Students in Transition: Life Satisfaction Predictors of Incoming College Students

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Abstract

The current study explored the extent to which demographic, academic, and psychological variables directly and interactively predicted life satisfaction within a large sample of adolescents immediately prior to their enrollment in college. Across indicators of gender, disability, academic achievement, and religiousness, students displayed very similar levels of satisfaction. However, students who identified as White or Latino/a, whose parents had higher incomes, and who had higher levels of life meaning displayed greater life satisfaction. Multigroups application of path analysis was used to examine the interaction of demographic, academic, and psychological variables in predicting satisfaction. Although the psychological variables predicted life satisfaction equally well across gender and disability status, meaning in life was a stronger predictor of life satisfaction among Asian Americans than among any other racial/ethnic group. With some exceptions, the predictors of life satisfaction for incoming college students appear very similar to those for current student and adult populations.

Keywords: Life satisfaction; adolescents; transition
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Predictors of life satisfaction have been examined across a wide range of populations, from children to the elderly. Yet little is known about the evolution of life satisfaction predictors during periods of life transition, as individuals move from one developmental stage to the next. One such transition point occurs when young adults move from high school to college. According to Lounsbury, Saudargas, Gibson, and Leong (2005), who students are when they begin college predicts both who they become while in college as well as how satisfied they are with their experience. Thus, understanding the life satisfaction of students during this transitional phase may provide insight on future psychological and college-related outcomes. To better understand which demographic, academic, and psychological variables best predict the life satisfaction of this population, this study investigated indicators of gender, disability, race, parental income, academic achievement, life meaning, and religiousness within a large sample of adolescents immediately prior to their enrollment in college.

Lifespan theorists such as Erikson (1968), Levinson (1978), Chickering (1969), and Perry (1970) offer frameworks for conceptualizing the transition from adolescence to early adulthood experienced by incoming college students. These developmental theorists outline life tasks such as engaging in intimate relationships, developing a sense of autonomy, establishing a cohesive identity, and advancing cognitive processing skills. College development research has infused concepts from these theories, often focusing on components of student development as a means to explore precursors of students’ withdrawal from college (e.g., Lounsbury et al., 2005; Pantages & Creedon, 1978). But as connections have been established between students’ academic development and their personal growth, including their well-being, more attention has been given to the factors that impact students’ satisfaction during their college years (e.g., Disch,
Harlow, Campbell, & Dougan, 2000). However, this research has failed to explore the life satisfaction of students immediately before they enter college, thereby missing potentially important predictors of life satisfaction that predate the stress and excitement of students’ transitions to the college environment.

Life satisfaction is defined as a positive cognitive evaluation of one’s life, and an important indicator of subjective well-being (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The literature exploring the demographic, academic, and psychological predictors of life satisfaction is robust. In their meta-analysis on predictors of life satisfaction, Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith (1999) noted that demographic variables – which are the data that colleges and universities most often collect regarding their matriculating students – generally fail to account directly for substantial variance in subjective well-being. Rather, demographic variables more often interact with psychological factors to predict life satisfaction. Building upon past research on demographic and psychological predictors of life satisfaction with college student and adult populations, this study may further our understanding of how demographic and psychological factors interact with regard to life satisfaction for students prior to any changes they may experience during their transition into college. In the following sections, we examine previous, and sometimes conflicting, evidence regarding the specific predictors of life satisfaction used in the current study. When possible, information is provided on those predictors as they relate to a young adult population.

**Demographic Predictors**

*Gender.* Though studied extensively within the literature, no statistically significant gender differences in levels of subjective well-being have been found for college student and adult samples (Haring, Stock, & Okun, 1984). However, women are reported to experience
stronger levels of positive and negative emotions (Fujita, Diener, & Sandvik, 1991), and therefore gender would be expected to predict scores on measures of positive and negative affect, the emotional components of subjective well-being. Reports of women’s more intense emotional experiences have been attributed to women’s gender socialization (Nolen-Hoeksema & Rusting, 1999), stereotypes, and measurement methods (Robinson & Johnson, 1997; Robinson, Johnson, & Shields, 1998). In contrast, no consistent differences in life satisfaction, the cognitive dimension of subjective well-being, have been linked to gender. For the current study, we hypothesize that men and women will report equal levels of life satisfaction.

Disability Status. A second demographic predictor examined in the present study is disability status, which captures one aspect of physical health. In general, physical health has been considered one of the most reliable predictors of life satisfaction (Fernandez-Ballesteros, Zamarron, & Ruiz, 2001), yet perceptions of health rather than objective health status tend to have a stronger association with life satisfaction (Brief, Butcher, George, & Link, 1993). In fact, the correlation between health and subjective well-being decreases when using objective health measures (e.g., physician ratings, number of doctor visits or hospitalizations; Watten, Vassend, Myhrer, & Syversen, 1997). In terms of disability status, national surveys of Americans with disabilities have found that life satisfaction tends to be highest with those ages 16 to 24, with those whose disability began before the age of 20, with those having no more than one disability, and with those who do not consider themselves disabled (Mehnert, Krauss, Nadler, & Boyd, 1990). As only self-reported disability was measured in the current study, and it is likely that participants will fall within the age range of 16 to 24, it is hypothesized that disability status will not be significantly related to life satisfaction.
**Racial/Ethnic Background.** A third demographic variable examined in the present study is racial or ethnic background. In a 1976 study, Clemente and Sauer found that race, along with quality of perceived health, represented the most salient predictor of life satisfaction for adults in the United States. But since that time, the relationship between race and life satisfaction has remained unclear. For instance, a study of 5545 public high school students in South Carolina reported no significant relationship between race and global life satisfaction (Huebner, Drane, & Valois, 2000), although differences in life satisfaction for older Black and older White individuals have been described (Krause, 1993). Overall, simple correlational studies on race and life satisfaction have done little to explain the mechanisms by which such an association exists.

To gain a deeper understand of how race relates to life satisfaction, this research area is beginning to be explored in conjunction with mediators such as racial discrimination experiences (Broman, 1997), race-related stress (Utsey, Payne, Jackson, & Jones, 2002), and coping strategies (Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000). As the current study will only assess self-reported race, we hypothesize that life satisfaction levels will be similar across racial groups.

**Income.** Students at large, public universities enter college from a variety of income classes. Personal income has been shown to have small but statistically significant correlations with subjective well-being, ranging from no effect (Clark & Oswald, 1994) to .17 (Haring, Stock, Okun, 1984) with adult populations. The minimal effect of income on life satisfaction applies across all income levels, including the extremely wealthy, although income more strongly relates to well-being when poverty threatens the attainment of the basic needs for food, shelter, safe water, and medical care (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). For five diverse adolescent populations ages 10 to 14, Bradley and Corwyn (2004) reported mixed results regarding income’s ability to predict life satisfaction. Although an income-to-needs ratio
predicted life satisfaction for African American and Chinese American adolescents, it failed to hold statistical significance for Dominican Americans, Mexican Americans, and European Americans (Bradley & Corwyn). In short, income has been weakly correlated with satisfaction and becomes a more important predictor as a population’s poverty level increases. For the current study, parental income will be assessed and it is hypothesized that this variable will correlate weakly with life satisfaction.

*Interactions.* Investigations have also unveiled some interaction effects between various demographic predictors and life satisfaction. More specifically, studies examining race and gender have found that Black women have the lowest levels of life satisfaction in comparison to White women, Black men, and White men (Thomas & Holmes, 1992). Race has also been found to interact with income in relation to life satisfaction, with socioeconomic status having a stronger association with life satisfaction for Whites than Blacks (Thomas & Holmes). Additionally, slightly higher correlations between income and subjective well-being have been reported for men than for women (Haring, Stock, & Okun, 1984; Pinquart & Sörensen, 2000). Finally, the interrelationships between race, gender, and income have been considered worthy of further study as important differences impacting the life satisfaction of individuals with a disability (Krause & Anson, 1997; Randolph, 2004). More empirical research is needed to analyze these interrelationships and is a major purpose of the current study.

*Academic Achievement*

An important and likely salient variable for incoming college students is academic achievement. Academic achievement may be an important component of students’ identity, especially for students entering a competitive university, and it may be theorized that students having higher levels of achievement might have higher levels of life satisfaction. Among other
variables, grade point average of college students has been associated with life satisfaction (Chow, 2005). Conversely, Rode et al. (2005) found that even after controlling for cognitive ability, life satisfaction predicted student performance, including college students’ GPAs, and academic performance on a short-term task. Regardless of the directionality of the relationship between academic achievement and life satisfaction, a significant association between the two variables has been reported across populations of college students (Chow; Rode et al.). For the current study, students’ SAT scores, high school GPA, and high school class rank were assessed as indicators of academic achievement. We hypothesize that life satisfaction will weakly correlate with each of these indicators of academic achievement.

Although demographic variables such as race and gender have been found to interact with academic achievement as it relates to general satisfaction in college (e.g. Allen & Haniff, 1991; Charleston-Lyons, 1999), fewer studies have examined these factors more specifically with life satisfaction. Gender (Rode et al., 2005; Vecchio, Gerbino, Pastorelli, Del Bove, & Caprara, 2007) in addition to income (Chow, 2005) have been explored as moderators in the association between academic achievement and life satisfaction, with conflicting results. For instance, Chow found that females with higher incomes had greater academic performance and in turn, higher reports of life satisfaction whereas Rode found that only gender, not age, parents’ income, and ethnicity, had enough variance to warrant statistical control. In short, more research is needed to address more fully the extent to which gender, race, income, and disability status moderate the relationship of academic achievement and life satisfaction for incoming college students.

*Psychological Variables*
Life Meaning. Meaning in life, an established indicator of well-being and a contributor to optimal human functioning (Ryff & Singer, 1998), is conceptualized across two dimensions: the presence of meaning and the search for meaning (Steger, Kawabata, Shimai, & Otake, 2008). The presence of life meaning relates to the extent to which individuals consider their lives as significant, meaningful, and purposeful, whereas the search for meaning in life represents individuals’ active pursuit to find a sense of significance, meaning, and purpose in life (Steger et al.). In college student and adult samples, self-reported life meaning has been correlated positively with well-being (Zika & Chamberlain, 1987) and specifically with life satisfaction (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, in press), while the search for life meaning has been associated with lower overall well-being (Steger et al., 2006; Steger et al., 2008). Thus, the presence of life meaning and the search for life meaning are distinct dimensions that may potentially impact life satisfaction in different ways.

In the present study, we hypothesize that higher levels of life meaning will moderately correlate with higher levels of life satisfaction and that higher levels of the search for meaning will correlate with lower levels of life satisfaction.

Weber (1996) offers one of the few explorations of the potential interactions of demographic variables with the relationship between life meaning and life satisfaction that could be located. In this study, demographic variables had little impact on the association between life and meaning and life satisfaction for high school freshman yet the variables of gender and ethnicity acted as slight mediators between life meaning and satisfaction for high school seniors. More specifically, being female or white was connected to a stronger relationship between life meaning and satisfaction. Some research addresses life meaning and life satisfaction for individuals with disabilities (e.g., Viemero & Krause, 1998), yet no research could be located.
that analyzed disability status as a moderator for life meaning and life satisfaction. Due to the
dearth of research in this area, we will also explore how gender, race, income, and disability
status moderate the relationship of life meaning and life satisfaction for incoming students.

Religiousness. Closely connected to life meaning (Pollner, 1989), religiousness has been
extensively explored in relation to well-being (e.g., Gartner, Larson, & Allen, 1991). In their
meta-analysis on the benefits of religiousness, Koenig and Larson (2001) reported that 80% of
the studies exploring religiousness and life satisfaction found a positive relationship between the
two variables. Findings suggest that the benefits of religiousness for well-being are higher for
cognitive dimensions (i.e., life satisfaction) than for affective aspects of well-being (i.e., positive
and negative affect; Ellison, 1991). Although there is no general consensus on the measurement
of religiousness (Salsman, Brown, Brechting, & Carlson, 2005), Allport and Ross’s (1967)
conceptualization of intrinsic and extrinsic religiousness has permeated much of the literature in
this research area. Intrinsic religiousness represents the internal motivation to live according to
one’s religious beliefs whereas extrinsic religiousness signifies engaging in religiousness as a
means to an end, such as for the external factors of protection and social status (Allport & Ross).
Intrinsic religiousness has been closely connected to psychological adjustment (Donahue, 1985),
psycho-spiritual health (Genia, 1996), and life satisfaction (Koenig & Larson, 2001). In the
current study, we measure students’ levels of intrinsic religiousness and we hypothesize that
higher levels of religiousness will weakly correlate with higher levels of life satisfaction.

We also assess the potential moderating effect of gender, race, income, and disability
status on the relationship between religiousness and life satisfaction. Most commonly among
these demographic predictors, race has been examined in relation to religious meaning and life
satisfaction. The results have varied extensively, with several studies finding that religion is
more closely related to well-being for Blacks than Whites (Blaine & Crocker, 1995; Krause, 2003; Thomas & Holmes, 1992), some reporting no significant racial differences in terms of religion and well-being (Musick, 1996), and others reporting that the salience of religious commitment related to life satisfaction only for Whites but not for Blacks (Fife, 2005). Moreover, conflicting findings on gender as a predictor have been presented with women having been reported to have a higher level of religiosity than men (Bergan & McConatha, 2000) whereas no differences between men and women in religiosity also have been described (Fife). The conflicting research on race and gender and the lack of research on income and disability as potential moderators suggest the need for a closer examination of these relationships.

In sum, the purpose of the present study is to examine how many of these well-established demographic, academic, and psychological predictors relate bidirectionally and interactively to the life satisfaction of incoming college students. While most research on life satisfaction has been completed with undergraduate or adult populations, it may be that the relationships among these constructs for students about to transition to college are unique. Along with testing the various hypotheses proposed, we will also explore the extent to which academic and psychological variables predict life satisfaction, both with demographic variables as control variables and also as potential moderators of relations with life satisfaction.

Method

Participants

Participants were 2432 incoming first-year students at a large, mid-Atlantic, public university. Overall, 1154 participants were male (48%) and 1278 participants were female (52%), with an average age of 17.88 (SD = .50). Additionally, 1548 of the participants were White (64%), 299 were African American (12%), 327 were Asian American (13%), and 147
were Latino/a (6%). Of the participants, 149 (6.1%) indicated having a physical or mental disability and 1659 (68%) of the participants indicated not having any of the disabilities listed; 26% of the participants did not answer this item.

Procedure

Data for this study were collected through the University New Student Census (UNSC), an annual survey given to incoming first year students the summer prior to their entrance to the university. Upon committing to school enrollment, students were sent an email by the University’s Provost Office during the summer requesting their participation in this research project. Within this email was a link to an online survey where students were presented with an informed consent form and, if consent was given, were directed to login to the survey using their University ID and password. By gathering students’ University ID’s, this allowed us to combine this data set with data on file in the university admissions office that was used to determine students’ high school GPA’s and SAT scores. The survey consisted of approximately 230 questions and students were informed that they could cease participation at any time and were directed to not include any identifying information on the survey. Additionally, after all data were collected and merged with data from the university admission office, any identifying information attached to the data set (e.g. student ID, IP address) were removed to completely protect participant anonymity. The total enrollment of the first year class was 3926 students, and 2432 completed some part of the survey, thus making the response rate 62%.

Instruments

Parental income. Participants combined parental income was assessed by a single item which read as follows: “To the best of your knowledge, what is your combined annual parental income.” Students were given nine possible options: “Less than $25,000,” “$25,000-$49,999,”
“$50,000-$74,999,” “$100,000-$124,999,” “$125,000-$149,999,” “$150,000-$174,999,”  
$174,999-$200,000,” “$200,000 or more,” and “I don’t know.”

**Academic Achievement.** The degree to which students were performing well academically  
was measured by three separate indicators: high school class rank, high school GPA, and  
combined Verbal and Math SAT score. Student SAT scores and high school GPA were gathered  
through data from the university admissions office which had these scores on file when students  
applied to the university. High school class rank was assessed in the UNSC. For class rank,  
students were asked: “Where did you rank academically in your high school class.” Students  
responded to this item on a six point scale ranging from “Top 5% of the class” to “Lower half of  
the class”; “I don’t know” was also included as an option.

**Meaning in Life.** The degree to which participants felt their life was meaningful or were  
currently searching for meaning was measured by the short form of the Meaning in Life  
Questionnaire (Dik & Steger, 2008; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). Similar to Dik and  
Steger (2008) and Samman (2007), it was decided to use only the highest loading items from the  
Steger et al.’s (2006) original scale. The two items, “My life has a clear sense of purpose” and “I  
have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful” were used to measure meaning in life,  
while the two items, “I am seeking a purpose or mission in life” and “I am searching for meaning  
in my life” were used to measure the search for life meaning. These items were selected as they  
had the strongest factor loadings from the full Meaning in Life Questionnaire in several separate  
datasets. Participants were asked to respond to these items on a seven-point Likert type scale  
ranging from *absolutely untrue* to *absolutely true*. Steger et al. (2006) found scores from the life  
meaning subscale of the full Meaning in Life Questionnaire to correlate positively with  
religiosity, extraversion, agreeableness, and life satisfaction and to correlate negatively with
depression. The authors also found scores from the search for meaning subscale from the full MLQ to correlate positively with depression, sadness, and fear. Finally, Steger et al. (2006) found each subscale to have adequate internal consistency reliabilities, ranging from .81-.86. For the current study, the two life meaning items were found to correlate at .65 and the two search for meaning items were found to correlate at .70.

Religiousness. The 8-item revised intrinsic religiousness scale by Gorsuch & McPherson (1989) was used to measure the extent to which participants view their religion as an integral part of their life and identity. Example items include, “My whole approach to life is based on my religion” and “Although I am religious, I don’t let it affect my daily life” (reverse coded). Participants responded to these eight items on a five point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. In the instrument development study, Gorsuch and McPherson found this scale to have adequate internal consistency reliability at the .83 level. This scale has been found to highly correlate with other indicators of religiousness and significantly correlate with a host of well-being outcomes (e.g. Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996; Salsman et al., 2005). For the current study, the estimated internal consistency of this scale was .77.

Life Satisfaction. The degree to which participants find their life satisfying was measured by the five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985). Participants answered each item on a seven-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with sample items including, “In most ways my life is close to my ideal” and “I am satisfied with my life.” Pavot and Diener (1993) reviewed studies which had used the SWLS and found it to correlate strongly with other indicators of satisfaction and have adequate internal consistency reliability. For the current study, the estimated internal consistency reliability was .85.

Results
First, descriptive statistics were completed with scores on the life satisfaction measure and are shown in Figure 1. Scores on the life satisfaction scale tended to be negatively skewed as students were more likely to be satisfied than dissatisfied with their lives. Next, ANOVA’s were conducted to explore group differences among gender, race/ethnicity, and disability (Table 1). As hypothesized, male and female students had almost identical levels of life satisfaction, with mean scores of 25.69 and 25.71, respectively. Additionally, no significant differences in life satisfaction were found for those who identified as having a mental or physical disability versus those who did not, with mean scores of 24.79 and 25.77 respectively. However, contrary to the hypotheses, those from different racial backgrounds showed moderate differences in their levels of satisfaction. In order to explore the unique differences amongst each racial group, Tukey’s post hoc tests were conducted. As seen in Table 2, students identifying as White and Latino/a tended to be significantly more satisfied than students identifying as Black or Asian American. The effect size of these differences ranged from small to medium (Cohen, 1992).

Third, correlational analyses were conducted to explore the relationship of parental income, academic performance, life meaning, the search for life meaning, and religiousness to life satisfaction. Given the number of correlation analyses being conducted, the \( p < .01 \) threshold was used to determine significance. As seen in Table 3, while indictors of academic performance, the search for life meaning, and religiousness were significantly correlated with life satisfaction, none of these effect sizes would be considered meaningful. However, students whose parents had a higher annual income were weakly-moderately more likely to be satisfied (\( r = .22 \)). Additionally, students who felt that their life was more meaningful were found to be moderately-strongly more satisfied (\( r = .43 \)).
Following this, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to explore the ability of academic achievement, religiousness, and the life meaning constructs to predict life satisfaction over and above the demographic variables. This was completed by entering race, gender, parental income and disability status in the first block of the equation and high school rank, high school GPA, SAT score, life meaning, the search for life meaning, and religiousness in the second block. As seen in Table 4, demographic variables were found to account for 8% of the variance in life satisfaction and academic achievement, life meaning, the search for life meaning, and religiousness were found to add an additional 15% of variance after controlling for the demographic variables. In particular, of all the variables included, only race, life meaning, the search for life meaning, and parental income were found to account for significant variance.

Finally, we assessed whether the demographic variables of gender, race, disability status, and parental income interacted with academic and psychological variables to predict life satisfaction scores. We used a multigroups (e.g., see Byrne, Shavelson, & Muthén 1989) path analysis approach using AMOS 6.0 (Arbuckle, 2005) in which the best-fitting models of life satisfaction predictors were determined simultaneously for each level of demographic variables (e.g., female and male). In these baseline models, all paths from predictors to life satisfaction were allowed to vary freely across levels of demographic variables. Deterioration in model fit caused by successively contrained paths to be equal for all levels of demographic variables was assessed using chi-square tests, appropriate for these types of nested models. In all models, we created a latent academic aptitude variable, comprised of high school GPA, SAT scores, and class rank, to represent academic variables. The measurement model was a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 7.83, p < .01; CFI = .99; TLI = .96; RMSEA = .05, 90\% C.I. RMSEA = .02, .09$).
In the first set of analyses, we assessed whether gender interacted with academic aptitude, religiousness, presence of meaning, and search for meaning. Because race and parental income were significant predictors in the regressions, both were also included in the initial model as a control. The full model was comprised of paths from the predictors to life satisfaction, as well as covariance paths among the predictors. The full model was a poor fit to the data (χ² [df = 24] = 421.64, p < .001; CFI = .84; TLI = .41; RMSEA = .08, 90% C.I. RMSEA = .07, .09). Trimming the model of nonsignificant predictors and covariations resulted in a model with good fit (χ² [df = 10] = 10.60, p = .39; CFI = .99; TLI = .99; RMSEA = .01, 90% C.I. RMSEA = .00, .02). The final model consisted of race, parental income, presence of meaning, and search for meaning predicting life satisfaction, with a significant covariation between race and parental income (see Table 5 for path coefficients). Constraining paths to be equal across both women and men did not cause significant deterioration in model fit (all χ² [df = 1] < 2.35, all p > .10), meaning that predictors of life satisfaction were the same for men and women.

In the second set of analyses, we assessed whether race interacted with academic aptitude, religiousness, presence of meaning, and search for meaning. Because parental income was a significant predictor in the regressions, it was also included in the initial model as a control. The full model was a marginal fit to the data (χ² [df = 40] = 154.35, p < .001; CFI = .90; TLI = .73; RMSEA = .04, 90% C.I. RMSEA = .03, .04). The trimmed model was a good fit (χ² [df = 12] = 19.49, p = .08; CFI = .99; TLI = .95; RMSEA = .02, 90% C.I. RMSEA = .00, .03). This model consisted only of parental income, presence of meaning, and search for meaning, with no covariations among the predictors (see Table 5 for path coefficients). Constraining the path between presence of meaning and life satisfaction caused a significant deterioration in the model (χ² [df = 3] < 14.09, p < .01). We followed this finding up with pairwise comparisons
using the same model. In all models comparing Asian Americans with other groups, constraining the path between presence of meaning and life satisfaction caused significant deterioration in the model (all $\chi^2 [df = 1] < 8.00$, all $p < .01$), with no other significant findings. Thus, feeling life is meaningful appears to be a stronger predictor of life satisfaction among Asian American adolescents preparing for the transition to college than among adolescents of other racial backgrounds.

In the third set of analyses, we assessed whether disability status interacted with academic aptitude, religiousness, presence of meaning, and search for meaning. The full model was the same as that tested in the analyses of gender, and also provided a poor fit to the data ($\chi^2 [df = 24] = 421.64$, $p < .001$; CFI = .84; TLI = .41; RMSEA = .08, 90% C.I. RMSEA = .07, .09). The final trimmed model was also the same as in the analyses with gender (see Table 5 for path coefficients), providing a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 [df = 10] = 5.37$, $p = .39$; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.00; RMSEA = .01, 90% C.I. RMSEA = .00 .01). Constraining paths to be equal across disability status did not cause significant deterioration in model fit (all $\chi^2 < 2.20$, all $p > .10$), meaning that predictors of life satisfaction were the same for disabled and non-disabled adolescents.

In the final set of analyses, we assessed whether parental income level interacted with academic aptitude, religiousness, presence of meaning, and search for meaning (including race as a control variable). To reduce the number of income levels, we broke responses into low ($0-$99,999; $n = 663$), medium ($100,000-$149,999; $n = 525$), and high ($\geq$ $150,000; n = 576$) income levels. These categories were not meant to represent the actual distribution of income in the U.S. population, and simply reflect relatively equal-sized groups of the parental income levels reported in the present sample. The full model provided a poor fit to the data ($\chi^2 [df = 30]$
The final trimmed model consisted of race, presence of meaning, and search for meaning predicting life satisfaction, with no covariations (see Table 5 for path coefficients), providing a good fit to the data ($\chi^2$ [df = 9] = 7.33, $p$ = .60; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.00; RMSEA = .00, 90% C.I. RMSEA = .00, .02). Constraining paths to be equal across parental income levels did not cause significant deterioration in model fit (all $\chi^2$ [df = 2] < 1.30, all $p > .10$), meaning that predictors of life satisfaction were the same for adolescents reporting low, medium, and high levels of parental income.

Discussion

The results of this study shed light on the predictors of life satisfaction for this unique sample of students transitioning from high school to college. Descriptive analyses of overall scores on the life satisfaction measure indicate that most incoming students are more likely to be happy than unhappy. In fact, over 80% of the students sampled in the current survey had overall scores on the life satisfaction scale that were above the scale midpoint. Although recent estimates show an increase of depressive symptomology among incoming students (Benton et al., 2003), resulting in increased use of college and university mental health services, it is important to note that most students are generally satisfied with their lives currently. Though not available through the current data set, it would be beneficial to explore how the stresses of entering college affect satisfaction scores and if perhaps incoming students’ current scores are inflated due to lower levels of social stress and academic workload during their pre-college experience.

Demographic differences in levels of life satisfaction were assessed and, as hypothesized, gender and disability status had no relation to life satisfaction scores. However, significant racial differences were found among the sample, where students identifying as White and students
identifying as Latina/o reported higher levels of life satisfaction than those identifying as Black or Asian American. Perhaps even more surprising, several of these group differences approached or reached moderate effect size levels (Cohen, 1992). We feel this point deserves careful and cautious consideration, as a number of researchers have questioned the exploration of group differences between racial groups (Helms, Jernigan, & Mascher, 2005). Additionally, it is likely that the reasons behind lower levels of satisfaction for Asian American and Black students are very complex, and may be due to such factors as levels of discrimination or cultural differences in the interpretation of life satisfaction items. As these types of mediating variables were not assessed here, it is critical that future studies explore these questions.

The bivariate correlations between life satisfaction and parental income, academic achievement, life meaning, and religiousness partially confirmed initial hypotheses. Higher levels of high school rank, high school GPA, the search for life meaning, and religiousness each significantly correlated with higher levels of satisfaction. However, as these values were negligible and likely only due to the large sample size, it would be much more appropriate to suggest that levels of life satisfaction do not differ based on a student’s academic performance, religious dedication, or the degree to which they are searching for meaning. The academic achievement-satisfaction relationship may be particularly important as it signifies that the ability of students from the current study to be satisfied with their lives has little, if anything, to do with how well they are performing academically. It would be important to note how this relationship changes once students begin college and to examine whether their academic performance becomes more salient and, perhaps, has more of an impact on ratings of satisfaction.

The two variables most tied to life satisfaction in the current study were parental income
and life meaning. Students whose parents had higher income levels were slightly more likely to be satisfied with their lives. This finding fits with past research which suggests that income is related to satisfaction, but only in a limited way (Diener et al., 1999). For this particular sample of students, those coming from wealthier backgrounds may have lower levels of stress and greater access to social and academic opportunities, and these factors may lead to a greater overall satisfaction with life. Additionally, those students with higher levels of life meaning were moderately-strongly more likely to be satisfied with life, a finding which has been supported continuously throughout the literature as students who feel their lives have a greater sense of purpose are more likely to be satisfied with their lives (Steger et al., 2006; Steger et al., 2008).

A regression analysis also revealed that a moderate amount of variance in satisfaction and was accounted for by race, parental income, life meaning, and the search for life meaning. This indicates that after including these variables in the equation, other variables that weakly correlated with satisfaction (i.e. high school GPA, religiousness) become insignificant. Furthermore, while a moderate amount of variance is accounted for primarily by the four variables of race, parental income, life meaning, and the search for life meaning, another 77% of the variance in satisfaction is left unaccounted for. Thus, it may be that many of the variables not assessed in the current study, including social support, personality, and affect, may be much more closely connected to life satisfaction.

Finally, we conducted rigorous statistical tests based on previous reports that demographic and psychological variables interacted to predict life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1999). We found that over most of our comparisons, women and men, disabled and non-disabled, and adolescents coming from different income level backgrounds shared a similar set
of predictors of life satisfaction: race, parental income, presence of meaning in life, and search for meaning in life. Only race interacted with psychological predictors of life satisfaction such that in comparison to adolescents from other racial backgrounds, presence of meaning in life was a more robust predictor of life satisfaction among Asian American adolescents. Previous research has shown that the correlates of life satisfaction often differ between members of Asian and American cultures, with Americans placing more apparent value on self-satisfaction (e.g., Park & Huebner, 2005). Asian folk concepts of the good life include meaning (Tseng, 2007), and perhaps people who have been influence by Asian culture place higher value on the importance of meaning as a potential route to life satisfaction.

Limitations and Future Directions

Taken together, these findings allow for a clearer understating of the life satisfaction and predictors of satisfaction for this group of students during an important point of transition in their lives. This large sample of incoming college students were more likely than not to be satisfied with their lives, and those with higher levels of life satisfaction when coming to college were from more affluent backgrounds and/or had a greater sense of life meaning. However, there are a number of limitations which temper the results.

First, although this sample was large and diverse, participants were students attending one specific, public, East Coast University and were at a specific point of life. This restricts the extent to which these findings might be applied to students from other colleges and universities across the country as well as to students currently enrolled in college. Second, this study relied on self-report measures for the predictor as well as criterion variables, potentially creating a mono-method bias. Third, as less than one fourth of the total variance in life satisfaction was accounted for by the variables measured here, there are undoubtedly many additional variables
that could have been included to strengthen our understanding of the life satisfaction of this specific population. It would have been particularly useful to include measures assessing personality and social relationships as these may have some of the strongest relations to satisfaction among this population (Adams, King, & King, 1996; Schimmack, Oishi, Furr, & Funder, 2004).

Future research could address this study’s limitations through the use of cross-sectional surveys that employ self-assessment in addition to other convergent non-self-report measurement (Diener et al., 1999). For instance, college students could be followed throughout their college careers using self-reports in addition to independent ratings to obtain longitudinal information about the variables underlying life satisfaction during this window of time. Furthermore, advanced statistical analyses involving mediators and moderators as well as experimental research designs could shed light onto the mechanisms through which other demographic and psychological factors impact life satisfaction and suggest what causal pathways might exist for these variables. Expanding upon the research conducted by Lounsbury et al. (2005), future research could investigate the complex and interwoven contextual and personality variables related to life satisfaction for this population. Additional research suggests that the influence of demographic factors like race and income are often mediated by other social or well-being variables, such as exposure to unfair treatment (Schultz et al., 2000), or life problems and health (McKenzie & Campbell, 1987). A broader investigation of demographic factors and life satisfaction could include measures of these factors as well.

Future research could also analyze how life satisfaction for incoming college students relates to the developmental vectors described by Chickering and Reisser (1993). For instance, our finding that life meaning was a significant predictor of life satisfaction suggests that the
developmental vector of developing purpose (Chickering & Reisser) could be integral to life satisfaction for this population, even before they enter college. By conducting further research on what provides incoming college students with a sense of life meaning or purpose, researchers could trace the evolvement of students’ progress in this construction of meaning during their collegiate experience and possibly develop interventions for enhancing that process. It may be particularly important to understand such sources of meaning among matriculating Asian American students. Other vectors in Chickering’s (1969) theory of college development, such as achieving competence, managing emotions, establishing identity, and engaging in mature interpersonal relationships, could be explored as they predict life satisfaction in longitudinal research designs.

In sum, this study provides a brief snapshot of the life satisfaction of students transitioning from high school to college. It is important to understand what factors relate to life satisfaction for incoming college students as these may be precursors to future psychological well being and college enjoyment (Elder, 1998; Lee & Gramotnev, 2007). The results of the current study suggest that race, parental income, and meaning in life may relate to the satisfaction of incoming college students. Most importantly, those students who feel their lives have a sense of purpose are most likely to enter college with high levels of satisfaction.
References


Figure 1: Life Satisfaction Scores ($N = 2432$).
Table 1: Group Differences in Life Satisfaction Across Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Disability ($N = 2432$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$N$</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$\sigma^2$</th>
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Table 2: Differences in Life Satisfaction among the Four Racial Groups ($N = 2432$).

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<th>$d$</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>23.32 (6.56)</td>
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<td>.00</td>
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<td>Latino/a</td>
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<td>4.44</td>
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<tr>
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Table 3: Correlation of Life Satisfaction with Parental Income, Academic Achievement, Life Meaning, and Religiousness (N = 2432).

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* p < .01
Table 4: Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Life Satisfaction (N = 2432).

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<th>Beta</th>
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*p < .01
Table 5. Paths coefficients for life satisfaction predictors across demographic categories ($N = 2432$).

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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Income</td>
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<td>.18*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.45*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Search for Meaning</td>
<td>-.06</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Race → Income</td>
<td>-.33*</td>
<td>-.26*</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
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<th>Black</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>.21*</td>
<td>.18</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.29*</td>
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<table>
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<td>.19*</td>
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<td>Presence of Meaning</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-.09*</td>
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<table>
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<td>-.10</td>
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</table>

Note. Coefficient in boldface differs from other coefficients in same row at $p < .01$ level.

*a Low = $0-$99,999; Medium = $100,000-$149,999; High = $150,000 or more

* $p < .01$