

REVISITING THE ORIENTATIONS TO HAPPINESS MODEL: ARE PLEASURE, ENGAGEMENT, AND MEANING PROTECTIVE FACTORS AGAINST PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS?

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Abstract

While orientations to happiness (OTH) have been extensively studied in relation to well-being, their role in psychological distress remains less understood. This study examined whether the three orientations—pleasure, engagement, and meaning—predict depression, anxiety, and stress. Data were collected from 476 Romanian adults ($M = 32.85$, $SD = 11.87$) and analyzed using structural equation modeling to assess the predictive role of each orientation in psychological distress, operationalized as depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms. Pleasure orientation significantly predicted higher levels of depressive symptoms ($\beta = .12$, $p = .039$), anxiety ($\beta = .17$, $p = .002$), and stress ($\beta = .15$, $p = .002$). In contrast, meaning orientation negatively predicted depressive symptoms ($\beta = -.17$, $p = .002$) and stress ($\beta = -.11$, $p = .039$), supporting its protective role. Engagement orientation did not significantly predict any dimension of psychological distress. This study extends the OTH model beyond its traditional focus on well-being to examine its relationship with psychological distress, demonstrating that happiness orientations have both benefits and potential drawbacks. By highlighting the protective role of meaning and the risks associated with pleasure orientation, these findings emphasize the need for a more nuanced understanding of happiness orientations. Future research should explore the mechanisms underlying these associations and investigate their longitudinal effects.

Cuvinte-cheie: orientări către fericire, distres psihologic, depresie, anxietate, stres.

Keywords: orientations to happiness, psychological distress, depression, anxiety, stress.

1. INTRODUCTION

Exploring the primary factors that shape psychological well-being has represented a core theme within the field of positive psychology (e.g., David *et al.*, 2012). A notable contribution to this field is Peterson, Park, and Seligman's (2005) Orientations to Happiness (OTH) model, which identifies three distinct happiness-seeking strategies: pleasure (i.e., hedonic enjoyment), engagement (i.e., being fully absorbed and challenged by tasks), and meaning (i.e., purposeful living aimed at contributing to something larger than oneself). Each orientation captures a unique approach to achieving happiness.

The concept of OTH has attracted considerable scholarly attention, especially regarding its links with key indicators of well-being, including life

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satisfaction and positive affect. Numerous studies have found positive correlations in this regard (e.g., Park *et al.*, 2009).

However, in more recent work, scholars have turned their attention to how these orientations relate to negative affect (e.g., Swart & Rothmann, 2012; Vella-Brodrick *et al.*, 2008). Among the three orientations, the relationship between pleasure orientation and negative affect has been relatively consistent across studies, with most reporting no significant association (e.g., Pollock *et al.*, 2015; Vella-Brodrick *et al.*, 2008), although a few exceptions have been noted (e.g., Schueller & Seligman, 2010; Swart & Rothman, 2012).

In contrast, individuals high in engagement often report lower levels of negative affect. Although some studies failed to identify significant links (e.g., Chan, 2013), others have highlighted substantial negative correlations, revealing that deep involvement in activities that foster engagement may serve as a buffer against negative emotional states (e.g., Chan, 2009; Swart & Rothmann, 2012).

Turning to the third dimension, the meaning orientation has generally shown an inverse relationship with negative affect, indicating that individuals who orient their lives around purpose may be less prone to experiencing negative emotional states (e.g., Pollock *et al.*, 2015; Swart & Rothmann, 2012). This pattern aligns with theoretical perspectives proposing that a strong sense of purpose may enhance psychological resilience and provide a buffer against distress (e.g., Park, 2005).

Despite the considerable body of evidence highlighting the beneficial impact of both engagement and meaning pathways, studies assessing the predictive relationships between these orientations and distress correlates—such as depression, anxiety, and stress—are still relatively scarce (e.g., Schueller & Seligman, 2010). Given these considerations, the current study aims to examine whether engagement and meaning orientations negatively predict psychological distress. Accordingly, we proposed the following hypotheses: H1: Engagement orientation will negatively predict psychological distress—specifically, depression (H1a), anxiety (H1b), and stress (H1c); H2: Meaning orientation will negatively predict psychological distress—specifically, depression (H2a), anxiety (H2b), and stress (H2c).

Given the ambiguous and inconsistent findings concerning the pleasure orientation (e.g., Pollock *et al.*, 2015; Schueller & Seligman, 2010), we will explore its relationship with psychological distress without explicitly hypothesizing a directional outcome. This exploratory approach will provide insights into potential contexts in which pleasure orientation may have protective, neutral, or even detrimental effects on psychological distress.

2. METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The sample consisted of 476 Romanian adults, with an average age of 32.85 years ($SD = 11.87$). Most participants were female (94.5%), held higher education degrees (77.9%), were unmarried (70.4%), and resided in urban areas (87.2%).

PROCEDURE

The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of Babeş-Bolyai University. Participants were recruited online via Facebook announcements, posted on groups and shared through personal networks. Data were collected via Google Forms. Respondents provided informed consent before participation, ensuring anonymity and the right to withdraw. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete and included the Orientations to Happiness Scale (Peterson *et al.*, 2005) followed by the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). For their participation, participants were compensated with either personal development workshops or course credit, the latter being available to students from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at Babeş-Bolyai University.

MEASURES

The Orientations to Happiness Scale (OTH; Peterson *et al.*, 2005) is a self-report measure of individuals' pursuit of happiness through three pathways: pleasure, engagement, and meaning. It contains 18 items (six per dimension) rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (does not describe me at all) to 5 (describes me very well). The Pleasure subscale emphasizes hedonic enjoyment (e.g., "For me, the good life is the pleasurable life"), the Engagement subscale captures deep involvement associated with flow (e.g., "Regardless of what I am doing, time passes very quickly"), and the Meaning subscale addresses purposeful living (e.g., "What I do matters to society"). The original scale demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties, with Cronbach's α coefficients of .82 for Pleasure, .72 for Engagement, and .82 for Meaning. In this investigation, the OTH demonstrated good internal consistency for the Pleasure ($\alpha = .78$) and Meaning ($\alpha = .74$) subscales, whereas the Engagement subscale showed questionable reliability ($\alpha = .62$), consistent with prior research (e.g., Ruch *et al.*, 2010). Although the Cronbach's alpha value falls below the conventional threshold of .70, it can be considered acceptable given the small number of items (e.g., Kline, 2000; Nunnally, 1978).

Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) is a self-report instrument assessing three core dimensions of psychological distress: depression, anxiety, and stress. In its 21-item version, each dimension includes seven statements evaluated using a 4-point Likert-type format, from 0 (did not apply to me at all) to 3 (applied to me very much or most of the time). The Depression subscale covers symptoms of low mood and hopelessness (e.g., "I felt that life was meaningless"), the Anxiety subscale captures excessive worry and physiological arousal (e.g., "I was aware of the action of my heart in the absence of physical exertion"), and the Stress subscale reflects tension and irritability (e.g., "I found it hard to wind down"). In the present study, the DASS-21 demonstrated good internal consistency for the Depression ($\alpha = .87$), Anxiety ($\alpha = .86$), and Stress ($\alpha = .88$) subscales.

3. RESULTS

To assess univariate normality, skewness and kurtosis values were examined across all measured variables. Skewness ranged from -0.34 (i.e.,

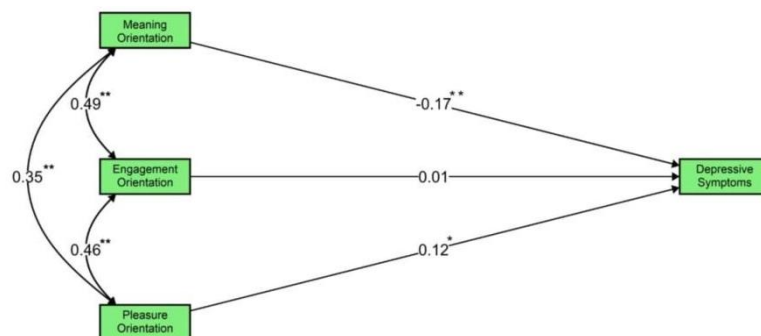
meaning orientation) to 1.04 (i.e., depressive symptoms), while kurtosis ranged from -0.77 (i.e., stress) to 0.39 (i.e., depressive symptoms), suggesting minor deviations from normality. Given that both skewness and kurtosis values fall within the commonly accepted range of ± 2 for skewness and ± 7 for kurtosis (e.g., West *et al.*, 1995), the data can be considered approximately normally distributed at the univariate level. Additionally, Henze-Zirkler's multivariate normality test yielded a statistically significant result ($HZ = 1.029$, $p < .001$), suggesting that the data did not meet the assumption of multivariate normality.

The mean scores for the orientations to happiness (OTH) indicated that participants reported the highest levels for meaning orientation ($M = 21.68$, $SD = 4.39$), followed by pleasure orientation ($M = 20.04$, $SD = 4.68$) and engagement orientation ($M = 16.18$, $SD = 3.36$). The average scores for distress indicators were 5.39 ($SD = 5.10$) for depressive symptoms, 5.56 ($SD = 5.06$) for anxiety, and 7.93 ($SD = 5.51$) for stress. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine the associations between OTH and distress indicators. Pleasure orientation was positively associated with anxiety ($r = .19$, $p < .01$) and stress ($r = .15$, $p < .05$). Meaning orientation was negatively correlated with depressive symptoms ($r = -.13$, $p < .01$). Engagement orientation showed small but significant positive correlations with anxiety ($r = .15$, $p < .01$) and stress ($r = .10$, $p < .05$). The three subscales of DASS-21 were strongly intercorrelated ($r = .63$ to $.70$, all $ps < .01$).

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted to examine the predictive role of the three OTH on distress, as measured by the DASS-21. The first model predicting depressive symptoms explained 2.9% of the variance ($R^2 = .029$). As shown in Figure 1, pleasure orientation emerged as a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .12$, $p = .039$); meaning orientation was a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -.17$, $p = .002$); engagement orientation did not significantly predict depressive symptoms ($\beta = .01$, $p = .894$).

Figure no.1.

SEM Examining the Relationship Between OTH and Depressive Symptoms

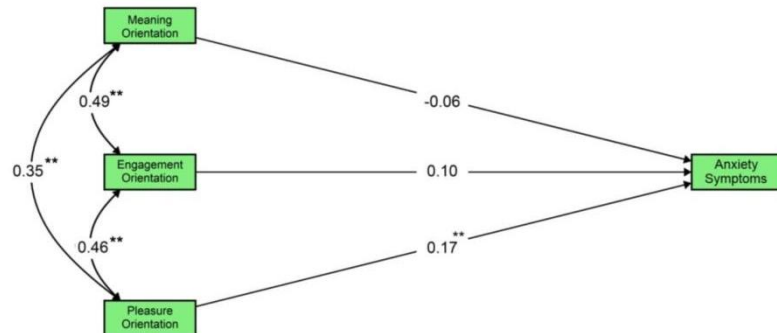


Note: Standardized regression coefficients (β) are displayed on the paths. Correlation coefficients are shown between the predictor variables. $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$ (two-tailed).

For anxiety symptoms, the second model explained 4.3% of the variance ($R^2 = .043$). Pleasure orientation was a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .17$, $p = .002$); engagement orientation did not significantly predict anxiety ($\beta = .10$, $p = .098$), nor did meaning orientation ($\beta = -.06$, $p = .274$).

Figure no. 2.

SEM Examining the Relationship Between OTH and Anxiety Symptoms

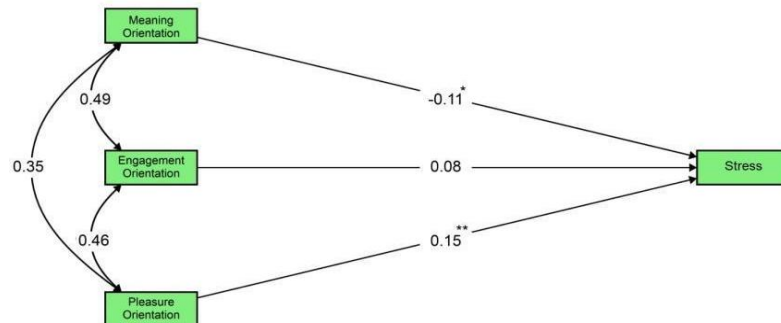


Note. Standardized regression coefficients (β) are displayed on the paths. Correlation coefficients are shown between the predictor variables. $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$ (two-tailed).

The third model explained 3.3% of the variance in stress ($R^2 = .033$); pleasure orientation positively predicted stress ($\beta = .15$, $p = .002$), meaning orientation negatively predicted stress ($\beta = -.11$, $p = .039$), and engagement orientation was not a significant predictor ($\beta = .08$, $p = .158$).

Figure no. 3.

SEM Examining the Relationship Between OTH and Stress.



Note. Standardized regression coefficients (β) are displayed on the paths. Correlation coefficients are shown between the predictor variables. $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$ (two-tailed).

4. DISCUSSIONS

The current research explored the predictive value of three happiness-seeking strategies—pleasure, engagement, and meaning—in relation to psychological distress, defined as symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress.

Given the mixed findings in previous studies, the relationship between pleasure orientation and psychological distress was explored without a specific

hypothesis (e.g., Pollock *et al.*, 2015; Schueller & Seligman, 2010). Our findings indicate that pleasure orientation positively predicts psychological distress across all three dimensions. This means that individuals who prioritize the pursuit of pleasurable experiences are more likely to report symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. It is possible that, for some individuals, the preference for seeking happiness through pleasure may function as a maladaptive strategy of emotional avoidance, potentially preventing them from confronting the root causes of their psychological distress. Consistent with this perspective, findings from a parallel line of research on coping suggest that distractive refocusing operates adaptively only when combined with active acceptance; when instead paired with avoidance, distraction is associated with higher negative affect (e.g., Wolgast & Lundh, 2017).

Another explanation concerns the possible dual nature of behaviors elicited by pleasure orientation. For example, Yang *et al.* (2016) found that pleasure orientation was associated with both positive and negative outcomes: it predicted greater prosocial behavior, which in turn enhanced subjective well-being, but also higher levels of Internet addictive behavior, which was linked to lower subjective well-being. Moreover, prioritizing pleasure may also reduce investment in other important domains, such as meaningful relationships and purposeful pursuits, both of which have been linked to lower psychological distress (e.g., Harandi *et al.*, 2017; Schnell & Krampe, 2020).

Unlike pleasure orientation, which positively predicted psychological distress, engagement orientation was not a significant predictor of any distress dimension. This contradicts Hypothesis 1, which stated that engagement would negatively predict depression (H1a), anxiety (H1b), and stress (H1c). These results suggest that engagement orientation does not function as a protective factor against psychological distress. Because most previous research has examined links between engagement and negative affect rather than discrete distress symptoms (e.g., Chan, 2013; Vella-Brodrick *et al.*, 2008), direct comparisons with the current findings are limited. A notable exception is Schueller and Seligman's (2010) study, in which they found that engagement negatively predicted depressive symptoms. However, because their study examined only depressive symptoms (i.e., not anxiety or stress), our comparison is necessarily limited to this single dimension of distress. As previously noted, engagement orientation was not a significant predictor of depressive symptoms in our sample, thereby challenging the findings of Schueller and Seligman (2010).

A possible explanation for this null finding is that engagement may enhance momentary positive emotions without directly buffering against depressive symptoms (e.g., Pallavicini & Pepe, 2019). In other words, while deep absorption and intrinsic motivation characteristic of engagement can improve short-term well-being, they do not necessarily target the cognitive-emotional processes – such as rumination or low self-compassion – that underlie depression (e.g., Lopez *et al.*, 2018; Nolen-Hoeksema *et al.*, 2008). Similarly, engagement orientation did not predict stress, perhaps because flow experiences – while promoting immersion and enjoyment – do not directly reduce the physiological arousal or perceived demands that characterize stress in general (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Regarding anxiety, prior research has found negative associations between flow experiences and anxiety; however, such studies have typically examined anxiety in specific contexts, such as concerns about academic performance (e.g., Rankin *et al.*, 2019). In contrast, the present study measured a broader form of

anxiety using the DASS-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), which captures a more general manifestation of anxiety. This suggests that engagement alone may not be sufficient to alleviate these manifestations of anxiety without targeting additional cognitive-behavioral strategies (e.g., Barlow, 2004; Beck & Clark, 1997).

Moreover, because the engagement subscale measures only general absorption – without distinguishing healthy, goal-directed flow from excessive, compulsive “dark flow” or identifying the context of that absorption – our results may obscure opposing effects. In other words, adaptive engagement in meaningful tasks might buffer against distress, while maladaptive immersion (e.g., obsessive work or gaming) could increase it. By conflating these into a single score, we potentially underestimate any protective effect of healthy engagement and fail to detect harmful effects of “dark flow” (Dixon *et al.*, 2019; Partington *et al.*, 2009).

Hypothesis 2 was partially supported, as meaning orientation negatively predicted depressive symptoms (H2a) and stress symptoms (H2c), but not anxiety (H2b). In other words, individuals who seek happiness through meaning are generally less likely to experience depression and stress, although this orientation does not appear to buffer against anxiety.

Specifically, and consistent with previous research (e.g., Schueller & Seligman, 2010), our results indicate that a stronger orientation toward meaning predicts lower levels of depressive symptoms. Individuals oriented toward meaning may often perceive their lives as purposeful, thus buffering against depressive symptoms through enhanced existential fulfillment and positive cognitive appraisals of their circumstances (e.g., Harandi *et al.*, 2017; Schnell & Krampe, 2020). Similarly, the meaning orientation predicted lower stress, possibly through its role in fostering a sense of purpose and resilience when facing life’s challenges (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Park, 2010; Schnell & Krampe, 2020).

By contrast, meaning orientation was not a significant predictor of anxiety levels. A plausible explanation is that anxiety, particularly as measured in broad distress scales, reflects heightened sensitivity to uncertainty, perceived lack of control, and anticipatory threat (e.g., Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). While a meaningful life orientation may provide existential direction and a sense of purpose, it might not entirely address these cognitive processes typically associated with anxiety (e.g., Barlow, 2004; Beck & Clark, 1997). Another plausible explanation is that merely endorsing a sense of meaning – without translating it into consistent behaviors and coping strategies – may not effectively counter the underlying mechanisms of anxiety. In this line, prior research on meaning-making has shown anxiety reduction when specific cognitive reappraisals targeting uncertainty and coping with adverse life events are engaged (e.g., Park, 2010).

In sum, the present study offers both theoretical and practical insights into the relationship between OTH and psychological distress. While previous research has predominantly emphasized the beneficial aspects of these orientations (e.g., Park *et al.*, 2009), our findings extend this body of knowledge by investigating how OTH predict different facets of psychological distress, an area that has been less explored in earlier studies. Notably, the results reveal that while seeking happiness through meaning may offer protection against symptoms of depression and stress, a stronger orientation toward pleasure predicts higher levels of distress. These findings suggest that OTH may have both positive and negative psychological consequences, underscoring the need for a more nuanced understanding of how different approaches to pursuing well-being impact mental health.

Practically, these findings highlight the need for a balanced approach to well-being in coaching, counseling, and psychotherapy. While pleasure-seeking can enhance positive emotions, relying on it as an avoidance strategy may, for some individuals, increase psychological distress. Although speculative, this interpretation is consistent with previous research on maladaptive coping and emotional avoidance (e.g., Wolgast & Lundh, 2017), highlighting the need for future studies to clarify the mechanisms by which pleasure orientation may contribute to psychological distress. Moreover, it is important that the pursuit of happiness does not rely solely on hedonic strategies, but is complemented by other orientations, especially meaning. The protective role of meaning orientation suggests that helping individuals cultivate purpose and coherence in life may be an effective therapeutic pathway for reducing symptoms of depression and stress.

This study also has several limitations. First, its cross-sectional design prevents causal conclusions about the link between orientations to happiness and psychological distress. Longitudinal research is needed to clarify the dynamics between these variables. Second, the sample's generalizability is limited, as most participants were women, highly educated, and urban residents. Future studies should include more diverse samples to enhance external validity. Third, reliance on self-report measures introduces social desirability and recall biases, potentially distorting how participants report engaging in hedonic, meaningful, or absorbing activities or their distress symptoms. Future research could integrate behavioral measures or ecological momentary assessments for greater accuracy. Another limitation concerns the measurement of engagement, which may partly explain its non-significant association with distress. As previously discussed, the OTH engagement subscale does not differentiate between adaptive and maladaptive forms of absorption. Without accounting for context or intent, the measure may obscure meaningful variations in how engagement relates to psychological outcomes (Dixon *et al.*, 2019; Partington *et al.*, 2009). Future research should refine this distinction to better capture the dual nature of engagement.

Overall, this research adds to the current understanding by extending the OTH model beyond its traditional focus on well-being to its relationship with psychological distress. By examining how pleasure, engagement, and meaning relate to depression, anxiety, and stress, the study highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of happiness orientations, considering both their benefits and potential drawbacks.

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