

Personal philosophy toward life and its association with personality traits

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Abstract

The aims of the present study were (a) to devise a scale to measure four philosophical attitudes toward life: nihilism, dogmatism, pragmatism and idealism, and (b) to explore the association of these personal philosophies toward life with personality traits. In a sample of 82 undergraduates enrolled in psychology courses at a rural state college in Stockton University, a Personal Philosophy toward Life Scale (PPLS) for measuring these four philosophies of life was developed. The respondents were also administered the short form of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire-Revised (EPQ-RS). The Cronbach alphas ranged from 0.47 to 0.70 for the PPLS subscales, denoting moderate reliability. The four personal philosophies toward life were associated, and two factors were identified and labeled: Pragmatism/Idealism Philosophical Outlook on Life (Factor 1) and Nihilism/Dogmatism Philosophical Outlook on Life (Factor 2). Scores for having a nihilistic and dogmatic outlook on life were associated with higher scores on measures of neuroticism, while scores of idealism and pragmatism were associated with lower scores on a measure of psychoticism. The results of this study suggest that psychological well-being may be associated with one's philosophy of life. Suggestions were made for future research.



Keywords: philosophy of life; pragmatism; nihilism; dogmatism; idealism; personality; students; psychoticism; neuroticism

Introduction

Philosophy of life refers to philosophies that focus on life, and a philosophy of life is a set of attitudes towards life that can impact the individual's mood. A philosophy of life is a personal philosophy that addresses existential questions about the status of humans (Fetler, 1968; McHoskey et al., 1999; Tartaglia, 2016). There are many possible philosophical approaches to life, and the present paper focuses on four approaches: pragmatic, idealistic, nihilistic and dogmatic (Brown, 2012).¹ Pragmatism focuses on logic and rationality and encourages critical thinking and the ways in which the context contributes to meaning (Baert, 2004; Cornish & Gillespie, 2009). Idealism places importance on mental and spiritual aspects in the interpretation of the individual's experiences and perception of the environment and is a positive and hopeful philosophy (Macionis, 2012). Nihilism, according to *Webster's New World Dictionary* (2012) is the viewpoint that traditional values and beliefs are unfounded, and that existence is senseless and useless. It is associated with excessive pessimism and a negative view of humans. Dogmatism, according to *Webster's New World Dictionary* is defined as having strong beliefs, not caring about the different beliefs of others, and not considering the evidence that may justify changing or modifying one's beliefs. These life philosophies are useful for categorizing how ordinary individuals look at the world. However, it should be noted that these are not necessarily independent. For example, an individual can be a pragmatist and idealist, or a nihilist and idealist at the same time.

¹ Other philosophies of life include cynicism and stoicism.



Previous research has suggested that the people's philosophical attitude toward life is associated with their personality traits. For example, Fakouri and Hamm (1974) found that having a pragmatic attitude toward life was associated with a measure of achievement motivation in a sample of graduate students. McHoskey et al. (1999) found that having a nihilistic attitude toward life in a sample of undergraduates was negatively associated with turning to religion in order to cope with existential issues (such as finding a meaning for life). Philosophies of life might also be associated with mental health. Anderson and Western (1969) devised a scale to measure social liberalism, pragmatism, dogmatism and cynicism, while Fakouri and Hamm (1974) devised a scale to measure realism, pragmatism, idealism and existentialism.

There has been some previous research into the socio psychological and subjective correlates of personal philosophies toward life. For example, dogmatism negatively impacts on well-being (Rokeach, 1954; Samaie & Sepahmansour, 2015; Whatley, 1971; White, 2006), and on happiness and sense of humor (Dixon et al., 1986). Vafamehr (2009) reported that dogmatism was positively correlated with self-controlling, playful problem solving and cognitive coping mechanisms. Using the Rokeach Dogmatism Scale, Malmir et al. (2017), found that dogmatism was negatively correlated with happiness in an Iranian adult sample, while Zamanian (2006) noted that nihilism was associated with meaninglessness, emptiness, hopelessness, indecisiveness, distress, aggression, depression and suicide, even resulting in social and cultural damage.

Some studies have found that a belief in free will is associated with some positive personality traits and outcomes (Crescioni et al., 2015), positive attitudes toward job performance and academic achievement (Stillman et al., 2010; Feldman et al., 2016), and

reduced aggression and increased helpfulness (Baumeister et al. 2009). A study by Vohs and Schooler (2008) found that a belief in determinism is associated with cheating. Thus, a personal philosophy toward life can be associated with the meaning one attributes to one's life, as well as life goals, personality, and personal values. The meaning that an individual adopts toward life is a fundamental attitude that gives coherence to the individual's conception of the world, and the individual's philosophy of life is associated with depression and psychological well-being (Kleftaras & Psarra, 2012). The individual's goals in life may be key factors in regulating behavior and personality cohesion, and Schmuck et al. (2000) reported that intrinsic and extrinsic life goals impact behavior and emotions in German and American university students. Najafy et al. (2015) found that life goals, along with personality traits, can predict subjective well-being in Iranian adults.

The present paper was designed to devise a scale to measure four philosophical approaches to life. Nihilistic and dogmatic approaches seem to be pessimistic and less healthy philosophies of life, and so it was hypothesized that nihilistic and dogmatic approaches would be associated with poor psychological health. Idealistic and pragmatic approaches seem to be optimistic and more healthy philosophies of life, and it was hypothesized that idealistic and pragmatic approaches would be associated with good psychological health. Thus, the aims of the present exploratory study were: (a) to devise a scale to measure nihilistic, dogmatic, pragmatic and idealistic approaches to life, and (b) to explore the association of these personal philosophies toward life with personality traits. Hans Eysenck's personality theory is based on three components (or three dimensions): extraversion (E), neuroticism (N) and psychoticism (P) (Eysenck, 1967, 1998), and these three dimensions are considered to be combinations of lower



level traits or factors. The present study used Eysenck's psychological inventory to measure mental health and personality.

Methods

Participants

A sample of 82 undergraduate students (62 females and 20 males) enrolled in psychology courses at a rural state college in Stockton University ($M_{age} = 21.5$ yrs., $SD = 5.2$) was recruited. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at the college.

Measures

The Personal Philosophy toward Life Scale (PPLS). The PPLS is a self-report scale to measure of nihilistic, dogmatic, pragmatic and idealistic outlooks on life. Items were written by the present authors to describe the intrinsic nature of each personal philosophy toward life, and four six-item scales were devised to measure these attitudes. They were presented with an answer format of agree-disagree (agree = 1, disagree = 0). The items for the 4 scales were presented in a mixed order.

The Short form of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire-Revised (EPQ-RS; Eysenck, Eysenck & Barrett, 1985). The EPQ-RS is a 48-item self-report questionnaire for measuring personality traits of Psychoticism (P), Extraversion (E), Neuroticism (N), and Lie/Social Desirability/Faking good (L). Each subscale has 12 items, answered with a yes-no format. A typical item for subscale of Psychoticism is "Would you like other people to be afraid of you?", for Neuroticism is "Do you worry too long after an embarrassing experience?", for Extraversion is "Can you usually let yourself go and enjoy yourself at a lively party?", and for Lie is "If you

say you will do something, do you always keep your promise no matter how inconvenient it might be?". The EPQ-RS has shown good psychometric properties in cross-cultural studies (see Alexopoulos & Kalaitzidis, 2004; Almiro & Simões, 2013, 2014; Almiro et al., 2016; Aluja et al., 2003; Bakhshipour & Bagharian Khorooshi, 2007; Colledani et al., 2018; Dazzi et al., 2004; Dazzi, 2011; Eysenck & Barrett, 2013; Eysenck et al. 1985; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1991; Karanci et al., 2006; Picconi et al., 2018). The questionnaire was administered anonymously to students.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed with descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviations), Pearson correlation coefficients, and a Principal Components factor analysis (PCA) to identify the number of factors to be retained using SPSS-26. The criterion of eigenvalues greater than or equal to 1.0 was adopted and the varimax orthogonal rotation of axes was used.

Results

The mean scores (and *SDs*) of the respondents on the Personal Philosophy toward Life Scale (PPLS) subscales are shown in Table 1. The Cronbach alpha reliabilities ranged from 0.47 to 0.70 and were only moderate for the subscales.

Table 1. Mean scores and Cronbach alpha reliabilities for the PPLS subscales

| Mean | SD | Cronbach α | |
|------------|------|-------------------|------|
| Pragmatism | 5.45 | 1.09 | 0.70 |
| Dogmatism | 3.21 | 1.54 | 0.47 |
| Nihilism | 2.59 | 1.64 | 0.59 |
| Idealism | 4.62 | 1.27 | 0.56 |

The item-total correlations for the four personal philosophies toward life are shown in Table 2. All were statistically significant.

Table 2. Item total correlations

| | Pragmatism | Dogmatism | Nihilism | Idealism |
|----------------------|------------|-----------|----------|----------|
| Subscale item number | | | | |
| 1 | 0.75*** | 0.52*** | 0.56*** | 0.80*** |
| 2 | 0.59*** | 0.44*** | 0.61*** | 0.51*** |
| 3 | 0.73*** | 0.53*** | 0.73*** | 0.66*** |
| 4 | 0.58*** | 0.57*** | 0.49*** | 0.66*** |
| 5 | 0.71*** | 0.52*** | 0.56*** | 0.30** |
| 6 | 0.53*** | 0.55*** | 0.48*** | 0.56*** |

* two-tailed p < .05
 ** two-tailed p < .01
 *** two-tailed p < .001

The four subscale scores from the PPLS were subjected to a PCA with varimax rotation. For the factor analysis, the KMO was 0.53 and the Bartlett's Test Chi-Square was 44.72 (df = 6, $p < .001$). Two factors were identified with eigenvalues greater than one. Pragmatism and idealism loaded on one factor, while nihilism and dogmatism loaded on the second factor (see Table 3 and Figure 1).

Table 3. Factor loadings (≥ 0.50) of the Personal Philosophy toward Life Scale (PPLS)

| PPLS subscales | Factor 1 | Factor 2 |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------|
| Pragmatism | +0.87 | -0.10 |
| Dogmatism | +0.03 | +0.88 |
| Nihilism | -0.26 | +0.80 |
| Idealism | +0.84 | -0.10 |
| Eigenvalue | 1.85 | 1.13 |
| % of total variance | 46.1 | 28.2 |

Factor 1: Pragmatism- Idealism Philosophical Outlook on Life

Factor 2: Nihilism- Dogmatism Philosophical Outlook on Life

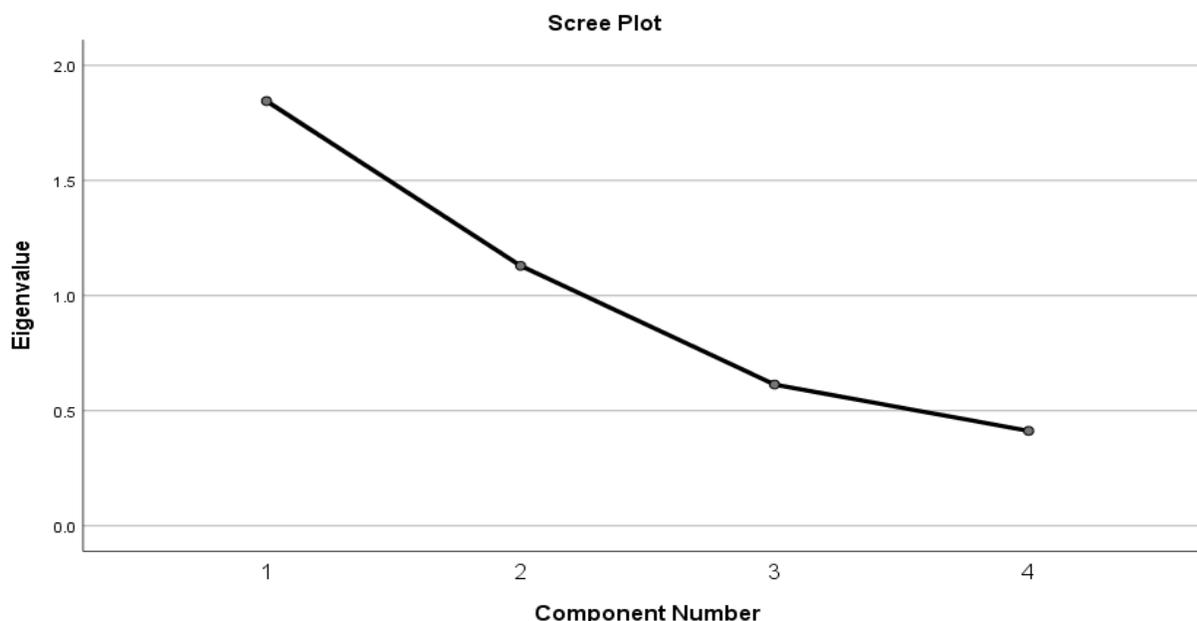


Figure 1. Scree Plot for the Personal Philosophy toward Life Scale (PPLS)

Looking at the correlations with the EPQ-RS personality traits, pragmatism and idealism scores were negatively associated with psychoticism (a measure of a lack of agreeableness and conscientiousness) indicating that these philosophies toward life are associated with better attitudes toward others. Nihilism and dogmatism scores were both positively associated with neuroticism, indicating that these philosophies toward life are associated with poor mental health.

Lie scale scores from the EPQ-RS personality traits were not significantly associated with any of the personal philosophy toward life scale scores, indicating that faking good does not appear to have been present in the participants' responses to the questionnaire (see Table 4)².

Table 4. Correlations between the variables

² The correlations between the four philosophies of life scores are shown in Table 4, and only 2 are positive and statistically significant. The other 4 correlations are all negative, and one of these 4 is statistically significant. This argues against the presence of an acquiescent response set in the participants.

| | Pragmatism | Dogmatism | Nihilism | Idealism |
|--------------|------------|-----------|----------|----------|
| Pragmatism | - | -0.06 | -0.31** | +0.51*** |
| Dogmatism | | - | +0.45*** | -0.15 |
| Nihilism | | | - | -0.20 |
| Idealism | | | | |
| Psychoticism | -0.42*** | -0.04 | +0.06 | -0.41*** |
| Neuroticism | +0.13 | +0.50*** | +0.45*** | +0.10 |
| Extraversion | +0.13 | -0.07 | -0.15 | +0.13 |
| Lie | -0.07 | -0.22 | -0.14* | +0.20 |

* two-tailed $p < .05$
 ** two-tailed $p < .01$
 *** two-tailed $p < .001$

Discussion

A Personal Philosophy toward Life Scale (PPLS) was devised, and the four subscales had moderate internal consistency. Scores for the four philosophies formed two factors: Pragmatism and Idealism (Factor 1) and Nihilism and Dogmatism (Factor 2).

The finding that nihilism and dogmatism scores were associated with higher scores on a measure of mental ill-health (neuroticism), while pragmatism and idealism were associated with lower scores on psychoticism indicates that these personal philosophies may affect the individual's mental health and interpersonal relationships, in line with the hypotheses guiding this study. Alternatively, it may be that individuals with poor mental health are attracted by or turn to particular philosophies of life that are consistent with their mental health status. It is interesting to note that two of the philosophies of life were associated with neuroticism while



two were associated with psychoticism, indicating that pragmatic and idealistic attitudes toward life may be associated with better functioning in life than adopting dogmatic and nihilistic attitudes toward life.

Although the results indicate an association between dogmatism and nihilism and between pragmatism and idealism, these associations may not make theoretical sense. For example, a pragmatist is mostly concerned with getting results, whereas an idealist wants perfection and ideological purity. This suggests that ordinary individuals do not necessarily follow the theories proposed by philosophers in developing their attitudes toward life.

The present study was limited by the small sample size, the predominance of female participants, and the modest reliability of the scales which were devised for the study. One possible weakness is the simple agree-disagree format of the questions. Factor analysis is problematic with a binary response format. It would be better in future research to use a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Another issue is that the PPLS has no reverse-scored items. This raises the question that perhaps some positive associations between the scales are caused by the inclination of some respondents to agree with everything while others respond in a more balanced way or even tend to disagree with everything - an acquiescence response bias. The EPQ does not directly measure mental health. Although there are correlations between neuroticism and a variety of adverse mental health conditions, it is entirely possible to be both high in neuroticism and a psychologically healthy person. However, the results indicate that philosophical attitudes toward life may be valuable information for psychologists, and it is hoped that this preliminary study of philosophical attitudes toward life stimulates further research on this important topic.

Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that psychological well-being may be associated with an individual's philosophy of life. Idealism and pragmatism were positively associated with mental health, while dogmatism and nihilism were negatively associated with mental health. The Cronbach alpha reliability of the scales was only moderate, and perhaps the each of the scales should be increased in length and scored on a Likert scale. The Dogmatism scale appears to need improvement in order to increase its reliability. One surprising result is the strong relationship between pragmatism and idealism and between dogmatism and nihilism, which opens up some interesting theoretical insights. The results seem to show a divide between those who are optimistic about the world, and those who are pessimistic about the world. Future studies should explore how life philosophies relate to optimism and pessimism about one's own life and use alternative personality inventories such as the Big-Five inventory (McCrae, et al., 1987), Hexaco (Ashton et al., 2004; Lee & Ashton, 2004), and the Symptom Checklist 90 (SLC-90; Derogatis, Lipman, & Covi, 1973). Using an online platform such as Mechanical Turk to get a bigger sample and thus more power is suggested.

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Conflicts of Interest

Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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No funding was received.

Ethics Statement

This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at a rural state college in Stockton University, USA, for the study.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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