The Best Possible Life in Prison:

Aspects of Life Satisfaction Among Incarcerated Men

by

Madison Sutton

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Kevin Wright, Chair
Cody Telep
Jacob T.N. Young

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ABSTRACT

Whether through scaring incarcerated people straight or encouraging rehabilitation through treatment, most people hope that, one way or another, incarceration will alter an individual's path towards a better life. Current forms of incarceration are not achieving this goal and instead inflict undue amounts of pain (Crewe, 2011; Sykes 1958). In times of deprivation and isolation, some people have found ways to not only persevere, but to thrive. Though these individuals are not commonly the focus of criminal justice literature, there is much value in shifting attention to people thriving in prison including the opportunity to gain knowledge on the multi-faceted nature of well-being broadly and the rehabilitation of incarcerated people more specifically. The current study uses structured interview data from 386 men serving time in a medium-security prison unit to explore the correlates of life satisfaction among people in prison. To identify contributing factors to well-being during incarceration, logistic and multinomial regressions analyze variation in the life satisfaction scores of these incarcerated men. The results from these analyses suggest that perceptions of life meaning, generativity, flourishing, and age are all positively associated with thriving in prison and frequency of experiences with incarceration are not related, positively or negatively, to life satisfaction. This study provides some support to current well-being literature and also introduces complexities to the existing knowledge regarding the relationships between demographics such as race or relationship status, and well-being.

DEDICATION

Dedicated to the men and women of the Fall 2018 Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program

class. Thank you for sharing a small piece of your lives with me; you have forever

changed mine.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Almost all prison research expands our knowledge of the negative aspects of prison. Those who are imprisoned experience poor physical and mental health (Binswanger et al., 2007; Crewe, 2011), substance abuse problems (Binswanger et al., 2012), victimization (Haney, 2012), and strained family relationships (Haney, 2001; Wildeman & Andersen, 2017). Prison research shows people sit idle for years and then return to the community with the same, or worse, needs or behaviors that led them to crime in the first place (Cullen, Jonson, & Nagin, 2011). Reentry research highlights that the pains of imprisonment continue to plague returning citizens well after their sentence is served. Even after release, formerly incarcerated individuals face barriers to employment, housing, and healthcare, often finding themselves at an increased risk for homelessness (Couloute, 2018), substance abuse (Binswanger et al., 2012), and mental and physical health problems (Haney, 2001). Scholars have also found that the negative impacts of incarceration often extend well beyond the individual who is incarcerated. Families and loved ones of those who have experienced incarceration feel the ripple effect of their institutionalized time, both financially and emotionally (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002; Murray & Farrington, 2008; Turanovic et al., 2012). Previous criminology research well-establishes the pervasive and negative effects of incarceration for those incarcerated, their loved ones, and their broader communities.

Recently, social science scholars have turned their gaze towards something less innately captivating than the bad in life, but perhaps infinitely more valuable: positive psychology. The field of psychology at large has become synonymous with the study of

abnormal psychology, a well-documented body of research on people whose psychological functions differ from the norm, often in debilitating ways. Rather than study malfunctioning, positive psychologists bring attention to how people with typical psychological functioning can grow and thrive (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 2000; Deiner, Kesebir, & Tov, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). To date, positive psychological research has focused on understanding happiness, productivity, creativity, and gratitude - in other words the good in life - to devise interventions to improve these elements. In particular, life satisfaction as a holistic well-being measure has caught the eye of many scholars interested in focusing on the good in life (e.g., Diener et al., 1985; Judge & Watanabe, 1993; Veenhoven, 1996). Life satisfaction and well-being have been linked to many positive life and health outcomes, from quicker recovery times post-surgery (Scheier et al., 1989) to a better ability to stay positive during tough times (Aspinwall, 1998). Where criminology tends to focus on what scholars can learn from the bad, positive psychology highlights the value there is in learning from the good.

There are two main reasons why studying life satisfaction in prison through the lens of positive psychology has value. First, understanding life satisfaction in prison could inform on how to best create environments and opportunities that support incarcerated peoples' resiliency and rehabilitation. Unpacking how to understand and promote the contributing factors to life satisfaction behind bars is crucial to the health and growth of those experiencing incarceration. The subsequent positive health and behavior outcomes that are likely to result from improved well-being include increased prosocial behaviors (Kreuger et al., 2001) and conflict resolution skills (Van Katwyk et al, 2000). Each incarcerated person who experiences higher life satisfaction will benefit from

improvements to their physical, mental, and behavioral health. The correctional staff and other incarcerated people on the yard will benefit from a possible reduction in the frequency of misconduct in the unit. And, the general public stands to benefit from reduced victimization since people who exit incarceration having received evidence-based treatments towards rehabilitation have been shown to be less likely to return to prison for a new offense (Cullen, 2013). Exploring the contributing factors to well-being behind bars can help reimagine incarceration, for whatever length of its continued use as a justice solution, from a place that fails in achieving society's safety and rehabilitation goals to a tool for enhancing lives and preventing future harm.

Second, an understanding of which life satisfaction factors are key during incarceration will help researchers further explore the multi-faceted nature of well-being and life satisfaction for all people. There are few other instances where people collectively face the same large barriers to high levels of well-being. This unique quality of incarceration positions it as a rare opportunity to deepen the existing knowledge on human resiliency and the various elements that can act as protective factors sheltering well-being from harsh circumstances. Exploring these key elements can inform on suggestions for the public at large, teaching potentially universal lessons about which elements to prioritize when working to overcome hardships. Learning about life satisfaction among those in prison is a valuable pursuit that holds the potential to inform on well-being enhancements for people experiencing incarceration, correctional staff, and the general public alike.

The current study sheds light on the well-being and quality of life of people residing in prison using data collected by imprisoned researchers of the Arizona

Transformation Project. The current study contains data from structured interviews of 386 incarcerated men who live in the unit where the incarcerated researchers reside. This study seeks to answer the question, "What are the correlates of life satisfaction among men in prison?" More broadly, the current study provides an added understanding of positive psychology in a negative environment.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Positive Psychology

The history of positive psychology is rooted in the recognition of value within the

human experience as a whole. Dissatisfied with the disease model commonly used in

general psychology research and feeling that psychology should also be concerned with

positive phenomena such as love and happiness, some scholars shifted their focus to

lessons from existentialism and phenomenology to more completely understand

psychological life (Froh, 2004). Maslow first introduced the term of positive psychology

in his 1954 book, *Motivation and Personality,* criticizing existing psychological research

for focusing too much on human shortcomings and not fully investigating the extent of

human maximum achievement. This shift away from traditional psychology highlights

the value of considering the interaction between subjectivity and objectivity, giving new

weight to people's perceptions of their lived experiences rather than only the objectively

measurable outcomes of their lives (Rathunde, 2001). Psychologists' general tendency to

study the darker side of human nature has historically deprived questions of positive

psychology the resources they deserve, preventing scholars from recognizing the value

that these questions hold (Sheldon & King, 2001). To understand the human experience

completely, positive psychology proclaims the value in learning about the best as well as

the worst, in life and in people.

The theoretical frameworks that make up positive psychology reflect the field's

departure from traditional psychology. Positive psychology trades in the disease model of

traditional psychology to embrace a new science of strength and resilience (Seligman &

Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Subjective well-being (SWB) is one abstract concept that is commonly studied in positive psychology. SWB generally refers to happiness, life satisfaction, or equilibrium, which means having the right resources necessary for the challenges you are met with (Dodge et al., 2012). Scholars theorize that SWB is comprised of stable personality and genetic factors as well as variable external circumstances and activities (Lyubomirsky, 2001). Some scholars argue that changes in external circumstances can temporarily influence SWB but engaging in influential activities are much more likely to lead to long-term SWB changes (Lyubomirsky, 2001). This theoretical assertion has positive implications for anyone seeking to alter the SWB of others or themselves.

As psychological scholars began shifting their focus from reducing the bad to nurturing the good instead, their works uncovered many findings highlighting the value of this approach. Courage, future mindedness, optimism, interpersonal skills, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, perseverance, and the capacity for flow and insight have all been found to protect against poor mental health (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). SWB, in particular, is another human strength that is associated with a number of positive outcomes. These include fewer physical symptoms of pain and quicker recovery times post-surgery, (Scheier et al., 1989) higher engagement in healthy activities, (e.g. exercising) (Lox et al., 1999), increased self-esteem (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006), more prosocial and altruistic behavior (Krueger et al., 2001), a higher ability to cope and remain positive during difficult times, as well as more adaptive interpersonal skills (Aspinwall, 1998), conflict resolution skills (Van Katwyk, et al., 2000), and more efficient decision-making skills (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Positive psychology would

suggest that nurturing SWB improves positive life outcomes and buffers against negative ones.

Life Satisfaction

SWB can be measured through a number of different indicators, each capturing a unique component of what it means to truly be well. Measurements of well-being can range from indicators of present feelings of happiness to more holistic judgements of life (Diener et al., 2009). Life satisfaction is one such measure that is known to be strongly representative of SWB (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002) and of particular interest to scholars due to its ability to depict a person's comprehensive evaluation of their life. Rather than reflecting momentary feelings of happiness or sadness, life satisfaction represents a personal interpretation of the various ups and downs a person experiences over time and how they have or have not overcome them. These more holistic life assessments can provide unique insight into the overall well-being an individual person is experiencing across a number of life domains, not just current positive or negative emotions. There are three important facets of life satisfaction that are theorized to both directly and indirectly influence a person's evaluation process: the position in society into which a person is born, the ratio of good to bad large life events, and the amount of pain versus pleasure one feels on a daily basis all play a role in how satisfied a person is with his or her life (Veenhoven, 1996). And, although some have questioned the utility of life satisfaction measurements due to concerns about its malleability, little evidence suggests that life satisfaction is a fixed trait (Veenhoven, 1996). This suggests that various domains can likely be manipulated to improve life satisfaction.

The Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale is one of the most widely used tools to measure life satisfaction. Developed by Hadley Cantril in 1965, this tool asks participants the following question:

> Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?

This scale has been widely used in SWB research including Gallup's World Poll (Gallup, 2009) and in-depth daily polls of America's well-being (Harter & Gurley, 2008). Gallup has found that country-level comparisons of individual's scores on the scale correlate highly to other country-level indicators of well-being including Per Capita GDP, Health Expenditures Per Capita, the Human Development Index Ranking from the United Nations, and Citizen Engagement (Gallup, n.d.). Additionally, Gallup finds that those who report high levels of life satisfaction on the Cantril scale also report significantly fewer health problems, less stress, worry, sadness, anger, more happiness, enjoyment, interest, and respect (Gallup, n.d.). Beyond Gallup, the Cantril scale has been found to be both a valid indicator of general quality of life and sensitive to changing circumstances (Atkinson, 1982). Scholars also recognize the value of the reflexivity offered by the self-anchoring aspect of the scale and have replicated it in other contexts (Di Napoli & Arcidiacono, 2013).

Life Satisfaction in Prison

Due to the well-established pains of imprisonment (Crewe, 2011; Sykes 1958), it would be expected that incarcerated individuals do not, on average, have high levels of life satisfaction. It may be that no one thrives in prison, which would indicate a stark

contrast from the general population that sees 55% percent of Americans thriving (Witters & Harter, 2020) and demonstrate large differences either resulting from, or leading to, crime and incarceration. Few people thriving in prison would suggest that incarceration is a major indicator of low well-being levels strengthening what is known about the extent of pains of imprisonment and the consequent impact on those experiencing incarceration.

On the other hand, man's triumph over trauma has been showcased throughout history. Even in the most extreme situations of suffering, such as that of the people incarcerated in World War II internment camps, people have shown their ability to find meaning in life and hope for the future (Frankl, 1946). To be clear, wartime internment and contemporary imprisonment are not directly comparable experiences. However, the past provides an undeniable account of the incredible capacity of human resilience. It is possible that research would find this same resiliency in people experiencing modern day incarceration; there is even existing knowledge that suggests some people have found ways to live fulfilling lives despite challenging prison conditions, some even citing prison as the institution which saved their lives (Wilson & Witter, 2019; Wright, 2020). The existence of these outliers highlights the unique and individual nature of the incarceration experience.

In allowing space for experiences like these to come forward in the research, scholars can simultaneously acknowledge the negative impacts of incarceration while also maximizing the potential for intervention to serve as a force of good while prisons remain a reality of our justice system. Furthermore, it is important to identify and understand these exceptions to the norm so as to develop pathways for others to also

achieve high levels of well-being and the associated positive secondary effects, no matter the obstacles. It would go against everything that is currently known to argue that people cannot find meaning and growth even during the most stressful and negative of life experiences. So – if it is known they can, then it is just a matter of better supporting those processes to happen. But, to do that researchers first need to understand the intricacies of the contributing factors to life satisfaction variation behind bars.

Correlates of Life Satisfaction in Prison

Based on what is known about life satisfaction in non-incarcerated populations, some factors are likely to influence levels of life satisfaction in incarcerated people. Race and ethnicity have been associated with well-being with Hispanic people reporting higher levels of well-being than White people, and White people reporting higher levels than Black people (Zhang, Braun, & Wu, 2017). Exploring these differences further, research shows that race-related stress has a negative effect on well-being (Driscoll et al., 2015). Looking specifically at people facing adverse life experiences, research shows that, among people with traumatic brain injuries, Black people have lower life satisfaction than Caucasian or Asian people (Arango-Lasprilla et al., 2009). Many factors could play roles in these differences (e.g. spirituality, social support, or language barriers), but one key reason for this variance could be healthcare discrimination and resulting distrust of medical care providers leading to a lack of adherence to rehabilitation recommendations (Arango-Lasprilla et al., 2009). Due to the demonstrated relevant effects of racial prejudice on people's life satisfaction levels, especially those facing adverse life experiences, the current study anticipates similar race and ethnicity trends to occur

among those who are incarcerated as experiences with racial prejudice are not likely to decrease behind bars.

Due to the known trauma related to incarceration (Crewe, 2011; Edgemon & Clay-Warner, 2019; Listwan et al., 2013) as well as the documented impact of stress on well-being and life satisfaction (Abolghasemi & Varaniyab, 2010; Hamarat et al., 2001), it may be possible that those who have served many years behind bars or have many years left in their prison sentence have lower levels of life satisfaction. Additionally, experience with incarceration is known to have devastating impacts on family members (Arditti, 2012; Chui, 2010, Dallaire et al., 2015; Nichols & Loper, 2012) and could possibly influence the well-being of a person who has incarcerated family. Overall, it may be that people who have experienced more interaction with incarceration have lower levels of life satisfaction, which would reinforce the negative impact that the literature would expect the pains of imprisonment to have on overall well-being. Alternatively, it may be that people who have experienced more interaction with incarceration do not differ significantly in terms of life satisfaction which would have important implications for the possibility that various supports can be enhanced to protect against the negative impacts of incarceration.

Incarceration could also impact the influence that parental status typically has on life satisfaction. For the general population, most research shows that children have little to no effect on parents' life satisfaction (McLanahan & Adams, 1987). In fact, in many cases, having children decreases life satisfaction, possibly due to the burdens associated with parenthood, which offset the joys (Pollman-Schult, 2014). When children are found to have a positive effect on life satisfaction, it is often dependent upon marriage status

and the parent-child bond. People who are married with children sometimes see an increase in life satisfaction, but those who are unmarried see a decrease (Angeles, 2009). Parents with stronger ties to their children report higher levels of life satisfaction than parents with weak parent-child relationships (Veenhoven, 1996). For incarcerated parents, the separation could affect the parent-child relationship, possibly weakening or strengthening it depending on individual contexts (Poehlmann, 2005; Poehlmann-Tynan, 2015).

Six factors are likely to be tied to higher levels of well-being behind bars. First, prior research has found age to have a curvilinear relationship with life satisfaction, starting high during youth and young adulthood, decreasing into middle age (around 30-50), rising again in old age (around 70), and then decreasing into late life (80+) (Baird et al., 2010; Realo & Dobewall, 2011). To explain this relationship, some scholars theorize that though some life domains decline with age (e.g. health), others actually improve (e.g. income) and it is the resulting balance of all the life domains weighed against each other that creates the curvilinear relationship (McAdams, Lucas, & Donnellan , 2012). Given existing research, the same relationship can be expected to be present for those who are incarcerated, with older individuals reporting generally higher levels of life satisfaction, but steps will be taken to evaluate the adequacy of modeling the relationship linearly compared to curvilinearly.

Second, people who are more highly educated report higher levels of well-being (Zhang, Braun, & Wu, 2017) and people with lower education and perceived social class are found to have lower levels of life satisfaction (Kim et al., 2015). This association could be due to the opportunities that increased education provides for economic and

social mobility as well as financial security. Prior research finds that higher educational attainment is strongly associated with higher life satisfaction, with a stronger effect for women especially (Zhang, Braun, & Wu, 2017). The current study would expect this same relationship to be present among incarcerated people as well.

Third, people who are in a committed relationship report higher levels of well-being (Bucher et al., 2019). In particular, people who are married have higher life satisfaction scores than never-married, separated, divorced, or widowed people (Gove, Hughes, & Style, 1983). Relationship conflict and stability are also known to play a role in well-being. People in relationships with consistently high conflict or relationships that frequently transition between high and low conflict experience low life satisfaction and high frequencies of depressive symptoms; however, these people's depressive symptoms decrease with time suggesting that people may develop coping mechanisms to reduce the negative impact their relationship has on their well-being (Roberson et al., 2018). The positive effect that relationships generally have on life satisfaction is expected to be present in this study, but it is possible that the strain of incarceration on relationship quality and stability may affect this association.

Fourth, flourishing, which is explained through the PERMA model developed by Martin Seligman in 2011 and detailed in his book *Flourish*, is comprised of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments. Like life satisfaction, flourishing scores are highly representative of subjective well-being. Though both are conceptual measures of SWB, there is value is examining the relationship between flourishing and life satisfaction behind bars because, where flourishing offers a more immediate measure of SWB in the moment, life satisfaction provides more of a

holistic evaluation of a person's entire life. These measures are closely associated in non-incarcerated populations causing expectations for them to be positively correlated in the current study, but the extent of their association may differ behind bars due to the external life circumstances presented by incarceration.

Fifth, generativity, or feeling like you have left your mark on the world, is closely associated with life satisfaction (Ackerman et al., 2000; Huta & Zurtoff, 2007). It is thought that this association is due to the opportunity that generativity offers for a person to recover from any injuries sustained to their identity (De Medeiros, 2009). Through opportunities to have an impact on others, people can perhaps rewrite their legacy and renegotiate the worth of, and therefore their satisfaction with, their own life. This positive relationship is also expected to exist for incarcerated people.

Sixth, and finally, life meaning is positively related to life satisfaction (Steger et al., 2006). Whereas life satisfaction is a holistic evaluation of a person's overall life experiences, life meaning is the specific feeling that the person is connected to something larger than themselves (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005). One way this may show up in people experiencing incarceration is through the connection between post-traumatic growth and life satisfaction, where meaning in life acts as a mediator increasing the level of well-being (Triplett et al., 2011). In other words, certain psychological processes cause trauma to act as a catalyst for seeking meaning. This search for meaning then results in growth and higher levels of life satisfaction. Because of the close association between life satisfaction and meaning in non-incarcerated populations, as well as the mechanism by which post-traumatic growth could more specifically influence the relationship within

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this population, we would expect a positive relationship to exist between meaning and life satisfaction in the incarcerated people in this study.

Taken together, the literature surrounding the topic of well-being suggests that life satisfaction differs based on individual life experiences and can possibly be manipulated and improved through different measures targeted at the various domains of well-being. The ability for life satisfaction to be improved upon and the positive secondary effects that it has positions it as an instrumental tool for evaluating and understanding the well-being of incarcerated people. Additionally, research studying people thriving in prison could help identify the most influential domains of well-being during, and despite, times of pain and deprivation. Those who can thrive under difficult circumstances have much to contribute to the literature's understanding of how humans negotiate their own life satisfaction evaluations and which elements are crucial in overcoming difficult circumstances to still reap the rewards of positive well-being. With this understanding, correctional professionals can then begin to work toward improving the well-being of those in their secure care.

CHAPTER 3

CURRENT FOCUS

Prison research has done much to reveal the hardships that people experience during incarceration. Research shows that incarcerated people are forced to contend with physical and mental health issues, victimization, and strained family relationships. Though much of corrections research rightfully turns a critical eye to negative experiences in prison, less is known about how people in prison begin to heal, grow, and thrive. This is problematic because these elements could be key to their rehabilitation. Previous research has demonstrated predictors of well-being in the general population but fails to investigate well-being predictors behind bars. This, too, is problematic because the experience of incarceration may influence well-being and change the importance or direction of different elements that people consider when evaluating their life satisfaction. The current study seeks to contribute to the literature by exploring the correlates of life satisfaction among people in prison.

CHAPTER 4

METHOD

Setting

Data come from a medium security unit in a men's state prison located in
Florence, Arizona. As of February 2021, there are 36,975 people incarcerated in The
Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry facilities (Shinn, 2020).
Specifically at the Florence facility in August 2020, there were 649 men incarcerated in
the unit where the study took place with roughly 37.9% of the unit population identifying
as Caucasian, 22.3% as African American, 4.0% as Native American, 28.2% as Mexican
American, 4.8% as Mexican National, and 2.8% identifying as other racial groups not
listed (Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry, 2020).

Sampling and Methods

The data for the current study comes from a participatory action research (PAR)
study conducted from March through October 2020 by the Arizona Transformation
Project (ATP), a learning community consisting of Arizona State University (ASU)
faculty, students, and incarcerated men (see Haverkate et al., 2018). These researchers
used structured interviews to collect responses from 386 incarcerated men. The trained
interviewers who collected the data for the original study are five incarcerated men
residing in the Florence, AZ prison unit. These incarcerated researchers participated in
survey construction as well as interview facilitation due to their membership in the ATP.
The instrument contained open-ended and close-ended questions including sections
regarding participants' personal demographics, life evaluations, and experiences within
the prison environment.

This was the second study of this type carried out by the ATP (see Haverkate et al., 2020; Thrasher et al., 2020). The main value of using a PAR method for the study is in its ability to solicit realistic and non-performative answers from the sample population (Clark et al., 1999). The incarcerated researchers on the team understand the situation of the incarcerated survey participants better than a university researcher without a justice-involved background could. Many of the questions on the survey can be personal in nature (e.g. Do you have a life plan?). As such, PAR was implemented with the intention of reducing any unfavorable dynamics that could stand in the way of obtaining accurate measurements on more intimate survey items, such as that of life satisfaction in the present study. The team of incarcerated interviewers approached other residents in their prison unit to explain the survey process and gauge interest in participation. Following IRB protocol and COVID-19 social distancing guidelines, the researchers obtained consent from willing participants and went through the interview questions with them on the yard, each survey taking approximately 45 minutes[1]. No incentives were offered for participation.

Measures

The descriptive statistics for the sample are reported in Table 1.

Dependent variable.

The dependent variable is self-reported life satisfaction as measured by participants' responses to the Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale, a widely used SWB and life evaluation measure (Cantril, 1965). The scale item is as follows:

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[1] This study was approved by the Arizona State University Institutional Review Board Study 00011283. Interviewers received training on both how to interview and human subjects protections.

Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to ten at the top. Suppose we say that the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. If the top step is 10 and the bottom step is 0, on which step of the ladder do you feel you personally stand at the present time?

There is no one way to present the Cantril scale results. The various methods range from presenting mean scores to full distributions. One common grouping is considering thriving as 7 and above, struggling as the middle scores of 5 and 6, and suffering as those who score 4 and below. These cutoff points were developed by Gallup, a well-known consulting firm that regularly measures the well-being of Americans and other people across the globe, based on the empirical relationships that emerged when analyzing the characteristics of the three groups (Gallup, 2009). Categorizations like these can be useful for comparing findings and communicating meaningful results.

Research on the general American public that uses the Cantril scale finds that between 48.8% and 53.7% of people reported life satisfaction scores of 7 or higher between the months of March and October in 2020, the time frame during which the data for this study was collected (Witters & Agrawal, 2021). To consider this scale in the present study, life satisfaction scores will be interpreted in four ways. First, life satisfaction will be broken into *thriving* (scores of 7 and above on Cantril scale) and *not thriving* (scores of 6 and below) where the cutoff point for thriving is guided by the commonly used understanding of the Cantril scale put forward by Gallup (Gallup, 2009). Second, life satisfaction will be broken into *thriving* (scores of 9 and 10) and *not thriving* (8 and below) where the thriving is interpreted as only the most extreme life satisfaction scores. Third, life satisfaction will be broken into *thriving* (scores of 5 and above) and *not thriving* (4 and below) where the cutoff point for thriving is closer to the midline of the

scale. Lastly, life satisfaction will be broken into *thriving* (7 and above), *struggling* (5 and 6), and *suffering* (4 and below) based on the categories commonly used for interpretation by Gallup World Polls (Gallup, 2009). The distribution of participant's life satisfaction scores is depicted in Figure 1, with the largest percent of the sample, 22%, selecting 5 out of 10 (n=85).

Independent variables.

Race/Ethnicity. This variable was measured through a survey question that asked, "What would you identify as your race or ethnicity? (Choose all that apply)" and had the response options of "White", "Black or African American", "Hispanic or Latino", "American Indian or Alaska Native", "Asian", "Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander", and "Other." For analyses, groups were created for White, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, and Other races and ethnicities. Thirty-four percent of the sample identified as White, 29% identified as Black or African American, 25% identified as Hispanic or Latino, and 12% identified with another race or ethnicity not listed here.

Figure 1

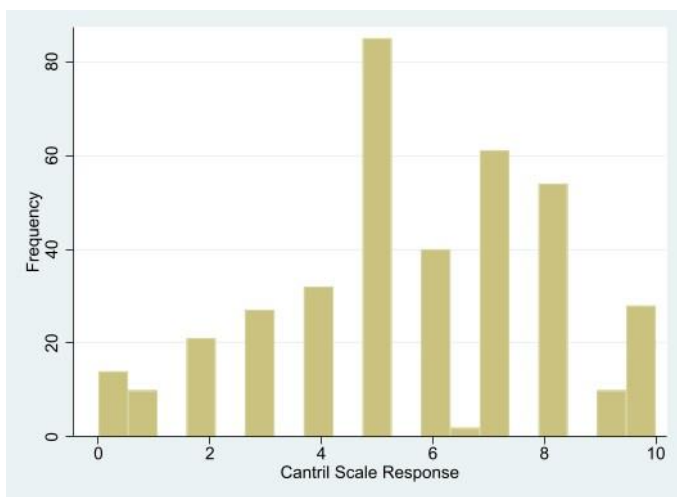*Distribution of Life Satisfaction Scores*

Table 1
Descriptive statistics

Variable	*Mean*	*SD*	*Minimum*	*Maximum*
Life Satisfaction				
Thriving (9+)	0.10		0	1
Thriving (5+)	0.73		0	1
Thriving, Struggling, Suffering				
Thriving (7+)	0.40		0	1
Struggling (5-6)	0.33		0	1
Suffering (4 and below)	0.27		0	1
Demographics				
Race				
White	0.34		0	1
African American or Black	0.29		0	1
Hispanic or Latino	0.25		0	1
Other	0.12		0	1
Age	40.92	13.69	19	91
Education level				
Less than high school	0.22		0	1
High school diploma/GED	0.34		0	1
More than high school	0.44		0	1
In a relationship	0.27		0	1
Has children	0.69		0	1
Scales				
WHO Spirituality, Religiousness and Personal Beliefs Meaning Sub-scale	3.99	0.84	1.00	5.00
Flourishing Scale	4.05	0.50	2.25	5.00
Generativity Scale	4.00	0.61	1.67	5.00
Controls				
Familial incarceration index	0.80	0.78	0	3
Sentence served (years)	9.87	10.05	0.33	61
Sentence left to serve (years)	5.46	7.69	0	92

Age. Age was measured by the self-reported age respondents gave at the time of the survey collection. Participant age in this sample ranged from 19 to 91 with an average age of 40.92.

Education level. In the current study, education level was measured through a response to the question of "What is the highest level of education that you have completed at this time?" with response options of "8th grade or less", "Some high school", "High school diploma or GED", "Some college, associate degree, vocational training, or technical school", "College degree (4 year degree)", and "Graduate studies or graduate degree." For analyses, groups were created for less than high school diploma, high school diploma or GED, and more than a high school diploma. Twenty-two percent of the sample reported less than a high school diploma, 34.2% reported a high school diploma or GED, and 43.78% reported more than a high school diploma as their highest attained education level.

Relationship status. In the present study, relationship status was measured through a question that asked, "What is your current relationship status?", with response options of "Single," "In a relationship," "Married," "Separated," "Divorced," "Widowed," and "Don't know." Roughly 27% of the sample are married or in a relationship (n=106) as opposed to the 73% percent who reported they are not (n=280).

Parental status. Parental status was measured through a question that asked, "How many children do you have?" and a new dichotomous variable was generated denoting those who had at least one child and those that had no children. The majority of people in this sample, 69% (n=267), reported that they were a parent whereas the rest of the sample, 31% (n=119), reported that they had no children.

Perceptions as Correlates of Life Satisfaction

Life Meaning Scale. Life meaning was measured through respondents' answers to the World Health Organization Spirituality, Religiousness and Personal Beliefs Meaning

Sub-scale questions including "To what extent do you find meaning in life?", "To what extent does taking care of other people provide meaning in life for you?", "To what extent do you feel your life has purpose?", and "To what extent do you feel you are here on Earth for a reason?". These questions were combined into a single value indicating the extent to which the person felt their life had meaning. A high score on the Life Meaning scale represents a person who has strong feelings of life meaning and purpose. The possible values ranged from 1 to 5 with values in the sample spanning the full range and having a mean score of 3.99. The scale had an overall alpha reliability level of 0.86.

Flourishing Scale. The current study measured flourishing through respondents' level of agreement with the statements, "People respect me.", "My social relationships are supportive and rewarding.", "I am engaged and interested in my daily activities.", "I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others.", "I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me.", "I am a good person and live a good life.", "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life.", and " I am optimistic about my future." These items were combined into a scale indicating the extent to which a person is presently leading a fulfilling life. A high score on the Flourishing scale represents a person who is flourishing in life. The possible values ranged from 1 to 5 with values in the sample ranging from 2.25 to 5.00 and having a mean score of 4.05. The scale had an alpha reliability level of 0.83.

Generativity Scale. Generativity was measured through respondents' level of agreement with the statements "I try to pass along the knowledge I have gained through my experiences.", "I have made and created things that have had an impact on other people", "I try to be creative in most things that I do.", "I have important skills that I try

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to teach others.", "I feel that I have done nothing that will survive after I die.", and "I feel as though I have done nothing of worth to contribute to others." These questions were reverse coded as necessary and combined into a scale indicating the extent to which the person felt generative, like they have left their mark on the world. A high score on the Generativity scale represents a person high in generativity. The possible values ranged from 1 to 5 with values in the sample ranging from 1.67 to 5.00 and having a mean score of 4.00. The scale had an overall alpha reliability level of 0.82.

Control Variables

Familial incarceration was measured through respondents' answers to the questions "Did you ever have a parent serve time in prison?", "How many of your siblings have gone to prison?", "How many of your children have gone to jail?, and "How many of your children have gone to prison?" These questions were combined into an index indicating the extent to which the individual had experience with familial incarceration. The possible values range from 0 to 3 and indicate the number of generations in their family (parents, siblings, or children) that have experienced incarceration. The average person in this sample scored 0.80 on this index of familial incarceration.

Prison time served and prison time left to serve in their current sentence were both self-reported by the participants. The average person in this sample had served about 10 years in their current sentence with a range of responses from 4 months to 61 years served. The average person in this sample had over 5 years left to serve in their current sentence. Responses ranged from 0 years left to serve, from those who were set to be released in 2020, to 92 years remaining in the current sentence.

Plan of Analysis

  The primary goal of this study is to explore the correlates of life satisfaction among incarcerated people. To accomplish this objective, a multivariate analysis is needed to evaluate the impact of various influential variables. Since the dependent variable will be considered in two types of ways, dichotomous and categorical with three groups, this necessitates the use of two different types of analyses. First, in the cases where the dependent variable will be treated as dichotomous (thriving, not thriving), a logistic regression model will be estimated. Then, in the case where the dependent variable will be treated as a categorical variable with three groups (thriving, struggling, suffering), a multinomial logistic regression will be estimated[2]. The average relative risk for each variable in each model will be reported and significant ones will be interpreted. Finally, these models will be assessed through analysis of the pseudo r-squared, goodness of fit, variance inflation factors, and tolerance.

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[2] An OLS regression model was estimated and the results were not substantively different than those presented in the following models.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

To assess aspects of the members in different life satisfaction groups, logistic

regressions were run for the first three interpretations of the dependent variable and a

multinomial logistic regression was run for the fourth, and final, interpretation. The

logistic regression results are presented in Table 2 and the multinomial logistic regression

results are presented in Table 3.

Model 1 - Correlates and Thriving (7 +)

The fit of this and all subsequent models are assessed through an evaluation of the

pseudo r-squared, goodness-of-fit test statistic, variance inflation factors, and tolerance.

According to the pseudo r-squared, model 1 explains roughly 17.06% of the variation in

life satisfaction among incarcerated men. The p-value for the model is less than 0.001

which is less than 0.05 resulting in rejection of the null hypothesis and suggesting a low

likelihood of a type one error. The mean variance inflation factor was 1.5. In fact, all

variance inflation factors were under 2.05, which is well below the common threshold for

concern at 10.00 (Vittinghoff et al., 2011). All tolerance levels were above 0.48, which is

well above the minimum tolerance level commonly accepted without concern at 0.10

(Vittinghoff et al., 2011). The variance inflation factors and tolerance levels reveal that

this model has no strong issues with multicollinearity. Additionally, the goodness of fit

test fails to reject the model suggesting that model 1 may adequately represent the present

relationship.

Demographics. Neither race nor education level nor having children were

significant predictors of thriving. Age and being in a relationship were significant

predictors of thriving at a p-value less than 0.05. These results show that as an incarcerated man ages, his likelihood of thriving increases by 2% with each year. Additionally, the results show that incarcerated men in a relationship are 43% less likely to be thriving than their single counterparts.

Scales. All three scales, meaning, generativity, and flourishing, were found to be significant at a p-value of less than 0.05. A higher score on the meaning scale increases an incarcerated man's likelihood of thriving by 45% with each point increase. A higher score on the flourishing scale increases an incarcerated man's likelihood of thriving by 48% with each point increase. A higher score on the generativity scale increases an incarcerated man's likelihood of thriving by 37% with each point increase.

Controls. Familial incarceration index, sentence served, and sentence left to serve were not found to be significant predictors of thriving in prison.

Model 2 - Correlates and Thriving (9 +)

According to the pseudo r-squared, model 2 explains roughly 15.54% of the variation in life satisfaction among incarcerated men. The p-value for the model is 0.0069 which is less than 0.05 resulting in rejection of the null hypothesis and suggesting a low likelihood of a type one error. The mean variance inflation factor was 1.55. In fact, all variance inflation factors were under 2.06 and all tolerance levels were above 0.48, both far from the common thresholds for concern. These variance inflation factors and tolerance levels reveal that this model has no strong issues with multicollinearity. The goodness of fit test fails to reject the model suggesting that model 2 may adequately represent the present relationship.

Table 2.
Logistic Regressions of Subjective Well-Being on Individual Characteristics of Incarcerated Men (n=384)

Variable	Model 1 – thriving (7+)			Model 2 – thriving (9+)			Model 3 – thriving (5+)		
	Odds Ratio	Standard Error	ARR	Odds Ratio	Standard Error	ARR	Odds Ratio	Standard Error	ARR
Race and ethnicity									
African American or Black	0.75	0.28	0.82	1.88	1.16	1.58	0.75	0.29	0.92
Hispanic or Latino	1.44	0.51	1.22	1.48	0.97	1.36	1.58	0.60	1.13
Other	1.12	0.50	1.07	2.11	1.59	1.68	1.53	0.72	1.12
Age	1.03*	0.01	1.02	1.03	0.02	1.03	1.02	0.02	1.00
Education level									
High school diploma/GED	1.17	0.41	1.09	0.95	0.52	0.95	0.94	0.35	0.98
More than high school	1.06	0.38	1.04	0.67	0.38	0.64	0.35	0.22	0.85
In a relationship	0.50*	0.15	0.57	0.62	0.31	0.56	0.99	0.29	0.97
Has children	1.24	0.39	1.13	1.05	0.55	1.05	0.93	0.30	0.98
Life Meaning Scale	2.07*	0.48	1.45	2.94*	1.26	1.98	1.20	0.24	1.05
Flourishing Scale	2.19*	0.82	1.48	3.27+	2.15	2.08	2.91*	1.10	1.30
Generativity Scale	1.81*	0.58	1.37	0.82	0.43	0.82	1.92*	0.59	1.18
Sentence served (years)	0.98	0.02	0.99	0.99	0.03	0.99	0.97	0.02	0.99
Sentence left to serve (years)	1.01	0.019	1.00	0.99	0.04	0.99	1.00	0.02	1.00
Familial incarceration index	0.91	0.16	0.94	0.74	0.21	0.73	0.81	0.15	0.94

Notes: + = *p<.0.10;* * = *p<0.05; White* is the reference group for race and *less than high school* is the reference group for education level

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Table 3.

Multinomial Logistic Regression of Subjective Well-Being on Individual Characteristics of Incarcerated Men (n=384)

Variable	Suffering Group (0-4)			Struggling Group (5-6)		
	Relative Risk Ratio	*Standard Error*	*ARR*	*Relative Risk Ratio*	*Standard Error*	*ARR*
Race						
African American or Black	1.45	0.66	1.20	1.22	0.51	1.02
Hispanic or Latino	0.54	0.24	0.62	0.82	0.32	1.05
Other	0.65	0.34	0.67	1.08	0.53	1.18
Age	0.96*	0.02	0.98	0.97+	0.02	0.99
Education level						
High school diploma/GED	0.96	0.42	1.04	0.82	0.31	0.88
More than high school	1.41	0.62	1.37	0.70	0.27	0.66
In a relationship	1.72	0.38	1.13	2.18*	0.73	1.37
Has children	0.92	0.35	1.04	0.74	0.25	0.82
Life Meaning Scale	0.52*	0.14	0.79	0.46*	0.12	0.66
Flourishing Scale	0.27*	0.12	0.20	0.67	0.28	1.10
Generativity Scale	0.42*	0.16	0.51	0.67	0.24	0.98
Sentence served	1.04	0.03	1.14	1.01	0.03	1.00
Sentence left to serve	0.99	0.02	1.02	0.99	0.02	1.00
Familial incarceration index	1.23	0.27	1.00	1.02	0.20	0.95

*Notes: + = p<0.10; * = p<0.05; White is the reference group for race. Less than high school is the reference group for education level.*

Demographics. Race, age, education level, being in a relationship, and having children were not found to be significant predictors of thriving in prison.

Scales. Two scales, meaning and flourishing, were found to be significant in this model. Meaning was significant at a p-value less than 0.05 and flourishing was significant at a p-value less than 0.10. A higher score on the meaning scale increases an incarcerated man's likelihood of thriving by 98% with each point increase. A higher score on the flourishing scale increases an incarcerated man's likelihood of thriving by 108% with each point increase.

Controls. Familial incarceration index, sentence served, and sentence left to serve were not found to be significant predictors of thriving in prison.

Model 3 - Correlates and Thriving (5 +)

According to the pseudo r-squared, model 3 explains roughly 13.82% of the variation in life satisfaction among incarcerated men. The p-value for the model is less than 0.001 which is less than 0.05 resulting in rejection of the null hypothesis and suggesting a low likelihood of a type one error. The mean variance inflation factor was 1.55. In fact, all variance inflation factors were under 2.06 and all tolerance levels were above 0.48, both far from the common thresholds for concern. These variance inflation factors and tolerance levels reveal that this model has no strong issues with multicollinearity. The goodness of fit test fails to reject the model suggesting that model 3 may adequately represent the present relationship.

Demographics. Race, age, education level, being in a relationship, and having children were not found to be significant predictors of thriving in prison in this model.

Scales. Two scales, flourishing and generativity, were found to be significant in this model at a p-value less than 0.05. A higher score on the flourishing scale increases an incarcerated man's likelihood of thriving by 30% with each point increase. A higher score on the generativity scale increases an incarcerated man's likelihood of thriving by 18% with each point increase.

Controls. Familial incarceration index, sentence served, and sentence left to serve were not found to be significant predictors of thriving in prison.

Model 4 - Correlates and Thriving (7 +) Struggling (5-6) Suffering (4 and below)

According to the pseudo r-squared, model 4 explains roughly 13.98% of the variation in life satisfaction among incarcerated men. The p-value for the model is less than 0.001 which is less than 0.05 resulting in rejection of the null hypothesis and suggesting a low likelihood of a type one error. The mean variance inflation factor was 1.55. In fact, all variance inflation factors were under 2.05 and all tolerance levels were above 0.48, both far from the common thresholds for concern. These variance inflation factors and tolerance levels reveal that this model has no strong issues with multicollinearity. The goodness of fit test fails to reject the model suggesting that model 4 may adequately represent the present relationship.

Suffering Group (0-4) Compared to Thriving Group (7+)

Demographics. In the comparison between the lowest scoring life satisfaction group, suffering, and the highest, thriving, age was found to be a significant variable. These results show that as an incarcerated man ages, his likelihood of being in the suffering group compared to the thriving group decreases by 2% with each year.

Scales. All three scales, meaning, generativity, and flourishing, were found to be significant at a p-value of less than 0.05. A higher score on the meaning scale increases an incarcerated man's likelihood of being in the thriving group as opposed to the suffering group by 21% with each point increase. A higher score on the flourishing scale increases an incarcerated man's likelihood of being in the thriving group as opposed to the suffering group by 80% with each point increase. A higher score on the generativity scale increases an incarcerated man's likelihood of being in the thriving group as opposed to the suffering group by 49% with each point increase.

Controls. Familial incarceration index, sentence served, and sentence left to serve were not found to be significant predictors of thriving in prison.

Struggling Group (5-6) Compared to Thriving Group (7+)

Demographics. In the comparison between the middle scoring life satisfaction group, struggling, and the highest, thriving, age was found to be a significant variable at a p-value less than 0.10 and being in a relationship was found to be significant at a p-value less than 0.05. These results show that as an incarcerated man ages, his likelihood of being in the struggling group compared to the thriving group decreases by 1% with each year. Additionally, the results found that incarcerated men who were in a relationship were 37% more likely to be in the struggling rather than thriving group.

Scales. In this comparison only one scale, meaning, was found to be significant at a p-value of less than 0.05. A higher score on the meaning scale increases an incarcerated man's likelihood of being in the thriving group as opposed to the struggling group by 34% with each point increase.

Controls. Familial incarceration index, sentence served, and sentence left to serve were not found to be significant predictors of thriving in prison.

There were some reoccurring findings in the presented models that are highlighted in Table 4. Regarding nonsignificant results, the control variables along with race, education, and parental status were not found to be significant in any of the models. Regarding significant results, age and relationship status were found to be significant predictors of high life satisfaction in two out of the four models. Specifically, being older and single increased an incarcerated man's likelihood of thriving. Across three out of four of the models, meaning, flourishing, and generativity were found to be significant

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predictors of life satisfaction with higher levels of meaning, flourishing, or generativity

increasing the likelihood of thriving. All models presented a significant p-value less than

0.05 and passed tests for goodness of fit and multicollinearity. Some differences emerged

in the pseudo r-squared with model 1 demonstrating the highest value.

Table 4
Comparison of Significant Results Across all Models

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	
				Suffering	Struggling
Race					
Black or Afr. Amer.	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Hispanic or Latino	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Other	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Age	+	NS	NS	+	+
Education level					
HS diploma/GED	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
More than HS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
In a relationship	-	NS	NS	NS	-
Has children	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Life Meaning Scale	+	+	NS	+	+
Flourishing Scale	+	+	+	+	NS
Generativity Scale	+	NS	+	+	NS
Sentence served	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Sentence left to serve	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Familial incarceration	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS

Notes: + = significant positive relationship at either p<0.05 or p<0.10; - = significant negative relationship at either p<0.05 or p<0.10, NS = not significant

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

The well-being challenges of incarceration are well-documented in criminology literature. Positive psychology brings a new vantage point to this established area of study, revealing lessons about elements that can help people thrive behind bars rather than further belaboring elements that detract from well-being in prison. The goal of the current study was to understand what differentiates people who are thriving in prison from their non-thriving peers. The current analysis focused on whether people's demographics, experiences with incarceration, or intrinsic measures of meaning, generativity and flourishing were associated with life satisfaction scores. Conclusions in line with these three main groups of variables can be drawn based on the results of the study.

First, some demographic relationships did not appear in the model as expected. In particular, race and education were not found to be significant in this study. When only demographics are considered in the model, being Hispanic or Latino has a significant association with thriving. The variable remains significant as flourishing and generativity are added, but as meaning is added to the model, the influence of being Hispanic or Latino is accounted for. This finding suggests that perhaps the association between race and well-being is less straight-forward than is typically reported in the literature. Past literature may, more accurately, be demonstrating the effect of meaning, of which certain races or ethnicities may have higher levels, on life satisfaction. Similarly, education level has been found in previous literature to be a significant predictor of well-being, but not in this study. This holds true even when considering supplemental analyses where different

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groups of variables were progressively stepped into the model to evaluate their effect on the final analysis. This finding suggests that the positive effect of education on well-being which is reported in the literature may be neutralized by imprisonment. Expanding on this further, this finding may possibly begin to hint at the role which economic and social mobility may play in life satisfaction. Income level has been found to be positively associated with life satisfaction (Boes & Winkelmann, 2010). Increased education has a positive effect on income level (Torpey, 2018); however, behind bars, education does not enable the same kinds of economic mobility that it does in the free world: opportunities for increased income in prison are relatively nonexistent regardless of one's education level. Without access to the benefits that increased education affords individuals and their families, economic and social mobility being main ones, it follows that the effect of education on life satisfaction is not significant.

Lastly with regard to demographics, age and relationship status were found to have significant associations with thriving. The finding that older people have higher levels of life satisfaction is generally consistent with existing knowledge. The existing literature would further suggest that the relationship between age and life satisfaction is better modeled curvilinearly; however, this study finds that adding age-squared along with age to the models provides no real additional value to any of the models. Contrary to existing literature, being in a relationship was a significant *detractor* from thriving. This finding may suggest that incarceration can alter social supports that typically uplift life satisfaction into negative stressors or increased challenges. Maintaining a relationship at a distance, let alone from behind bars, creates new stressors for both parties (Turney, 2015). This finding may demonstrate the challenges of relationship maintenance during

incarceration and the noteworthy influence these types of struggles could have on individual life satisfaction.

Second, and also different from what was expected, incarceration experiences had no significant positive or negative associations with life satisfaction. Familial incarceration and time served were not significant predictors of life satisfaction, but their odds and relative risk ratios did point in the expected directions: increases in experiences with familial incarceration and amount of time served were associated with lower levels of life satisfaction. Time left to serve was also not significant and had no positive or negative association with a person's likelihood of thriving. These findings are unexpected due to the well-established pains associated with incarceration. Rather than being a reflection on the nature of the prison conditions, these findings may instead highlight the immense capacity and adaptability of humans to overcome challenges. Post-traumatic growth may be one possible explanation of these results (Triplett et al., 2011). It is possible that the difficulties of incarceration force people to develop coping strategies that buffer against these hardships in order to survive the experience with some well-being still intact. It is also possible, for these variables as well as for others included in the models, that different effects are occurring for different people that cancel each other out in the main effect. For example, high familial incarceration for one person could be devastating and reduce their SWB while, for another person, it could indicate instead that incarceration is a normal experience and not impact their SWB. Future research is needed to untangle these relationships and effects further.

Third, and finally, this study found that meaning, generativity, and flourishing are associated with thriving in prison. This is consistent with findings from existing literature

that depict opportunities for creating, giving back, and developing meaning as key

players in the well-being of all people, especially people experiencing incarceration

(Feldman, 2018; Gill, Roulet, & Kerridge, 2018; Nugent & Loucks, 2011). The

relationship between flourishing and life satisfaction was somewhat unexpected resulting

in flourishing staying in the final models. Both variables are conceptually thought to be

measures of SWB, with some research even structuring life satisfaction as a component

of flourishing (Bakracheva, 2020). However, in the present study, flourishing and life

satisfaction were not closely correlated enough to suggest concern that they are tapping

into the same construct; flourishing was actually more closely correlated with

generativity and meaning (Appendix A). Due to this, and the minimal differences

resulting from excluding it, flourishing was kept in the final models. It is possible that

flourishing and life satisfaction take on different meaning behind bars rendering them

conceptually different constructs. The questions included in the flourishing scale measure

immediate extrinsic and intrinsic quality of life elements whereas life satisfaction

measures elicit more holistic evaluations of the entire life. These two concepts,

flourishing and life satisfaction, may share more similarities among people in the free

world than people experiencing incarceration.

The findings from the current analyses make contributions to theory in the fields

of positive psychology as well as criminal justice. First, the findings expand what is

known about people's well-being during trying times. Some past well-being literature

attempts to account for people experiencing hardship, but few, if any, seek to learn from

the unique challenge of the incarceration experience. From this pursuit, support has been

gained for the important role that generativity, flourishing, and meaning all play during

evaluations of life satisfaction, and specifically in contexts of hardship. Second, the findings uncover some complexities in factors that have been previously associated with well-being. The unexpected findings with regard to education level and relationship status in this study present the possibility that incarceration, and possibly other challenging life circumstances, can act as a moderator weakening or even changing the direction of established predictors' influences on well-being. Additionally, life meaning's ability to account for the influence of any race or ethnicity differences in life satisfaction adds dimension to past knowledge about the relationship between race and life satisfaction. Further research is needed to explore the complexities uncovered in this study, in particular the role of hardship as a moderator of well-being and how that may inform on the development of coping adaptations.

Beyond theory, these findings are important due to the implications they have for practitioners in the field of corrections and criminal justice. First, knowing that someone, for example, with ten years behind bars is not any less likely to achieve thriving than someone who has only experienced the pains of imprisonment for one month affirms that striving for improved well-being in prison is not a hopeless venture. Increased experience with incarceration does not make it impossible, or even less likely, for a person to thrive in prison; it is possible for people to achieve high levels of life satisfaction behind bars.

Second, this knowledge could help practitioners create pathways for more people to achieve positive well-being during incarceration. Increasing opportunities for creating generativity, meaning, and aspects of flourishing could help pave the way for people in prison to have higher life satisfaction and reap the associated benefits of improved health, prosocial and altruistic behaviors, and conflict resolution skills, to name a few.

Opportunities of this nature might take the form of peer-to-peer mentorship programs, peer-led classes in art, education, or exercise, charity fundraisers, art showcases, book clubs, educational programs that enable people to learn and master a skill, or work opportunities that give people the chance to feel that they are meaningfully contributing to a community and rewriting their legacy in the process (Wright, 2020).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Generalizability. The sample for the current study consists of all males thus limiting the generalizability of the findings to only incarcerated males, especially due to the existence of research which shows a difference in baseline well-being between males and females. Existing research finds small but significant increases in life satisfaction for females as compared to males despite the comparatively worse conditions for females worldwide (Graham & Chattopadhyay, 2013; Joshanloo & Jovanović, 2019). The largest sex-based differences appear in rich countries and are almost non-existent in poor countries (Graham & Chattopadhyay, 2013; Joshanloo & Jovanović, 2019). Further research should examine the aspects of life satisfaction among incarcerated females and make comparisons to incarcerated males as well as the general public.

Omitted Variables. Not all variables that have been found to be associated with life satisfaction were included in the survey design. For example, relative income is one variable that it often studied in relation to well-being levels with research showing that the comparison of a person's income to another person's in their social reference group can affect life satisfaction positively if income ranks higher than the reference and negatively if it ranks lower (Boyce, Brown, & Moore, 2010; Yu, 2019). As there is not much income variability among people experiencing incarceration due to the lack of

opportunity for high paying jobs, scholars may be interested in examining how this experience affects relative income as a predictor of well-being. The wages for prison jobs are below minimum wage, which could result in incarcerated people being lower income than most others if the general public is the reference group; yet, they are only surrounded by others who earn relatively the same amount as them who may also be considered a reference group. Furthermore, families and friends can send money to people experiencing incarceration, which could be considered an alternative for income and allow scholars to examine if it is the action of earning the income that contributes to well-being or merely the outcomes of what the income can bring that make the contribution. Further research should consider exploring and controlling for relative income in further studies of life satisfaction among incarcerated people.

Multicollinearity. Although no issues were raised with the variance inflation factors or tolerance levels in the different analyses, it is worth noting that meaning, generativity, and flourishing were all rather highly correlated (Appendix A). This may suggest that these indicators were possibly tapping into the same construct, which could affect the precision of the coefficient estimates or weaken trust in the p-values of the models. Future research is advised to further examine the similarities and differences between these measures as well as how their inclusion or exclusion may alter the demonstrated relationships with life satisfaction.

Conceptual interpretations of thriving. The concept of life satisfaction begins to beg the question, is thriving in prison always a positive thing? It is possible that people in prison who rate their life satisfaction highly simply do not think that a better life is possible for them; the measure that taps into well-being in the free world may be better

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depict hopelessness and defeat behind bars. Some evidence from the analyses, such as the positive relationships between life satisfaction scores and measures we would expect to be higher in thriving people (e.g. engagement and interest in daily activities), suggest that this concern may be mostly unwarranted. Nonetheless, it would be prudent to further test the Cantril scale for construct validity within this particular population.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The results suggest that high life satisfaction behind bars is possible and at least

moderately common. And, there are a number of important factors, age, flourishing,

generativity, and meaning, that are related to achieving these high levels of well-being

despite challenging circumstances. Further, some factors that the literature posed as being

closely associated with high life satisfaction, such as race, education level, and

relationship status, may be more nuanced and dependent upon context than previously

anticipated. These findings add additional complexity to existing well-being literature

revealing that it is malleable lifestyle and mindset elements which are the most

consistently and strongly associated to well-being during times of hardship.

The purpose of research that seeks to learn more about people who are thriving in

prison is not to overlook the pain of those who are suffering or to demean them for not

being resilient. The importance of learning about those who are able to overcome the

obstacles to living a fulfilling life despite suffering is in gaining insight on the facets of

life that build and hold us up even in our worst moments. Through identifying and

finding ways to enhance these supports, researchers and practitioners can see to it that all

people experiencing incarceration have the opportunity to establish a beneficial

foundation to rely on as they navigate the emotionally tumultuous experience of restricted

freedom and its associated consequences. Approaching corrections through the lens of

positive psychology allows scholars to water the flowers and not the weeds, to

acknowledge the negative impacts of incarceration while also revealing it to be a

potential juncture for intervention, and to develop pathways for all to achieve high levels

of well-being and its positive effects, no matter the obstacles.

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APPENDIX A

CORRELATION MATRIX

Table 5.
Correlations for Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1. Life satisfaction	1.00																
Race and ethnicity																	
2. *White*	-0.14	1.00															
3. *Black*	0.02	-0.43	1.00														
4. *Hispanic*	0.11	-0.43	-0.38	1.00													
5. *Other*	0.01	-0.26	-0.23	-0.23	1.00												
6. Age	0.10	0.04	0.11	-0.13	-0.23	1.00											
Education level																	
7. *Less than HS*	0.03	-0.15	0.01	0.18	-0.04	-0.13	1.00										
8. *HS Diploma*	-0.01	0.04	-0.05	-0.02	0.03	-0.11	-0.43	1.00									
9. *More than HS*	-0.01	0.09	0.05	-0.14	0.00	0.23	-0.46	-0.61	1.00								
10. In a relationship	-0.03	-0.00	0.06	-0.04	-0.03	0.04	0.04	-0.07	0.04	1.00							
11. Has children	0.05	-0.09	0.03	0.03	0.06	0.29	0.13	-0.01	-0.01	0.16	1.00						
12. Life Meaning Scale	0.35	-0.28	0.29	0.01	-0.02	-0.05	0.03	-0.05	0.02	0.14	0.02	1.00					
13. Flourishing Scale	0.38	-0.20	0.20	0.04	-0.04	-0.09	0.02	-0.01	-0.00	0.10	-0.05	0.55	1.00				
14. Generativity Scale	0.37	-0.14	0.17	0.01	-0.05	0.10	-0.01	-0.11	0.11	0.08	0.07	0.56	0.65	1.00			
15. Sentence served	0.03	-0.08	0.13	-0.05	0.01	0.57	-0.10	-0.05	0.14	-0.12	0.14	-0.03	-0.03	0.08	1.00		
16. Sentence left to serve	-0.03	0.08	-0.016	-0.07	-0.00	0.23	-0.06	-0.14	0.19	0.15	0.13	-0.07	-0.07	-0.01	0.27	1.00	
17. Familial incarceration index	-0.04	-0.20	0.24	-0.01	-0.02	-0.15	0.12	0.05	-0.15	0.08	0.05	0.04	0.04	0.01	-0.11	-0.07	1.00

Notes: $+ = p<.0.10$; $* = p<0.05$