

Self-Directed Learning Readiness and Life Satisfaction Among Older Adults

A Sample Quantitative Research Proposal Written in the APA 6th Style

[Note: This sample proposal is based on a composite of past proposals, simulated information and references, and material I've included for illustration purposes – it is based roughly on a fairly standard research proposal; I say roughly because there is no one set way of creating a quantitative research proposal. Much of its design is based on the nature of the research, your preferences, and your decisions regarding how to describe or portray what it is you plan to accomplish. The material in this document was adopted from a dissertation proposal created by Dr. Ralph Brockett. A biography is not included in this sample proposal. To examine ways of creating references in the APA format and other suggestions for using the APA stylistic guide, see <http://www-distance.syr.edu/apa6th.html> or <http://www-distance.syr.edu/apa6th.pdf> . Roger Hiemstra]

Introduction

An important area of emphasis in gerontological research over the past several decades has been the issue of life satisfaction. Questions about the physical, psychological, social, and economic status of older adults have served, either directly or indirectly, as the predominant focus of the aging research (e. g., Maddox and Wiley, 1996). It is these kinds of questions that have increased understanding of the processes and problems of aging and have led to the development of strategies designed to maximize the potential of the later years.

At the same time, self-directed learning has generated considerable interest in the adult education literature. This has been fueled by the development of the SDLRS (Guglielmino, 1997), a scale designed to measure a person's readiness for self-directed learning. Unfortunately, very few have looked at self-directed learning and older adults. Hiemstra (1975) studied older adult's learning projects and found a strong relationship between a preference for assuming personal control over learning and age. This was supported by Hassan (1991) and McCoy (1992). Hassan also looked at the self-directed learning readiness scores of older adults and found a corresponding positive relationship between age and scores on the SDLRS. However, apparently no published reports of subsequent research with the older adult exist.

In addition, no one has published accounts of any comparisons between SDLRS and Life Satisfaction among older adults. If life satisfaction can be improved by learning efforts as shown by Dowden (2008), it is important to determine if a propensity and readiness for self-directed learning among older adults has a relationship to measures of life satisfaction. Therefore, the intent of this proposed research will be to examine such relationships.

Problem Statement

Based on the above discussion, it is possible to identify a two-fold problem that will serve as a point of departure for the present investigation. As has been noted above and is clarified in the later review of literature section, one problem area is the fact that many older adults face various

hurdles that can impact their overall state of well-being. Some adults are able to cross these hurdles through self-learning efforts, while others find themselves less well equipped to cope with such concerns. The second problem area involves better understanding why some people turn to learning for meeting personal needs, while others do not.

In essence, life satisfaction varies considerable among older adults, as does personal propensity to undertake learning efforts. It is these variances that lie at the heart of the problem areas proposed for this study. If a link can be established between life satisfaction and an attitude conducive to self-directedness in learning, then it might be possible to look toward self-directed learning as a strategy for promoting a higher quality of life among persons in their later years.

Purpose

The purpose of this study, then, is to explore ways in which older adults' perceptions as self-directed learners compare with the degree of satisfaction that they ascribe to their lives. Specifically, the study will focus on two primary objectives:

1. To determine the relationship between life satisfaction and personal readiness for self-directed learning.
2. To determine the extent to which components of life satisfaction combine with selected demographic variables to predict a person's level of self-directed readiness.

In addition, because so little is known about self-directed learning among older adults, a third objective will complete the research effort:

3. To examine various methodological and substantive considerations in studying self-directed learning.

Hypotheses

Based on a review of literature as noted later in this proposal, two major hypothesis areas will guide the analysis of data. First, it is hypothesized that perceptions of life satisfaction will be related to perceptions of self-directed learning readiness among a sample of older adults. Those persons who report a high degree of life satisfaction will tend to have perceptions of higher self-directed readiness while low satisfaction will be related to low self-directed readiness. In essence, this means that it will be possible to predict an individual's level of self-directed readiness by knowing their score on overall life satisfaction plus some of the factors sometimes identified as barriers to participation in adult education among older adults, such as age and gender. Finally, it is hypothesized that subjects from a community sample will tend to demonstrate higher self-directed readiness and life satisfaction than those residing in an institutionalized setting.

Definition of Key Terms

Life Satisfaction – a self reported assessment of one's overall psychosocial well-being. It is a combination of (a) personality factors such as mood and self-concept, (b) more socially-related

factors such as the nature of one's social interactions, (c) perceived health, and (d) financial security.

Older Adult – for the proposed study, older adult is defined as any person who is at least 65 years of age.

Self-Directed Learning – a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes.

Self-Directed Learning Readiness – the degree to which one perceives oneself to possess the attitudes and skills needed to be an effective self-directed learner. It is measured in the proposed study through the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS), developed by Guglielmino (1997).

Review of Literature

Before considering this body of literature, it is important to point out that research on quality of life has not fallen within the exclusive domain of gerontologists. Quality of life is an issue that is relevant to persons of all ages and has been widely studied as such. Cantrill (1965), for instance, studied quality of life among persons in more than a dozen nations at different stages of development. In the U.S., researchers affiliated with the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan have undertaken extensive efforts in studying quality of life (e.g., Andrews & Withey, 1996; Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1996; Campbell, 2001, Davis, 2010, Thomkins, 1996). The reader is alerted to the existence of broader studies such as these. The present discussion, however, will concentrate primarily on findings and issues associated with persons in their later years.

Defining Life Satisfaction and Related Concepts

To fully understand the meaning of life satisfaction as it is used in the proposed study, it is necessary to be familiar with a number of related concepts. The term that probably serves as the umbrella under which other terms are covered is quality of life. In general, quality of life is a nebulous term that evades precise definition (Campbell, 1991). Andrews and Withey (1996) have stated the following about quality of life:

. . . sometimes refers to an 'outsider's' judgments of quality covered in such measures as crowding, decibels of noise pollution, reported crimes, income levels, etc., but it may also refer to the privately known and privately evaluated aspects of life (p. 4).

Another broad term, one that is specifically associated with the gerontological literature, is successful aging. Kalish (1995) discusses the following four related though distinct definitions of successful aging:

- A way of life that is socially desirable for this age group
- Maintenance of middle-age activities
- A feeling of satisfaction with one's present status and activities
- A feeling of happiness and satisfaction with one's life (p. 60).

Clearly, successful aging bears some relationship to life satisfaction, especially as considered in the third and fourth definitions presented above. Leonard (1981-82) has addressed the relationship between life satisfaction and successful aging by viewing the former as "a major component" of the latter (p. 223).

Another term frequently associated with life satisfaction is well-being. This is sometimes referred to more specifically as "subjective well-being" (Larson, 1998) or "social-psychological well-being" (George, 2004). According to Larson, well-being is an assessment of "the general affective experience of older persons in terms of a positive negative continuum" (1998, p. 109). Essentially, then, life satisfaction can be viewed as an "assessment of one's overall psychosocial well-being." Throughout the present discussion, well-being will be used more or less interchangeably with life satisfaction.

So, then, just what is life satisfaction? As has been pointed out, life satisfaction is an integral component of successful aging. George has described life satisfaction as "essentially a cognitive assessment of one's progress toward desired goals" (1999, p. 210). Lemon, Bengston, and Peterson (1992) define the concept as "the degree to which one is presently content or pleased with his general life situation" (p. 513). An important consideration that needs to be taken into account when conceptualizing life satisfaction is the point of reference from which the concept is measured. Neugarten, Havighurst, and Tobin (1961), among others, have discussed two approaches to measuring well-being. The first of these is an examination of the person's external conditions. Here, well-being is determined on the basis of factors such as income, participation in social activities, employment and marital status, and health as assessed through a physical examination. This approach has been criticized by various authors. For example, Neugarten, et al. (1961) have noted that this approach is subject to the biases of those who define the parameters of what constitutes high and low life satisfaction. Campbell (1991) has stressed that it is not possible to "understand the psychological quality of a person's life simply from a knowledge of the circumstances in which that person lives." Therefore, by attempting to "explain the population's sense of well-being on the basis of objective circumstances, we will leave unaccounted for most of what we are trying to explain" (pp. 1-2).

Measuring Life Satisfaction: Different Approaches

Since 1949, a variety of measures have been developed to assess life satisfaction and related constructs among older people. Four such scales are discussed in the present section. The earliest of these efforts to measure the well-being of older adults was reported by Cavan, Burgess, Havighurst, and Goldhammer (1949). The focus of this study was on "personal adjustment," which was measured through an instrument referred to as *Your Activities and Attitudes*. This is a rather extensive survey of the kinds of activities and concerns individuals devote their energies and attitudes toward health, family and friends, happiness, and related issues.

Another early measure of well-being was the *Kutner Morale Scale* (Kutner, Fanshel, Togo, and Langner, 1956). This is a seven-item Guttman scale that was administered to 500 persons at least 60 years of age. Here, morale was defined as "a continuum of responses to life and living problems that reflect the presence or absence of satisfaction, optimism, and expanding life perspectives" (p. 48). In this scale, subjects were asked to give their responses to each of seven morale-related questions, with points scored for appropriate responses. A criticism that has been leveled against this measure is that it views well-being as a unidimensional concept rather than a combination of interacting factors (Neugarten, et al., 1961).

By far, the measure that has been predominant in life satisfaction research is the *Life Satisfaction Index A* (LSIA), which was developed by Neugarten, et al. (1961). This is a 20-item scale where subjects are asked to respond either "agree," "disagree," or "?" to each statement. The LSIA grew out of a larger study where life satisfaction ratings were assigned to individuals based on a series of interviews. Through these interviews, the authors recognized five factors that comprised the variable life satisfaction. These factors include:

- zest vs. apathy
- resolution and fortitude
- congruence between desired and achieved goals
- self-concept
- mood tone

The LSIA is regarded as a major contribution because it defined life satisfaction as a multidimensional construct and specified the various factors comprising the construct. As Salamon and Conte (1991) note, however, reliability figures for the Indexes were at best low to moderate, with a range of $r = -.07$ to $r = .59$. This would indicate an important limitation to the use of the LSIA.

In response to the limitations of unidimensional life satisfaction scales and the relatively low reliability scores of the LSIA, Salamon and Conte (1991) developed a new life satisfaction measure. The Salamon-Conte Life Satisfaction in the Elderly Scale (SCLSES) is a 40-item Likert scale that asks subjects to respond to statements designed to produce an understanding of their "feelings about life in general." The SCLSES contains eight subscales, five of which are closely related to those identified by Neugarten, et al. (1961). These are "taking pleasure in daily activities," "regarding life as meaningful," "goodness of fit between desired and achieved goals," "positive mood tone," and "positive self-concept" (pp. 5-6). In addition, Salamon and Conte included subscales for three additional factors that have been found to be closely related to life satisfaction. These are "perceived health," "financial security," and "social contacts" (p. 6). This instrument was selected for use in the present investigation for two reasons. First, the reliability coefficient of .93 reported by the SCLSES developers is considerably higher than reliability figures for other life satisfaction measures. Second, several of the factors in the scale can be linked, directly or indirectly, to adult education participation and/or perceptions of self-directedness. The SCLSES, proposed for use in this study, is discussed in greater detail in a later section.

Self-Directed Learning [note: this section has been shorted for purposes of illustration in this sample proposal – in reality, it would most likely be 1-3 pages longer to make the case for its use in the proposed research]

Self-directed learning is by no means a new concept to adult education; yet it only began to emerge as a major research focus in the field since the early 1970's. The foundation upon which self-directed learning has been supported is generally associated with the principles of humanistic philosophy and psychology. A variety of approaches have been used to study the self-directed learning phenomenon. These studies can be categorized as either learning projects (Tough, 1971), qualitative (Passmore, 1986), or self-directed readiness (1997). Findings indicate that self-directed learning is far more widespread than had been imagined prior to Tough's initial learning projects study. In addition, there is growing evidence of a broad range of psychosocial factors that correlate with self-direction. As these studies are reported, it becomes increasingly possible to define the parameters of self directed learning.

Residence [note: this section has been shorted for purposes of illustration in this sample – in reality, it would most likely be 1-3 pages longer to make the case for its use in the proposed research]

Especially relevant to the present investigation is a consideration of the relationship between residential setting and life satisfaction. Wolk and Telleen (1999) studied life satisfaction differences between samples from long-term care and retirement community settings. Life satisfaction was found to be higher among the community sample, where subjects were in a lower constraint environment. Further, they noted different emphases in life satisfaction correlates between the two groups, suggesting that the strength of the correlation between life satisfaction and related factors may differ on the basis of the setting in which an individual resides.

Summary

Life satisfaction has been an important area of study for psychologists and sociologists in recent decades. Because of its link with quality of life, gerontologists have found it especially fruitful to explore life satisfaction among older adults. Like self-directed learning, life satisfaction is hard to define and this has contributed to certain difficulties in studying the concept. Research has examined life satisfaction variously as a unidimensional and a multi dimensional phenomenon, an objective and subjective measure, an indicator of present and lifetime well-being, and a social and psychosocial phenomenon. Learning efforts have been shown to have a relationship to life satisfaction, but the exact association is not clear. This proposed research will add to the literature base by building a rationale for recognizing the importance of both self-directed learning and life satisfaction in research and theory building in gerontology and adult education.

Methodology

In the previous section, an introduction to the proposed area of research was presented. This included a description of the study's research problem, several research purposes, three hypotheses that will serve to direct the data analysis, and an identification of several terms key to

the study. In addition, a review of relevant literature related to the two major study variables – adult self-directed learning readiness and life satisfaction during the aging process – established a background of support for the study. Both of these variables have been studied extensively, but not together and with older adults. The proposed research is an effort to examine the relationship between these variables in a manner that has not been done to date.

The intent of this section is to describe the methodology that is proposed for such a research effort. Included in the section will be a description of the study setting, proposed research design, study sample, and proposed data collection methods, procedures, and analysis efforts.

Study Setting

In its broadest conceptualization, this study is intended to address the population of older adults in the United States. However, the vast diversity of this population in terms of socioeconomic status and other related variables would make for a monumental undertaking. Therefore, it is necessary to delimit the setting from which a sample for the study will be drawn.

The setting for the proposed study, thus, consists of all individuals residing within two settings. One setting will be an adult residential home in Syracuse, New York. The adult home is a long-term care facility for persons who need minimal support. The other setting is a senior citizen's housing project located adjacent to downtown Syracuse. Residents living in this facility are all retired, living on their own, and do not need outside support. Choosing these two settings will provide for a sample of older adults within a confined geographic area thereby facilitating the collection of data, while at the same time meeting the requirements of grouping differences as noted in the literature review.

Research Design

The proposed study employs an ex post facto research design as described by Kerlinger (1973):

Ex post facto research is systematic empirical inquiry in which the scientist does not have direct control of variables. Inferences about relationships among variables are made from any determined variations between the studied variables. (p. 344)

Therefore, the study plan will involve the gathering of information about life satisfaction and self-directed learning readiness among older adults living in two different residential settings. No manipulation of the variables by the researcher will be possible; instead any determined differences will be ex post facto in nature in that they will stem from differences in results in the measurement efforts according to age, gender, residential setting, life satisfaction scores, and self-directed learning readiness scores.

Population and Sampling Plan

The adult home is not a health care facility, but rather a residential setting for independent older adults who require only minimal services, such as assistance with house keeping, one or two daily meals, and transportation to meet medical, grocery shopping, and other needs. It has been

determined that 271 people, 65 years of age or older, live in this setting. In addition, 346 people live in the 220 apartments contained within the senior citizen complex. Some tenants may receive special services based on income and all are eligible for various social and community activities, but all are independent in terms of transportation, meeting medical needs, and involvement with others throughout the community.

A random sample will be drawn from the list of residents obtained for both settings. Using a table of random numbers, the names of individuals will be selected from each setting until a minimum of 110 people in each setting is obtained. It is anticipated that if fewer than 95 people per setting initially respond to the instruments described below, names will continue to be drawn from the remaining individuals until at least 95 people from each setting have completed the two forms. It is hoped that at least 100 people from each site will complete the forms.

It is expected that obtaining a minimum of 190 people as described in the previous paragraph will result in a good cross section of subjects in terms of gender, age, and residential setting. In addition, the normal variations in life satisfaction SDLRS scores among at least 190 people will enable statistical comparisons for the study's hypotheses that provide new information about older adults.

Data Collection Procedures

In the proposed study, two instruments will be employed to measure one independent variable, one dependent variable, and three moderator (demographic) variables. These are outlined below.

Independent Variable – Life satisfaction, the independent variable in this study, will be measured by the Salamon-Conte Life Satisfaction in the Elderly Scale (SCLSES). Developed by Salamon and Conte (1991), the SCLSES is a self-report inventory that focuses on three aspects of daily living. These include (a) taking pleasure in daily activities, (b) regarding life as meaningful, and (c) self-concept. It is a 44-item instrument; 40 of the items comprise a Likert scale measure of life satisfaction, while the other items are measures of possible moderating variables. The authors report a reliability coefficient of .93 for the entire scale. They did not talk about the instrument's validity. Even given this latter limitation, the SCLSES, it would appear, offers much potential as an approach to measuring the variable of life satisfaction.

Dependent Variable – The dependent variable in this study is self-directed readiness. It is measured through the use of the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS). This is a 58-item Likert scale, developed by Guglielmino (1997) to determine the extent to which subjects perceive themselves to possess the skills frequently associated with self-directed learning. Guglielmino reported a reliability coefficient of .87 for the scale. In addition, both internal and predictive validity of the instrument have been demonstrated to be high. Hassan (1991) used the SDLRS with a sample of 102 individuals that included 39 people at least 60 years of age. She did not find a significant relationship between age and self-directed learning readiness. Thus, it would appear the SDLRS is appropriate for use with older adults as a means of identifying variance across the population.

Moderator Variables – In addition to the above independent and dependent variables, three secondary independent or moderator variables will be considered. According to Tuckman (1978), a moderator variable is as follows:

. . . that factor which is measured, manipulated, or selected by the researcher to discover whether it modifies the relationship of the independent variable to an observed phenomenon (p. 63).

Thus, the moderator variables can determine the extent to which the relationship between the two major variables is influenced by secondary factors. In this study the moderator variables of age, gender, and residential status will be included.

Data Gathering Plans – The two instruments and a simple instruction sheet that also asks subjects their age and gender, will be delivered to an administrator in each setting who has agreed to distribute and collect the completed instruments. Prior to their distribution an introductory letter from both the researcher and the respective administrators will be placed in each selected subject's mailbox or mail slot asking for their cooperation. The letters will describe the research and its importance and the support of the administrator. They also will note that a \$5 coupon toward any groceries at the local Wegman's Grocery (donated by the store's public relations office) will be available to each person completing the two instruments and signing a letter of informed consent related to the research. Finally, they will provide a telephone number for anyone with questions or who may need assistance in completing the instruments. This procedure will be pilot-tested with at least 10 volunteers from the Fayetteville Senior center to refine the data gathering plans.

Once the pilot-testing procedures have been completed, any required changes in the administration plans will be carried out. Then the administrators will be authorized to distribute the forms. Any person who has phoned needing clarification will be provided further explanation. Anyone who phones in a need for assistance in completing the forms will receive support in the form of one of the location's administrative assistants reading the forms and recording the answers. Each assistant so involved will be provided training by the researcher on how to read and record the answers in an unbiased manner.

One week after this initial delivery, a follow-up phone call will be made to either thank those who completed the forms or to remind those who have not yet completed their forms. The grocery coupons will be mailed to all who have completed the forms with a letter of thanks. If fewer than 95 people from each of the two settings complete the forms, then the random sampling and distribution will continue until at least that number of completed forms from each setting has been received. It is anticipated that all data collection efforts will be completed within one month.

Data Analysis

Four types of analysis are proposed for this study. First, in order to provide a description of the sample from which data will be collected, descriptive information on age, gender, and residential setting will be described, as well as the means, modes, range, and standard deviations for the

SDLRS and SCLSES scores. Second, to determine the relationship between SDLRS and SCLSES, Pearson product moment correlation coefficients will be determined. Third, to determine any differences in SDLRS and SCLSES scores according to the moderating effects of age, gender, and residential setting, chi-square, t-tests, and analysis of variance will be used to examine for any significant differences among the scores and moderator variables.

The specific hypotheses to be tested are shown below in null form:

1. There is no significant relationship between life satisfaction and self-directed learning readiness. This will be tested with the Pearson correlation coefficient.
2. There is no significant difference in life satisfaction and in self-directed learning readiness between adult home and residential setting subjects. Each will be tested by chi-square.
3. There is no significant difference in life satisfaction and in self-directed learning readiness according to gender. Each will be tested by chi-square.
4. There is no significant difference in life satisfaction and in self-directed learning readiness according to age. Each will be tested by t-test and, collectively, by analysis of variance.

All hypotheses will be tested at a minimum of the .05 level of significance.

Concluding Remarks

Significance

It is expected that the study will make at least three contributions to the areas of adult education and gerontology. First, the study will contribute to the expanding knowledge base of self-directed learning. As more is known about the relationship of self-directed learning to such areas as a person's satisfaction regarding life, it will be possible to more clearly understand the meaning of self-directed learning. The proposed research study is viewed as a piece of this puzzle.

Second, this study is the first attempt to utilize the SDLRS with a sample of older persons residing in institutional and residential housing settings. So often, these segments of the aging population are overlooked as potential learners. The study should contribute toward a better understanding of this group.

Finally, the ultimate issue underlying the study is quality of life. It is anticipated that the study may identify ways through which education can contribute to the meaning of life for many persons in their later years. While this is an enormous undertaking, the study could prove to be a small step in this direction.

Limitations

There are three limitations to the study. First, the study will be limited in terms of its generalizability to the total older adult population. Like any other age group, older adults are a very heterogeneous population. While the proposed study sample should be quite diverse, the fact remains that certain segments of the older population will not be included.

A second potential limitation of the study is that the independent and dependent variables are measured as subjects' perceptions, not actual behaviors. In essence, the study does not address actual participation in self-directed learning activities nor does it address actual aspects that make up a person's life satisfaction, rather it describes the values that subjects ascribe to these areas.

Finally, anytime you use an instrument the results are subject to the known reliability and validity of that instrument. Although some information about the instruments in regard to reliability and validity (in the case of the SDLRS) is known, the instruments may have limitations in measuring what they purport to measure. Only subsequent research with other audiences and with other instruments will help further our understanding of the concepts being measured in the study.

Supplemental Materials

Although they are not included in this sample proposal, this section would include such areas as a bibliography of cited references in the APA 6th style, any necessary appendix material, and a copy of any instruments if appropriate.