

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## Character Strengths of Self-Regulation and Purpose in Life as Predictors of Life Satisfaction and Mental Wellbeing

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### **Abstract:**

*This study was undertaken to investigate virtues and character strength, more specifically, self-regulation and purpose in life and their relationship, to better understand the importance of virtues and character strengths in relation to mental health, psychological well-being and satisfaction with life. Positive psychologists approach posits that virtues and character strengths are the bedrock of flourishing individuals and optimally functioning institutions and society. The scales used were standardised Self-Control Scale (SCS) and Purpose in Life test (PIL). The sample size of the study was N= 279 and the population was Catholic consecrated men in Initial Formation. The location of the study was the Archdiocese of Nairobi- Kenya. The data analyses included descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings showed that, 95% of Catholic consecrated men in Initial Formation had high levels of self-regulation and 97.1% had good degree of purpose in life. The Pearson's correlation indicated a positive correlation between self-regulation and purpose in life ( $r = .276, p < .000, N = 279$ ). The study showed that the character strengths of self-regulation and purpose in life are ingrained aspects that contribute to mental wellbeing and life satisfaction.*

**Keywords:** Self-regulation, Purpose in life, eudemonia, life satisfaction, wellbeing

### **1. Introduction**

Self-regulation and purpose in life are among the twenty-four-character strengths in the realm of classification of virtues and character strengths that guides the field of positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Self-regulation is classified under the virtue of temperance and purpose in life under the virtue of transcendence within the catalogue of six core virtues of wisdom/knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and each of the six virtues is associated with six character strengths therefore building a total of 24 character strengths (Selvam & Poulsom, 2012) as illustrated in Table 1.

Core Virtues	Character Strengths
Wisdom and Knowledge	Creativity (originality, ingenuity), Curiosity (interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience), Open-mindedness (judgement, critical thinking), Love of Learning, Perspective (wisdom)
Courage	Bravery (valour), Persistence (perseverance, industriousness), Integrity (authenticity, honesty), Vitality (zest, enthusiasm, vigour, energy)
Humanity	Love, Kindness (generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, 'niceness'), Social Intelligence (emotional intelligence, personal intelligence)
Justice	Citizenship (social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork), Fairness, Leadership,
Temperance	Forgiveness and Mercy, Humility (modesty), Prudence, Self-regulation (self-control)
Transcendence	Appreciation of beauty and excellence (awe, wonder, elevation), Gratitude, Hope (optimism, future-mindedness, future-orientation), Humour (playfulness), Spirituality (religiousness, faith, purpose)

*Table 1: Catalogue of Core Virtues and Character Strengths*

In this regard, the focus of the study was self-regulation as one of the 24-character strengths that enhances a person's mental power in inhibiting impulsive behaviour in relation to purpose in life which is one of the contributing factors to well-being. Self-regulation has been shown to embolden a person's ability in altering unnecessary behaviour, in particular impulsive behaviour and boosts the flexibility and adaptability of human behaviour, enabling one to accustom

one's actions to a remarkably broad range of social, situational and institutional demands. Over and above, self-regulation enhances and strengthens a person's ability to focus attention and livens one's awareness of the set goals and in keeping the standards required in attaining goals or an undertaking. It is measured in terms of the ability to have control over thoughts, emotions, impulses, performance and breaking habits. Philosophically, therefore, self-regulation can be termed as the training of the human soul in order to bring it in harmony with the natural order (Cook, 2013) so as to achieve excellence and thereby eudaimonia or the fullest human happiness also referred to in positive psychology as flourishing. The benefit of self-regulation is that it is an important component of free will and a driver of socially desirable behaviour. Additionally, it adds benefit to the individual and to the society and it contributes to a great many attractive outcomes, such as task performance, self-discipline, endurance, mental health and good interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). Other benefits include; enhancement of a person's mental strength in altering emotions and behavior thus boosting the inhibition of maladaptive behaviour (Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007); it is a requisite to better performance in tasks and it is an important aspect in healthy behaviour including human affectivity.

It motivates the delay of instant gratification; it is a strength or willpower to prevent one from acting out of an impulse and, therefore, it helps a person to think through an action before execution and, as such, avoid a distraction even if it is pleasurable at the moment and focus on a goal thereby meeting more long-term goals rather than enjoying a short-term activity and finally; it opposes impulsiveness or the urge to surrender a future benefit by indulging to a less rewarding but more immediate benefit. Self-regulation is significantly and positively correlated to personal growth ( $r=.281, p \leq .01$ ), personal relatedness ( $r=.197, p \leq .05$ ), purpose in life ( $r=.554, p \leq .01$ ), self-acceptance ( $r=.395, p \leq .01$ ) and overall psychological well-being ( $r=.185, p \leq .05$ ) (Singh & Sharma, 2018).

Correspondingly, purpose in life is understood as a cognitive process that defines life goals and provides personal meaning. Additionally, an intrinsic purpose in life contribute to psychological well-being due to the fact that purpose enhances one's role in work engagement, sense of identity and belonging and therefore brings about fulfilment or contentment in life (Shide, 2017) and subsequently; eliminating the sense of hopelessness which leads to depression and suicide. The positive indicators that measure purpose in life are; the sense of purpose or mission in one's life, the extent that one has satisfaction with life, the sense of worthiness and freedom, the negative indicators are fear of death and suicide.

In essence, purpose in life is one of the factors that constitute well-being. Studies have shown well-being is a multi-faceted construct which is constituted by aspects such as autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relationships with others, purpose in life, realization of potential and self-acceptance (Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012). Statistically, more recently studies have associated wellbeing with the ability to fulfil goals (Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, 2008), to happiness (Pollard & Lee, 2003) and life satisfaction (Diener & Suh, 1997; Seligman, 2002). It is against, this backdrop, the consecrated persons are understood and regarded as people who are well self-regulated having found an intrinsic purpose in their lives. In other words, consecrated life is regarded as an epitome of life of virtues and character strengths, because consecrated life is grounded on transcending human limitations in order to attain higher goals, such as living a life of satisfaction, eudaimonia, tranquility and harmony with oneself and others and connectedness with divine as opposed to living an individualistic, hedonistic, selfish life that is dominated and imprisoned by materialistic and hedonistic interpretation of human existence.

This study therefore, sought to investigate, (1) the character strength of self-regulation, (2) the character strength of purpose in life, and (3) the correlation between self-regulation and purpose in life. The study was conducted among Catholic consecrated men in Initial Formation of religious life in Roman Catholic Church. This study helped in arriving at the basis of understanding whether the consecrated men in Initial Formation are self-regulated as well as whether they have purpose in life and the correlation between the two variables.

## 2. Method

This study was a quantitative correctional design using cross-sectional approach. It was conducted among Catholic houses of formation for consecrated life within the Archdiocese of Nairobi. The participants were men in Initial formation according to the norms of religious life in various stages of seminary formation. The respondents age range was between 23 years and maximum was 41 years and the sample size were ( $N= 279$ ). The period of initial formation was one (1) to 11 years. Candidates to priesthood were 66.3%, ( $n = 185$ ) and brotherhood were 33.3%, ( $n = 93$ ). Self-regulation was assessed using Self-control Scale by Tangney, Baumeister and Boone, 'which is a broad, general measure of trait self-control' with test-retest reliability of (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ) (Tangley, Baumeister, Boone, 2004). The assessment of purpose in life was measured using Purpose in Life Test (PIL; Crumbaugh and Maholick 1964) which measures "the degree to which the subject experiences a sense of meaning and purpose in life" (Crumbaugh 1968, p. 74). It was developed 'in 1964 by Crumbaugh and Maholick from Frankl Viktor's theoretical approach called logo-therapy' (Morgan, & Farsides, 2009, p285) with the authors of the scale reporting split-half reliability coefficients of (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$  (Crumbaugh & Maholik, 1964) and .92 (Crumbaugh & Maholik, 1968). Participants with self-control scale (SCS) score of between 25 and 50 were considered to have a good level of self-regulation whereas participants with PIL score of between 50 and 100 were considered to have high degree of purpose in life. The correlation between SCS and PIL was determined using bivariate analysis. All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 21.

## 3. Results

The socio-demographic profiles of the respondents were analysed using descriptive method across four variables; age of the participant, vocation type, years in vows and academic level. The youngest age recorded was 23 years and

maximum age was 41 years. The average age of the participants was 29.1 with SD = 3.22. In terms of academic level of the respondents, the majority had bachelor's degree at 84.6 %, (n = 236). In terms of vocation type, candidates to priesthood were 66.3 %, (n = 185) and brotherhood were 33.3 %, (n = 93). The minimum years in initial formation recorded was one (1) year and the maximum being 11 years. The participants were drawn from 28 nationalities and all the participants were male.

Data analysis involved totaling of individual scores of SCS and PIL test to determine the character strengths of self-regulation and purpose in life. Further bivariate analysis was conducted to determine the correlation between self-regulation and purpose in life. As such, the analysed scores of self-regulation, the lowest score was 19 points and the highest recorded score was 50 points with the average of 35.89 and SD = 6.4. A score of 25 points and above signifies high strength of self-regulation and a score of less than 25 points indicates poor self-regulation. The results indicated that 95% of the respondents had high strength of self-regulation and 5% of the respondents had poor or low levels of self-regulation.

The test result of purpose in life was conducted using purpose in life test (PIL) which is Likert type self-rating scale with a minimum score of 20 points and maximum score of 100 points, whereby a score of less than 50 indicates that one is experiencing an 'existential void,' a lack of meaning or purpose in life, whereas a score of above 50 points indicates a good strength of purpose in life. The higher the score, the higher the strength of purpose in one's life. In this regard, the lowest score recorded was 22 points and the highest score was 100 points with the average mean of 80.96, and SD = 13.16. As such, the test results indicated that 97.1% of the respondents had high strength of purpose in life and 2.9% had low levels of purpose in life. The test for correlation between self-regulation and purpose in life using bivariate analysis yielded a correlation of Pearson's  $r = .276$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $n = 279$ . Therefore, the study unravelled that self-regulation was significantly and positively correlated to purpose in life.

Further, demographics variables analysis showed that there was no statistical significance between self-regulation and age. In the same way, the results showed that there was no statistical significance between years in vows and self-regulation. Similarly, there was no apparent statistical significance between the type of vocation and self-regulation and still there was no statistical significance between academic level and self-regulation. In regard to purpose in life, similar Pearson's correlation analysis was done to determine how purpose in life relate with the moderating variables of age and years in vows. According to the results, there was no statistical significance established between purpose in life and age or between purpose in life and years in vows. Neither was there any statistical significance between purpose in life and type of vocation and finally between purpose in life and academic level.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. The Character Strength of Self-Regulation among Catholic Consecrated Men

The first objective of this study was to investigate the character strength of self-regulation among Catholic Consecrated men in initial formation. According to the results, 95% (n= 265) of the respondents had high strength of self-regulation. This was an indication that the Catholic consecrated men in initial formation in the Archdiocese of Nairobi portrayed high strength of self-regulation. Therefore, a person who has good self-regulation is able to control impulsive and intrusive thoughts and as well as good control over instant gratification tendencies whether emotional or behavioural. The theory of self-regulation indicates that in order to be an agent of one's own behaviour development one needs to intentionally guides one's own functioning through self-directing, self-organising, self-regulating and self-reflecting in view of making one's life meaningful and live according to set standards (Bandura, 2001).

By and large, the practice of self-regulation as shown by studies (Marshmallow Experiment) was very important as it is indicative of maturity required to live a consecrated life because the highly valued goals of consecrated persons can too often turn into failed good intentions in the face of temptations, frustrations and obstacles, even when the goals are important and motivation is high. Therefore, high degree of self-regulation becomes the willpower in achieving the religious mission. Research on the basic mechanisms and dynamics that enable delay of gratification- that is inhibiting temptations- show that exertion of willpower enables one to cart away or self-distance from the negative arousal (Mischel & Ayduk, 2002) of enticing and frustrating situations. As such, this present study has shown that Catholic consecrated men in initial formation within the archdiocese of Nairobi were well self-regulated. This was an indication that self-regulation helps consecrated men to alter emotions and behaviour that could lead to sexual impropriety, alcoholism, depression and frustrations- all which are regarded scandalous behaviour because consecrated life requires a high moral standard.

### 4.2. The Character Strength of Purpose in Life among Catholic Consecrated Men

A search for meaning inhibits every human mind and finding meaning in life is the ultimate prize for any individual. In this regard, this study also investigated the character strength of purpose in life among Catholic consecrated men in Initial Formation in the Archdiocese of Nairobi.

In this respect, the study found out that 97.1% (n= 279) of the respondents had a high strength of purpose in life. This, in effect, was an indication that the Catholic consecrated men in initial formation within the Archdiocese of Nairobi derived eudemonia meaning from their consecrated life and therefore, experienced life satisfaction from their vocation. In other words, this was an indication that these Catholic consecrated men had chosen a worthy course in their lives and that they were committed to their call.

Essentially, the purpose in life for a consecrated person is the response with complete and exclusive devotion to the call of transcendence. This sense of purpose then becomes a source of eudemonia- that is happiness and fulfilment,

making life worth living because the response to this call is made possible by the desire and choice not to live as per the human corporal impulses but a life well attuned to set standards and with a purpose (Keenan, 2002; Schneiders, 2001). Purpose in religious life is, therefore, characterised by a deep and powerful experience that a person senses within oneself and 'feels the need to respond to, unconditionally, dedicating one's life wholly and consecrating all things present and future' (Hickey, 2017).

These findings corroborate other empirical research findings that have shown that having a purpose in one's life, it brings about meaning in life and engagement to duties (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; Seligman 2002). The study, therefore, demonstrated that these consecrated persons accepted the call to consecrated life because they had found it meaningful and a worthy purpose. In this regard, these consecrated persons portrayed that they were a happy people engaged in their duties and more importantly, healthy people in term of spiritual and psychological well-being. This notion was corroborated by research that indicated (Lau, Cheung, Lam, Hui, Cheung, Mok, 2015) that people who have found meaning and purpose in life manifest general well-being and satisfaction with life.

#### 4.3. Correlation between Self-regulation and Purpose in Life

The third objective in lieu of the third research question was to establish the relationship that exists between self-regulation and purpose in life. In this regard, Pearson's correlation using bivariate analysis showed that there was a significant positive correlation between self-regulation and purpose in life with results yielding  $r = .276$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $n = 279$ . According to the findings of the present study then self-regulation and purpose in life had statistical positive significance of correlation. This shows that self-regulation contributes in achieving one's purpose in life. Essentially, then, a person who finds a purpose in life requires self-regulation in order to accomplish that purpose. As such, purpose in life has to be understood as the extent to which one's life is experienced as making sense, as being directed and motivated by valued goals and as mattering in the world (George & Park, 2016). Besides, it is a self-organising life, aim that pursues goals, manages behaviours, and provides a sense of meaning. Hence, purpose directs life goals and daily decisions by guiding the use of finite personal resources (Pohlmann, Gruss, & Joraschky, 2006).

Other the hand, self-regulation is a mental mechanism used by a person to exert management of one's emotional and behavioural responses so as to pursue goals and live up to standards (Vohs, & Baumeister, 2004). Furthermore, self-regulation reflects one's capacity to plan, control, evaluate, and adapt internal states in order to attain desired goals in changing and demanding environments (Gagnon, Durand-Bush, & Young, 2016). It is, therefore, a mental strength that helps a person disregard or alter a response and regulate affect, cognition and behaviour. Besides, it is a willpower within self that enables a person to alter thoughts, feelings, desires and actions in view of attaining higher standards and it is a necessary variable in adapting human behaviour.

## 5. Conclusion

According to the findings of the study, Catholic consecrated men were well self-regulated. Thus, it was an indication that they portray high standards of moral values and good self-regulated in regard to their lifestyle. This means that the Catholic consecrated men have control over thoughts and emotions and therefore lived according to the standards of desirable behaviour, had motivation to meet standards, were capable of monitoring of situations and thoughts that precede breaking standards and willpower or internal strength to control urges.

The second finding indicated that the Catholic consecrated men had intrinsic purpose in life. That means that they were living fulfilling and meaningful life in regard to their vocations and mission and that they were happy without the experience of existential pain. Essentially, it showed that they had defined goals in life and a sense of directedness and that they derived meaning in their present and past life and that they hold a belief that gives life purpose and have aims and objectives for living a flourishing and a satisfying life.

Further, there was a positive statistical significance of correlation between self-regulation and purpose in life. This means that one requires self-regulation so as to achieve one's purpose in life. Therefore, this study elucidated on the importance of virtues and character strengths in not only achieving one's purpose in life but also as predictors of mental wellbeing and life satisfaction.

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