



Original Article

# Developing a structural model for explaining psychological well-being based on ego strength and negative dimensions of time attitude

Maede Ataei<sup>1</sup>; \*Mehran Farhadi<sup>2</sup>; Khosro Rashid<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>MS. in psychology, Department of Psychology, University of Bu Ali Sina, Hamadan, Iran.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant professor, Department of Psychology, University of Bu Ali Sina, Hamadan, Iran.

<sup>3</sup>Associate professor, Department of Psychology, Bu Ali Sina University, Hamadan, Iran.

## Abstract

**Introduction:** Psychological well-being which replaces mental health is of particular importance in positivist psychology. This study aimed to develop a structural model for explaining psychological well-being based on ego strength and positive dimensions of time attitude.

**Materials and Methods:** The statistical population of this descriptive and correlational study consisted of all students who were studying at the central site of Bu-Ali Sina University during the academic year of 2018-2019. Through a convenient sampling, 367 of them were selected. They responded to Ryff's Psychological Well-being Questionnaire (1989), Miller and Worrell's Time Attitude Questionnaire (2010), and Markstrom, Sabino, Turner, and Bremen's Ego Strength Questionnaire (1997). Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation coefficient and structural equation modeling.

**Results:** The results showed that the proposed model had a good fit. In other words, Ego strength could affect psychological well-being through mediating positive dimensions of time attitude. The amount of impact in different dimensions was as follows: negative future ( $b = -1.29, P = 0.001$ ), negative present ( $b = -1.07, P = 0.001$ ), negative past ( $b = -0.076, P = 0.041$ ).

**Conclusion:** Those who had weak ego, tended to have negative time attitudes; as a result, their psychological well-being decreased. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that using strategies to prevent ego weakness in individuals can reduce their negative attitudes and thus can prevent the decline of psychological well-being.

**Keywords:** Behavioral inhibition system, Death anxiety, Fear of coronavirus

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## Introduction

Over the past decade, positive psychology has become one of the significant trends in psychology and has quickly found a good status in the field (1). Positive psychology seeks to focus more on the role of psychology in improving life, developing people's performance, and coping effectively with stressors. One of the components of positive psychology is psychological well-being (2).

Psychological well-being, as it is called today, is a substitute for the concept of mental health. In the modern era, psychologists have used psychological well-being instead of mental health because they believe this word evokes more positive dimensions (3). Karreman and Vingerhoest (4) defined psychological well-being as people's perception of life in terms of emotional, behavioral, and mental health dimensions. According to these two scientists,

## \*Corresponding Author:

Department of Psychology, University of Bu Ali Sina, Hamadan, Iran  
mehran.farhadi@yahoo.com

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this variable reflects individuals' mental life quality. In addition, concerning the psychological aspect, it is included in the life quality.

The World Health Organization defined psychological well-being as a state of well-being that recognizes his abilities and uses them productively and effectively (5). Ryff's definition of psychological well-being is based on virtuosity. He did not equate psychological well-being with pleasure and pain relief; he believed psychological well-being is an attempt to realize one's potential. According to this definition, the absence of symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and stress is not a health criterion. However, the health criterion includes self-acceptance and positive attitude towards self, independence, autonomy, dominance over the environment, goal-orientation in life, and the improvement of talents and abilities.

According to this view, psychological well-being includes the components of self-acceptance (having positive attitudes towards oneself and accepting various aspects of oneself), positive relationships with others (and feeling intimacy and satisfaction with these relationships), autonomy (showing independence, effectiveness, and active role in behaviors), dominance over the environment (and controlling external activities), goal-orientation (and believing on the meaningfulness of the past and the present life), and personal growth (feeling sustainable growth and gaining new experiences as a creature with potential talents) (7).

In general, psychological well-being has emotional and cognitive components. People with low well-being (i.e., those who gain low scores on all components of well-being) evaluate their life events negatively and experience negative emotions more than positive ones (8). According to King and Psych (9), many mental illnesses (e.g., depression) and factors such as social isolation, the lack of satisfaction, self-confidence, will, and purpose in life are due to the lack of psychological well-being in people and their negative views. These factors also reduce people's mental and physical health and, as a result, their welfare and well-being. Diner et al. (10) also believed that people with low well-being evaluate their life events unfavorably and experience more negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, and anger.

In his temporal model of psychological well-being, Durayappah argued that time attitudes influence the overall assessment of mental well-being. In other words, positive attitudes increase psychological well-being, and negative attitudes decrease it. Some people are drowned in far-fetched and ambitious aspirations with irrational acceleration, and some are left behind and tie themselves to the past and all its events and phenomena (11). This expresses the dimensions of the attitude towards time.

Time attitude refers to how a person feels and evaluates his past, present, and future (12). According to Worrell et al., time attitude includes the six basic dimensions: past positive, past negative, present positive, present negative, future positive, and future negative.

However, Zimbardo and Boyd (13) divided time attitude into the five dimensions of past negative (having a negative view of the past accompanied by shame and anxiety), past positive (having a warm and emotional view of all positive and negative past events), present negative (having a catastrophic view of the present as well as the future in such a way that the future is predetermined), present positive (having courageous, risk-taking and hedonistic view; people with this view believe that the future is under their control). The last dimension is related to the general tendency towards the future, which makes the person's present behavior dominated by his goals and expected rewards. This dimension is positively associated with responsibility.

Seligman (15) believed that people with negative views of the three-time dimensions and those who are so-called pessimists believe that unfortunate events last a long time, affect everything they do, and generally have more negative views. It has also been found that pessimists are more likely to develop developmental disorders such as depression and make less progress in the areas in which they are talented (e.g., employment and sports) (16).

Furthermore, time attitudes can act as predictors of mood. In other words, each attitude creates a special mood that determines people's lives. Past and present negative are the strongest predictors of present human mood and lead to negative moods (17).

Zimbardo and Boyd (18) believed that the way people consider time has a profound effect on their lives and society. However, they rarely realize this fact. Positive and moderate thoughts

about the three-time dimensions indicate health, while extreme and negative thoughts indicate prejudices resulting in unhealthy lifestyles, depression, bad moods, pessimism, and despair. As a result, people are deprived of mental health. The weakness and the strength of the ego can play a decisive role in the individuals' type of time attitudes (19).

In the psychoanalytic system, following Freud's structural model, the ego constitutes the part of the mind whose actions include perceiving, thinking, decision-making, managing emotional issues, satisfying conflicting motives, and maintaining cohesion despite constant internal struggles (20). According to Lavertue et al. (21), ego strength refers to one's capacity to manage the conflicting demands of Id, super ego, and external realities. When the ego cannot balance this function, the person's personality would be disturbed. In other words, the weaker the person's ego is, the more imbalanced his personality is. As a result, he would suffer from mental disorders. Since the ego is in charge of managing the mental system, all psychological problems would appear when the ego cannot fulfill its responsibilities and becomes weak. On the other hand, when the ego is strong, it allows a person to endure problems and stresses without being paralyzed and to try to solve them (22).

In other words, illness and health are the functions of the ego's ability to properly manage pressures and stresses, especially the pressure due to the satisfaction of the instincts. To the extent that ego cannot meet these requirements, the person becomes ill (23).

According to Erickson, the strengths that make the strong ego result from successfully resolving crises at every stage of life. He believed that if a person could successfully overcome the crisis of each stage, he would become stronger, and his ego would be stronger. Otherwise, in addition to staying and stabilizing at a stage where the crisis has not been successfully resolved, the ego would be weakened, and many problems would be created (24). One of the main problems of those with weak egos is that they have little motivation to face and overcome their life obstacles; they are lazy and have no motivation to change their lives. They have imposed distorted patterns of thinking which constantly force them to believe that there is nothing they can do. These dysfunctional patterns cause

them to become anxious and believe that problems are overwhelming in their life; they are incapable of solving them. These people become arrogant when they are appreciated and severely upset when criticized (25).

According to Guntrip (26), ego weakness is the basis of personality disorders. He believed that in patients with personality disorders, we should look for signs of a weak ego and find ways to strengthen it. He also believed that the weakness of the ego reduces the response of individuals to psychoanalytic therapies. This issue was also confirmed by Gold (27). Low ego strength is associated with personality disorders such as antisocial, dependent, avoidant, and impulsive personalities.

Early research on psychological well-being has mainly focused on external indicators (e.g., income and academic achievement), which lead to life satisfaction and psychological well-being. For instance, Farahbakhsh et al. (28) reported significant relationships between academic performance and psychological well-being.

However, such variables explain only a small amount of variance of psychological well-being. Psychological well-being is constant over time and returns to its original state after significant life events and due to the impact of variables such as income or even the quality of marital relationships. Thus, it is strongly associated with enduring personality traits. Keeping this issue in mind, many researchers paid attention to personality factors and their enduring characteristics to predict this important structure (29). For instance, Francis (30) reported a positive relationship between extraversion and psychological well-being and a negative relationship between neuroticism and psychological well-being. In his research study, Higgins (31) concluded that ego weakness is associated with symptoms such as depression, guilt, and the lack of effective ideas which would deprive people of psychological well-being or mental health. Rashid et al. (32) found that negative attitudes toward the past, the present, and the future can reduce their psychological well-being. In this regard, Ghiasi et al. (33) concluded that positive thinking training could predict components of psychological well-being such as personal growth, positive communication with others, and self-acceptance. In other words, the more pessimist people are, the higher their psychological well-being would be.

Research studies have shown that people with low ego strength are more likely to developmental disorders such as depression and even personality disorders and are less likely to respond to treatment; thus, the distance from psychological well-being. Research also suggested that psychological well-being can result from positive and negative perspectives. Accordingly, the objective of the present study was to develop a model which explains psychological well-being based on ego strength and the negative dimensions of time attitudes.

### Materials and Methods

The research method was descriptive, and its design was a correlation. Structural equation analysis was used to investigate the research model and the role of negative dimensions of time attitudes. The structural equation model is a compelling multivariate analysis that allows the researcher to examine hypothetical patterns of direct and indirect relationships (mediation) between a set of observed and hidden variables (34). The study population included all students of Bu-Ali Sina University who were studying at the central site of the university in the academic year 2018-2019. According to Morgan's table, it included 8000 students, from among which 367 students were selected through the convenient sampling method. They responded to the questionnaires.

#### Research instruments

A) *Ryff's Psychological Well-being Questionnaire*: This scale was developed by Ryff in 1989 and was revised in 2002. This test is a self-assessment instrument scored on a six-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). This scale measures the six factors of autonomy, mastery of the environment, personal growth, positive communication with others, goal-orientation in life, and self-acceptance. In addition, the sum of the scores of these six factors is calculated as the overall score of psychological well-being. Yahyazadeh administered this questionnaire to 100 female participants; the internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) for each of the subscales of autonomy, mastery of the environment, personal growth, positive communication with others, goal-orientation in life, and self-acceptance were .81, .79, .75, .88, .77 and .82, respectively (35). The Cronbach's alpha of this scale in the present study was 0.92. In addition, to evaluate the validity of the

instrument, its relationship with the criteria which measured personality traits and were also considered as the indicators of psychological well-being (e.g., Newgarten Life Satisfaction Scale, and Rosenberg Happiness and Self-Esteem Questionnaire) was examined. The correlations of the Ryff's test with each of the above scales were acceptable (0.47, 0.58, and 0.46, respectively). Therefore, the instrument had convergent validity (36).

B) *Mello and Worrell Time Attitude Questionnaire*: This questionnaire was developed by Mello and Worrell in 2010. The reliability of this questionnaire was between 0.7 and 0.8 in the sample who participated in the study in the United States. Rashid (37) translated this questionnaire and standardized it in Iran. The reliability of this questionnaire (Cronbach's alpha coefficient) in the Iranian sample was equal to 0.77, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the past positive, past negative, present positive, present negative, future positive, and future negative were .79, .83, .83, .84, .63, and .72, respectively. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the past positive, past negative, present positive, present negative, future positive, and future negative were .68, .71, .74, .65, .73, and .73, respectively. In addition, the factor analysis conducted to examine the factor validity of the instrument showed that the Persian form of the instrument measured the same six dimensions of the time attitudes desired by the original test. Therefore, the Persian form had factor validity (38).

C) *Ego Strength Questionnaire*: The ego Strength Questionnaire was developed by Markstrom et al. (39). The final version of this questionnaire includes 64 items scored on a Likert scale ranging from five (entirely true) to one (completely false). It also has a short form of 32 items; this short form was used in this study. Markstrom's research studies supported the internal consistency of the scale (Cronbach alpha= 0.94). Therefore, the validity and the reliability of the 32-item questionnaire were also confirmed. Its internal consistency was confirmed in various studies; its concurrent validity has been shown by examining its relationship with self-esteem, goal-orientation in life, internal control, and sexual roles ( $r=0.70$ ). Moreover, its differential validity was confirmed by the negative correlation between ego strength and despair, identity disorder, and helplessness ( $r=0.73$ ) (40). Markstrom's

research study also showed the internal consistency of this scale. He reported the Cronbach's alpha of this scale as 0.94 (41). In Iran, Haghigat et al. (42) reported the Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 for the short form scale. The Cronbach's alpha of the short form used in this study was 0.89, obtained based on the research findings.

**Results**

In this section, the most important findings are presented. Therefore, the fit of the research model was examined first. Then, each of the hypotheses was explained through a table.

**Table 1.** The goodness of the fit of the model (the relationship between psychological well-being and ego strength mediated by negative dimensions of time attitudes)

The ratio of Chi-square to degree of freedom (x2/ df)	Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)	Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	Normal Fit Index (NFI)	The root of mean residual squares (RMSEA)
3.33	0.91	0.95	0.94	.053

The ratio of Chi-square to the degree of freedom has no fixed criterion for the acceptable model. For models with a good fit, the goodness of fit index, the comparative fit index, and the normal fit index are equal to or greater than 0.9. Moreover, in models with a good fit, RMSEA is equal to or less than 0.05

and the values above 0.05 to 0.08 indicate a reasonable error. According to the goodness of fit indices reported in Table 1, the model fit was at a good level. Therefore, the model explaining psychological well-being based on ego strength and the negative dimensions of time attitudes had a favorable fit.

**Table 2.** Standard coefficients and significance levels of the relationships between research variables

Variables	Standard coefficient	t value
The effect of ego strength on future negative	-0.29	-3.94
The effect of future negative on psychological well-being	-0.19	-2.42
The effect of ego strength on present negative	-0.38	-4.87
The effect of present negative on psychological well-being	-0.22	-2.87
The effect of ego strength on past negative	-0.41	-5.21
The effect of past negative on psychological well-being	-0.25	-3.18

T values more than 1.96 are significant.

To examine the hypotheses, the mediating role of the negative components of time attitudes in the relationship between psychological well-being and ego strength was examined through

the Sobel test. Considering the error level ( $\alpha=0.05$ ), if the value of P is less than 0.05, the role of the mediating variable is statistically significant.

**Table 3.** The results of the Sobel test investigating the mediating role of the future negative

Criterion variable	Predictor variable	Coefficient	Standard error	Z	P
Negative future	Ego strength	a= 0.35	S <sub>a</sub> = 0.024	-4.12	0.001
Psychological well-being	Negative future and ego strength	b= -1.29	S <sub>b</sub> = 0.30		

Table 3 indicates that the relationship between ego strength and well-being is significant through the mediation of negative future since

the appropriate significance level is less than 0.01 ( $P < 0.01$ ).

**Table 4.** The results of the Sobel test investigating the mediating role of the present negative

Criterion variable	Predictor variable	Coefficient	Standard error	Z	P
Negative present	Ego strength	a= 0.36	S <sub>a</sub> = 0.026	-3.36	0.001
Psychological well-being	Negative present and ego strength	b= -1.07	S <sub>b</sub> = 0.31		

Table 4 shows that the relationship between ego strength and well-being is significant through the mediation of the negative present since the appropriate significance level is less than 0.01 ( $P < 0.01$ ). Table 5 shows that the

relationship between ego strength and well-being is significant through the mediation of past negative since the appropriate significance level is less than 0.01 ( $P < 0.01$ ).

**Table 5.** The results of the Sobel test investigating the mediating role of the past negative

Criterion variable	Predictor variable	Coefficient	Standard error	Z	P
Negative past	Ego strength	a= 0.39	S <sub>a</sub> = 0.025	-2.03	0.041
Psychological well-being	Negative past and ego strength	b= -0.76	S <sub>b</sub> = 0.37		

## Discussion

The objective of this study was to develop a structural model to explain psychological well-being based on ego strength and negative dimensions of time attitudes. The developed model, which showed that ego strength affects psychological well-being through the mediation of time attitudes, had a perfect fit. In models with a good fit, CFI, GFI, and NFI are equal to or greater than 0.9. Therefore, according to Table 1, the proposed model of the research study had a good fit. In other words, ego strength could explain people's psychological well-being through the effectiveness in the three negative dimensions of people's time attitudes. On the other hand, people with weak and incoherent egos had negative time attitudes in all three dimensions. Thus, they experienced poor well-being.

The research findings are consistent with the findings of several studies. Davis, Bremer, Anderson, and Trammill (43) and Boehl and Linder (44) found in their study that ego weakness causes people to have low self-esteem and therefore experience high levels of anxiety (especially death anxiety). These factors cause them to move away from psychological well-being. In their study, Buhl and Linder also found that pessimists (negatives) showed lower scores on psychological variables such as life satisfaction and self-efficacy than optimists (positivists).

Since these people do not believe in their power and ability to solve problems, they have low motivation to deal with problems and change their lifestyles positively. These people believe that problems have filled their lives and overcome them. Thus, they live with pessimism and laziness; they do not have motivation (25). They also cultivate negative time attitudes by focusing on the negative aspects of life. The same negative attitudes predispose them to

mental illness (13) and reduce their psychological well-being.

A person with low ego strength does not have the strength to fight against the problems; he believes that problems and stressful situations can easily overcome him; he considers his future uncertain. As a result, with a negative attitude and despair, he waits for a situation in which he can neither change for the better nor the power to deal with (25). This negative attitude predisposes him to mental illness, and as a result, deprives him of psychological health and well-being. The most significant negative impact is related to the fact that from among all negative dimensions of time attitudes (i.e., past negative, present negative, and future negative), the ego strength has the most significant negative impact on psychological well-being through the future negative.

This research finding is also consistent with the research findings of Aiken and Sandoz (45) and Rashid, Yarmohammadi Wasel, and Fathi (38). In their study, Aiken and Sandoz measured the self-control of alcoholics under different conditions. Among these people, those who had a strong ego had more restraint and, as a result, were optimistic about the future. Their strong egos made them hopeful about the future, resulting in higher levels of self-control and avoidance of risky behaviors (which undoubtedly lower well-being), especially alcoholism.

Rashid, Yarmohammadi Wasel, and Fathi concluded in their study that students who have a negative view of time also report low psychological well-being. However, in this study, the highest impact of psychological well-being was retrospective.

Moreover, lower ego strength leads to a negative outlook for the past and the present, thereby lowering psychological well-being. A person who does not believe in his capability and power to deal with his problems, does not

have enough motivation to make changes in life and deal with obstacles, cannot communicate effectively and sincerely with others, does not have sufficient social support (45), and experience less happiness and more anxiety (46) cannot have a positive outlook on life. Therefore, he finds himself defeated by the problems in the present life. In addition, due to the lack of sufficient social support, he feels lonely and becomes prone to all kinds of physical and mental illnesses, which threaten his psychological well-being.

In addition, it seems evident that a person who is not able to accept and adapt to the realities of life (due to his weak ego) is not able to recognize the valuable advances in life and has not successfully resolved his life crises will not be able to have a positive view of his past. Therefore, according to Erickson's theory of strong ego formation, it can be argued that a person who has not successfully resolved his life crisis will not have a strong ego. In other words, a weak ego results from a failure in life. Therefore, it seems natural for people who have a weak self to affect their past negatively (47).

According to the findings, low ego strength causes people to find themselves defeated by the problems. They believe that they are not capable of solving the problems. Furthermore, it deprives them of having a support network. As a result, they find themselves lonely. These factors lead to the formation of negative views and attitudes. Since having psychological well-being in addition to the absence of mental illness, depends on having a positive attitude

towards oneself, a sense of control over the environment, the growth and flourishing of talents, optimism and positive thinking (6) social connections (48) happiness joy and meaning in life (49) optimism and positive thinking (6), these people cannot have high levels of psychological well-being.

Given that all studies have some limitations, the limitation of this study was the loss of 14 samples, which may have affected the results. It is suggested that future research examine practical ways to cultivate positive perspectives in individuals.

### Conclusion

Accordingly, it is recommended that all people involved in the education and training (e.g., teachers, fathers, and mothers) avoid the use of educational methods which weaken the individuals' ego so that negative time attitudes would not be formed and their psychological well-being would not be reduced. Instead, they are encouraged to cultivate self-efficacy, self-esteem, and competence to strengthen people's ego and provoke positive time attitudes and increased psychological well-being.

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