

# The Purpose in Life and Psychological well-being from the Soldiers' View Points

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Military service is a very important event affecting the soldiers' psychological well-being (PWB) and purpose in life (PIL). The PWB, as an important multidimensional index in measuring people's mental health, can predict PIL in soldiers and is effective in organizing their personal and social lives.

**Aim:** To evaluate the relationship between PWB and PIL in soldiers.

**Methods:** This descriptive-analytic study was conducted at one of the military barracks of Iran in 2019. The study population included 301 soldiers selected using convenience sampling method. Data were collected using three questionnaires including socio-demographic information, PWB, and PIL.

**Results:** The results showed that PWB was high ( $85.85 \pm 7.91$ ) and PIL was at a moderate level ( $112.92 \pm 13.70$ ) in soldiers. A direct and moderately significant relationship was also found between PWB and PIL in the soldiers ( $r = 0.39$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ).

**Conclusion:** Based on the findings, an appropriate level of PWB can create coordination between the soldiers' values, interests, and attitudes, which results in realistic future planning and PIL realization in them. Future researchers are suggested to conduct more comprehensive studies among other military barracks and cultures to explore these two concepts.

**Keywords:** Soldier, Meaning in life, psychological wellbeing.

## INTRODUCTION

Military service, as an important life era, can affect different aspects of the soldiers' lives. Soldiers face positive (self-efficacy, discipline, and sense of competence in coping with life problems) and negative (separation from family and friends, lack of a supportive system, closed atmosphere of the barracks, inadequate nutrition, and change in sleep schedule) events during their military service, which may affect their psychological well-being (PWB)<sup>1</sup>.

The PWB is an internal emotional state related to good or satisfying living conditions. It is a state characterized by health, happiness, and success<sup>2</sup>. People with low PWB experience more negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, and aggression in dealing with problems, events, and conditions of life<sup>3,4</sup>. However, people with high PWB generally experience positive emotions and have a positive performance in developing their own competencies and skills. As a result, this will increase their commitment, productivity, and purpose in life (PIL)<sup>5,6</sup>.

Studies have introduced PIL as a barrier to depression, suicide, anxiety, stress, and fear, which can play a positive role in improving PWB in individuals<sup>7,8,9</sup>. Therefore, people with purposeful lives enjoy higher levels of self-esteem, happiness, and mental health and take good care of themselves in the face of emotional problems and traumatic events. In contrast, individuals with no PIL are at a greater risk of psychological, mental, and physical problems<sup>10</sup>. In this regard, Kleftras and Psarra stated the significant role of PIL in mental health<sup>11</sup>. In Turkey, Doğan et al. (2012) reported that PIL was a predictor of students' PWB<sup>12</sup>. A study by Bryan et al. (2019) in the USA showed that PIL improved mental health by increasing happiness,

reducing depression, and decreasing PTSD symptoms. Consequently, this will improve the immune function, reduce the anxiety attacks, and decrease the likelihood of suicide among the military personnel<sup>13</sup>.

Given these issues, it can be said that both PIL and PWB can have a significant impact on the soldiers' quality of life and mental health<sup>7</sup>. The researchers of this study include psychiatric and sociologist nurses, who have closely observed and understood the problems raised by not resolving the clients' conflicts. In addition, they strived to provide and coordinate the clients' required services to maximize their level of performance. However, the military staff's PIL and PWB have not been well-analyzed due to the closed atmosphere of the military barracks in Iran and research is very limited in this area. Therefore, this study aimed to evaluate PIL and PWB as well as the relationship between these two factors in conscripts.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Study design, setting, and sample:** This descriptive-analytic study was conducted at one of the military barracks of Iran from March to June 2019. The target population of this study included 1500 soldiers at the time of data collection. The inclusion criteria were having reading and writing literacy, 18 to 35 years of age, no self-reported mental-psychological problem at the time of data collection, and willingness to participate in the research. Incomplete questionnaires were considered as the exclusion criteria. The sample size formula of Cochran ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.05$ ) was recruited and a sample size of  $n = 306$  was calculated. Considering that five soldiers were excluded due to the incomplete questionnaires, the participants' response rate was 98.36%.

**Instruments and data collection:** To collect the study data, three questionnaires were used. The first was a demographic questionnaire including items of marital status (single and married), age (measured as a continuous variable in years), duration of military service (measured as a continuous variable in months), education (master's degree and higher, bachelor's degree, associate degree, diploma, and secondary school), distance to the place of residence (measured as a continuous variable in kilometers), and drug abuse (hookah, smoking, and substance abuse).

The second questionnaire was PWB, designed by Ryff in 1989 and revised in 2002. This questionnaire contains 18 items and six subscales (Table 1). The items were supposed to be answered on a six-point Likert scale using the options of Strongly Agree (6), Moderately Agree (5), Agree (4), Slightly Disagree (3), Moderately Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1). Items 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 13, 16, and 17 were scored reversely<sup>14,15</sup>. The total PWB score ranged from 18 to 108; where, mean scores of 18-48, 49-78, and higher than 79 showed poor, moderate, and high PWB, respectively.

Ryff et al<sup>16</sup> and Bayani et al<sup>17</sup> reported an appropriate level of reliability using the Cronbach's alpha. Furthermore, the test-retest reliability coefficient of PWB was calculated as 0.82<sup>17</sup> (Table 1).

The third questionnaire was the PIL test developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964), which was used to measure the participants' PIL. This instrument measures the respondents' existential vacuum state based on the Frankl's theory stating that the individual's inability to find meaning in life arises from a sense of emptiness, state of boredom, or existential frustration. Ratings for each item range from 1 "Absolutely yes" to 7 "Absolutely no" and items with positive statements were inversely scored. The total possible scores can range from 20 (low PIL) to 140 (high PIL). A raw score of 113 and above is interpreted as a high sense of purpose, a score within the range of 92-112 reflects a moderate sense of purpose, and a score of 92 or lower suggests lack of PIL. At the time of the instrument's development, the Cronbach's alpha was reported as 0.85 by the developers<sup>18</sup>.

In Iran, this questionnaire was administered and standardized on 250 students in Isfahan University selected by stratified random sampling. The reliability coefficient of this questionnaire was calculated and confirmed by Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.92<sup>19</sup>.

**Ethical considerations:** This research was approved by the Ethics Committee affiliated to Kerman University of Medical Sciences (Medical Ethic No: ir.kmu. rec.1398.062). The researchers proceeded to data collection after presenting the letter of introduction to the authorities at the military barrack and obtaining written consent forms from the participants. Prior to the data collection, all participants

were explained about the research objectives and ensured about the confidentiality and anonymity of their data.

**Statistical analysis:** Descriptive statistics (percentage, mean, and standard deviation) as well as analytical statistics (Mann-Whitney test, Kruskal-Wallis test, and Spearman correlation coefficient) were used to analyze the data. According to Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, the data did not follow the normal distribution. The level of significance was considered at 5% and SPSS (version 18) was employed for data analysis.

## RESULTS

### Demographic characteristics

The results showed that 84.4% of the soldiers were single, 60.1% were within the age range of 24-29 years, and 39.5% spent 6-12 months of their military service. Furthermore, 33.9% of the soldiers had undergraduate degree and distance to the place of residence was 1 to 6 hours in 76.4% of the participants. According to the findings, 72.8% of the soldiers did not use any drugs.

**PWB:** The results showed that PWB was at a high level in most soldiers. The lowest mean score ( $2.87 \pm 1.38$ ) was related on the item "I sometimes feel as if I've done all there is to do in life" from the PIL subscale. However, the highest mean score ( $5.30 \pm 0.84$ ) was attributed to the item "In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live" from the Environmental Mastery subscale (Table 2).

The Mann-Whitney test showed that the mean score of PWB was significantly higher in single than the married participants ( $p = 0.023$ ). The results of Kruskal-Wallis test indicated that the mean scores of PWB were significantly different with regard to various age groups ( $p = 0.041$ ) and participants' drug abuse condition ( $p = 0.004$ ). In other words, PWB was higher in people within the age range of 24-29 years and those who did not use any drugs.

**PIL:** The results showed that most soldiers had moderate purposeful lives. The PIL mean score was  $112.92 \pm 13.70$  in soldiers (Table 3).

Considering the Mann-Whitney test results, the mean score of PIL was significantly higher in the single compared to the married soldiers ( $p = 0.002$ ,  $z = -3.09$ ). The results of Kruskal-Wallis test also showed that the soldiers' PIL mean scores varied significantly with regard to the age groups ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $X^2 = 15.56$ ,  $df = 2$ ) and drug abuse condition ( $p = 0.001$ ,  $X^2 = 23.60$ ,  $df = 2$ ). In other words, the PIL was higher in the age group of 24-29 years and individuals who did not use any drugs.

**The Relationship between PWB and PIL:** Spearman correlation results showed a direct and moderate relationship between the soldiers' PWB and PIL ( $P < 0.001$ ,  $r = 0.39$ ), so that the soldiers' PIL improved by increase of their PWB (Table 4).

Table 1. Subscales and items of PWB

Subscales	Items	Definition	Cronbach's alpha of the original version	Cronbach's alpha of the Persian version
Autonomy	9,12,18	The ability and power to pursue desires and to act on the basis of personal principles, even if it is contrary to the customs.	0.37	0.71
Environmental mastery	1,4,6	Ability to regulate and manage the life affairs.	0.49	0.77

Personal growth	7,15,17	One's potential talents and abilities will become active over time.	0.40	0.78
Positive relations	3,11,13	Having a close and valuable relationship with important people in life.	0.56	0.77
Purpose in life	5,14,16	Having goals that give meaning to one's life.	0.33	0.70
Self-acceptance	2,8,10	Ability to see and accept one's own strengths and weaknesses.	0.52	0.78

Table 2. Mean scores of PWB

Dimensions	Items	Questions	Mean±SD
Autonomy	9	I tend to be influenced by people with strong opinions.	3.80±1.37
	12	I have confidence in my own opinions, even if they are different from the way most other people think.	4.94±1.32
	18	I judge myself by what I think is important, not by the values of what others think is important.	4.72±1.19
Total Autonomy			13.48±2.15
Environmental mastery	1	In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live	5.30±0.84
	4	The demands of everyday life often get me down	4.85±1.13
	6	I am good at managing the responsibilities of daily life	5.06±0.88
Total Environmental mastery			15.22±2.00
Personal growth	7	I think it is important to have new experiences that challenge how I think about myself and the world	4.95±0.98
	15	For me, life has been a continuous process of learning, changing, and growth	5.11±0.86
	17	I gave up trying to make big improvements or changes in my life a long time ago	4.95±1.23
Total Personal growth			15.02±2.03
Positive relations	3	Maintaining close relationships has been difficult and frustrating for me	4.83±1.08
	11	People would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others	4.49±1.14
	13	I have not experienced many warm and trusting relationships with others.	4.71±1.18
Total Positive relations			14.03±2.18
Purpose in life	5	I live life one day at a time and don't really think about the future	4.99±1.18
	14	Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them	5.05±1.14
	16	I sometimes feel as if I've done all there is to do in life.	2.87±1.38
Total Purpose in life			12.92±2.29
Self-acceptance	2	When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out so far.	4.98±0.87
	8	I like most parts of my personality.	4.97±1.08
	10	In many ways I feel disappointed about my achievements in life.	5.19±1.09
Total Self-acceptance			15.14±2.26
Total PWB			85.85±7.91

Table 3. Frequency and Mean score of PIL

	Category	Score	N	%	Mean ±SD
Purposeful life	Low	92<	24	8	112.92±13.70
	Moderate	92-112	171	56.8	
	High	>113	106	35.2	

Table 4. Correlation between PWB and PIL

Variable	Autonomy	Environmental mastery	Personal growth	Positive relations	Purpose in life	Self-acceptance	Total of PWB
Purpose in life	$\rho=0.22$ $P<0.001$	$\rho=0.36$ $P<0.001$	$\rho=0.21$ $P=0.001$	$\rho=0.34$ $P<0.001$	$\rho=0.06$ $P<0.001$	$\rho=0.28$ $P<0.001$	$\rho=0.39$ $P<0.001$

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between PWB and PIL among soldiers. The findings showed that most soldiers had a high level of PWB, which is consistent with other studies<sup>20,21</sup>.

Collective living in the military barracks can be effective on the soldiers' autonomy, positive relationships, and self-acceptance. In Iran, military service is considered as the first measure for the youths' effective participation in social occupations and governmental employment, which can affect PIL. Therefore, the military service and the barracks' environment provide the soldiers with a good opportunity to accept themselves and identify their own positive and negative aspects through a different attitude, which consequently creates a positive personal feeling<sup>22,23</sup>.

A study reported low levels of PWB among the postgraduate students. According to its results, educational programs should be developed to enhance the students' coping strategies in dealing with the psychological risk factors<sup>24</sup>. This finding can be justified by considering that the statistical population of the above-mentioned study included women, who have multiple roles and responsibilities in the family and society. However, in the present study, our participants included soldiers who have a more limited social role during their military service than women.

The PWB has many components that encompass the individual's quest for perfection and realization of the potential real forces<sup>2</sup>. The high level of PWB among the studied participants can be justified by mentioning that the barrack's environment provided the soldiers with the

opportunity to re-think, feel the continued growth, and accept new experiences. However, the self-reporting method of data collection may have caused the respondents to select the "Strongly Disagree" option more frequently.

In addition, the results showed that the lowest mean scores was related to the "PIL" subscale; whereas, the highest mean score was attributed to the "Environmental Mastery" subscale. Perhaps, one reason for the low level of PIL subscale is the young people's view towards the military service; they believe that young men are forced to resort to the military service to avoid possible future problems raised by lack of having the end-of-service card. This attitude has put the military service in a coercion and compulsion position and have convinced the soldiers to believe that they are moving away from the cycle of life and development by participating in the military service during the best part of their lives. In addition, most young individuals tend to be more independent in this period, although the individual and group relationships are more common in barracks, which increase the sense of environmental mastery in soldiers.

The results also showed that PIL was at a moderate level in the soldiers. Findings reported by Michael et al. (2013) were consistent with our results<sup>25</sup>. This is probably due to the fact that military service is the source and beginning of the soldiers' entry into the society, when they start to plan for their future. In other words, the soldiers give their lives direction and meaning during the military service.

On the contrary, PIL was high in patients with chronic diseases<sup>26</sup>. It seems that presence of meaning in life in difficult and critical situations turns the valueless experiences and concerns into coherent values and goals that lead to an integrated life<sup>27</sup>.

Our results showed a direct and moderate relationship between PWB and PIL. Consistent with the present research, many studies reported a significant relationship between PWB and PIL<sup>12,25,28,29</sup>. Joshua et al. also showed that individuals' moderate social relations were predictive of meaning in their lives<sup>30</sup>. One study in Switzerland mentioned that PWB was a strong predictor of purposeful life<sup>29</sup>. However, Bamonti et al (2015) reported contrastive results and indicated a negative relationship between PWB and PIL<sup>31</sup>. This discrepancy can be due to the difference in research communities and the questionnaires administered in these studies.

In Iran, beginning of the military service coincides with the adolescence era, which is a stormy period for the youths. During this time, the adolescents' emotions, feelings, as well as crisis of identity and personality are flaring. In this era, the adolescents begin to struggle against the values of family and surroundings to consolidate their identity and find their role in society<sup>22,23</sup>. Given the importance of this critical period for the young people, it seems necessary to pay more attention to the PWB and PIL concepts in soldiers.

**Limitations:** This study had two limitations. The first was the self-report data collection method through the questionnaires that could cause bias in the results. The second included limitation of the available sampling method; considering the military officials' discretion, the

researchers were not provided with the list of the soldiers to make random sampling. Therefore, the future researchers are suggested to carry out randomized and comparative studies with larger sample size in the military and other societies.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this study, the soldiers' PWB was high and their PIL was at a moderate level. The results also confirmed the positive and significant effect of the PWB on the soldiers' PIL. Nowadays, the government, policymakers, and military institutions try to make the barracks a good environment conducive to growth of the soldiers. Since PIL can be predictive of the soldiers' PWB, more attention must be paid to promote purposefulness in soldiers during the military service period. In this regard, effective measures can include shortening the length of service and spending the military service in the city of residence.

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