The Relationship of Self-Concept Clarity and Hope Between Family Cohesion and Subjective Well-Being in U.S. Collegiate Students

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Previous research found relationships between family cohesion (i.e., how committed family members are to the family), self-concept clarity (i.e., having a clear sense of one’s own identity), hope (having the agency to pursue goals), and subjective well-being (emotional and cognitive well-being). Two hundred fifty-nine college students from the United States completed the Cohesion subscale from the Brief Family Relationship Scale, the Self-Concept Clarity Scale, a Modified Hope Scale, the Satisfaction with Life Scale, and the Positive and Negative Affect Scale. Correlation analyses found that all variables were positively correlated. These findings contribute to the understanding of the links between these factors with the hopes that it leads to more targeted interventions that promote well-being.

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Subjective well-being refers to how an individual personally perceives their own happiness, life satisfaction, and overall well-being. Understanding the factors that influence subjective well-being can contribute to more targeted interventions that promote well-being in various contexts. Higher subjective well-being predicts better health outcomes and longevity (Diener & Chan, 2011; Diener et al., 1985). Subjective well-being is a component of the pleasurable aspects of well-being and can be broken down into two components, emotional and cognitive well-being (Diener, 1994; Kong et al., 2015). Emotional well-being is the extent one feels positive or negative emotions in their daily life (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). Emotional well-being can be thought of as a continuum, fluctuating to affect everyday activities, self-care, and fostering relationships. Low levels of emotional well-being were “linked to a reduced quality of relationships and ability to love” (Ross et al., 2023). While personality characteristics are more strongly associated with emotional well-being, cognitive well-being, the level of satisfaction one has with their life (Diener et al., 1985), is more strongly associated with external life circumstances (Luhmann, 2017).

In addition to external factors, internal factors, such as self-concept clarity and hope, influence one’s subjective well-being. As proposed in the work by Xiang et al. (2022), internal factors encompass self-concept clarity (Lin et al., 2018; Na et al., 2018), hope (Ciarrochi et al., 2015; Yalcin & Malkoc, 2015), self-worth (Miller-Smedema et al., 2018), self-esteem (Yu et al., 2016), and the Big Five personality traits (Soto, 2015).

Self-concept clarity is how well one knows oneself. According to the self theory of well-being, an ongoing and deepening comprehension of oneself is essential to attain happiness. When contradiction exists between one self and the ideal self, it may result in feelings of depression and diminish subjective well-being. (Duan, 1996). When an individual has a clearer sense of self, they have more life satisfaction (Shin et al., 2016) and positive emotion (Slotter & Walsh, 2017). Unsurprisingly, higher levels of self-concept clarity were found to be linked to higher levels of emotional well-being and cognitive well-being (Xiang et al., 2023).

Hope is how well one can engage in efforts to achieve their goals (Snyder, 1995). According to the goal contents theory, having material things does not improve individual subjective well-being (Ryan, 2009), but achieving goals like securing a meaningful relationship and personal growth does satisfy one’s inner needs and increases happiness (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). In a longitudinal study, hope was central to predicting adolescents’ emotional well-being and academic achievement (Ciarrochi et al., 2007).

Among the external factors influencing subjective well-being are family function (Hamama & Arazi, 2012; Schnettler et al., 2015), social support (Brannan et al., 2013), and attachment with parents and peers (Li & Zheng, 2014; Wei et al., 2011). Zabriskie et al. (2018) found that family function, which includes family cohesion, was linked to life satisfaction. Family cohesion is an important protective factor for individuals. It is the extent to which family members are concerned and committed to the family and degree to which family members are helpful and supportive of each other (Merkas & Braja-Zašganec, 2011). Family cohesion is positively associated with outcomes such as a clear future orientation (Zheng & Gan, 2018), hope (Santos et al., 2015), and well-being of family members (Lorenzo-Blanco et al., 2016; Uruk et al., 2007). Additionally, family cohesion plays a big part in well-being. Previous research has found that...
family cohesion affects well-being through individual variables like self-concept clarity and hope, and that it influenced emotional and cognitive well-being (Xiang et al., 2022). This study will attempt to replicate the findings from Xiang and colleagues (2022) examining the “associations between family cohesion, self-concept clarity, hope, and subjective well-being” in a population of students who attended an American college predicting that they will all be positively correlated with one another.

Methods

Participants

The participants were 259 students enrolled in U.S.-based colleges and universities, but 15 students were excluded for not completing the survey. Students attended either 4-year institutions, 2-year community colleges, or tribal universities. Some students received partial course credit or extra credit at their teacher’s discretion. No demographic data was collected.

Materials

Family Cohesion

Family cohesion was assessed using the Cohesion subscale (see Appendix A) from the Brief Family Relationship Scale (BFRS; Fok et al., 2014). It consisted of 7 items like, “in our family we really help and support each other.” It was adapted from the Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1994). The response options were on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The scale demonstrated great internal consistency with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.93.

Self-Concept Clarity

To measure self-concept clarity (see Appendix B), the Self-concept clarity Scale (SCCS; Campbell et al., 1996) was used. It contains 12 items like, “I seldom experience conflict between the different aspects of my personality.” Ten items are reverse-keyed like, “sometimes I feel that I am not really the person that I appear to be.” The response options ranged strongly disagree to strongly agree on a 5-point Likert scale. In the present study, the scale demonstrated great internal consistency with an alpha coefficient of 0.93.

Hope

Hope (see Appendix C) was measured using a Modified Hope Scale (MHS; O’Sullivan, 2011). It was modified further by generalizing the statements. More specifically, the statements were stripped of their academic focus and made more general. For example, the statement, “I can think of many ways to get out of an academic problem,” was changed to “I can think of many ways to get out of a problem.” Responses were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This scale’s alpha coefficient was 0.71.

Subjective Well-Being

To measure the cognitive component of well-being (see Appendix D), the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985). It uses 5 items to assess one’s satisfaction with their own life. The scale consists of measures like “in most ways my life is close to my ideal.” The responses were scored on a 5-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating higher life satisfaction. This scale showed good internal consistency with an alpha coefficient of 0.82.

The emotional component of well-being (see Appendix E) was measured with the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1998). This scale contains 20 words describing two different affect states, positive and negative with examples being “excited” and “shame.” The responses were scored on a 5-point scale and the negative affect score was subtracted from the positive affect score with higher scores indicating higher levels of emotional well-being. In the present study, the scale showed good internal consistency with an alpha coefficient of 0.89.

Procedure

The Institutional Review Board at the University of Wisconsin-Superior approved the study. The survey was conducted online and to start the survey participants had to agree to the informed consent.

Results

The associations were consistent with the previous study (see Table 1). Family cohesion was positively related to self-concept clarity (r = 0.26, p < .01), hope (r = 0.27, p < .01), emotional well-being (r = 0.37, p < .01), and cognitive well-being (r = 0.36, p < .01). Self-concept clarity was positively related to hope (r = 0.39, p < .01), emotional well-being (r = 0.66, p < .01), and cognitive well-being (r = 0.41, p < .01). Hope was positively correlated with emotional well-being (r = 0.49, p < .01) and cognitive well-being (r = 0.29, p < .01). Finally, emotional well-being was positively associated with cognitive well-being (r = 0.55, p < .01).
Table 1  
Correlation Table  

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Note: **p < .01

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to replicate the study of Xiang and colleagues (2022) and explore the relationships between family cohesion, self-concept clarity, hope, cognitive well-being, and emotional well-being using students who attended an American college (N = 244). These findings align with previous research and contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between these variables as well as support the significant impact of both internal and external factors on subjective well-being.

As suggested by Xiang et al. (2022), internal factors play a crucial role in shaping an individual’s overall well-being. We found that self-concept clarity was positively correlated with cognitive and emotional well-being. This aligns with self theory of well-being in which ongoing development of sense of self is essential for attaining happiness. When individuals experience contradictory feelings between their real and ideal selves, it can lead to depression and a reduction in overall subjective well-being (Duan, 1996). The findings in this study support previous research indicating that people with a clear sense of self tend to report higher life satisfaction and positive emotions (Shin et al., 2016; Slotter & Walsh, 2017; Xiang et al., 2023).

Additionally, hope, another internal factor, emerged as having a positive correlation with both cognitive and emotional well-being. In line with the theory of goal content, the achievement of significant objectives, such as establishing meaningful relationships and fostering personal growth, meets inner needs and enhances happiness (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006; Ryan, 2009). Furthermore, these findings align with previous research indicating that hope is positively correlated to emotional well-being (Ciarrochi et al., 2007).

Among the external factors, family cohesion was positively correlated with cognitive and emotional well-being in students who attended an American college. This aligns with previous research indicating the positive impact of family functioning on life satisfaction and other well-being indicators (Zabriskie et al., 2018). This study extends the findings that family cohesion was positively correlated with emotional and cognitive well-being (Xiang et al., 2022).

Considering the implication of these findings, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Since demographics were not collected, we cannot say that these participants were American, only that they attended an American college. We also can not assume any age group is represented by these findings. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of this study prevents the establishment of causal relationships among the variables examined. Future research could explore the mediating role of self-concept clarity and hope between family cohesion and subjective well-being using this population. Previous research by Slotter and Walsh (2017) suggests that self-concept clarity mediates for well-being outcomes.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the connections between family cohesion, self-concept clarity, hope, cognitive well-being, and emotional well-being among students who attended an American college. By exploring the relationships between external and internal factors that influence subjective well-being, contributions to the growing body of literature on subjective well-being were made. Future research could further explore these variables and their relationships leading to more targeted interventions aimed at promoting well-being in various contexts.

References


The satisfaction with life scale. Journal of Personality Assessment, 49(1), 71–75.
Appendix A

Table 2
Cohesion subscale (Strongly Disagree - Strongly Agree)
- In our family we really help and support each other.
- In our family we spend a lot of time doing things together at home.
- In our family we work hard at what we do in our home.
- In our family there is a feeling of togetherness.
- My family members really support each other.
- I am proud to be a part of our family.
- In our family we really get along well with each other.

Appendix B

Table 3
Self-concept Clarity Scale (Strongly Disagree - Strongly Agree)
- My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another.*
- On one day I might have one opinion of myself and on another day I might have a different opinion.*
- I spend a lot of time wondering about what kind of person I really am.*
- Sometimes I feel that I am not really the person that I appear to be.*
- When I think about the kind of person I have been in the past, I’m not sure what I was really like.*
- I seldom experience conflict between the different aspects of my personality.
- Sometimes I think I know other people better than I know myself.*
- My beliefs about myself seem to change very frequently.*
- If I were asked to describe my personality, my description might end up being different from one day to another day.*
- Even if I wanted to, I don’t think I would tell someone what I’m really like.*
- In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am.
- It is often hard for me to make up my mind about things because I don’t really know what I want.*
*Reverse-keyed item

Appendix C

Table 4
Hope Scale (Strongly Disagree - Strongly Agree)
- I can think of many ways to get out of a problem.
- I can think of many ways to achieve the goals that are most important to me.
- I energetically pursue my goals.
- There are not very many ways around any problem.*
- Even when others get discouraged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem.
- My past experiences have not prepared me well for my future experiences.*
*Reverse-keyed item

Appendix D

Table 5
Satisfaction with Life Scale (Strongly Disagree - Strongly Agree)
- In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
- The conditions of my life are excellent.
- I am satisfied with my life.
- So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.
- If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

Appendix E

Table 6
Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Very slightly or not at all, A little, Moderately, Quite a bit, Extremely)
- interested
- irritable*
- distressed*
- alert
- excited
- ashamed*
- upset*
- inspired
- strong
- nervous*
- guilty*
- determined
- scared*
- attentive
- hostile*
- jittery*
- enthusiastic
- active
- proud
- afraid*
*Reverse-keyed item