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## Psychological well-being of graduate students in relation to career planning

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### Abstract

Graduate students face numerous challenges that affect their psychological well-being, including academic pressures, financial burdens, and career uncertainties. This study investigates the relationship between psychological well-being and career planning among graduate students. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study explores how effective career planning can mitigate stress and enhance well-being. Quantitative data were collected through a survey administered to 300 graduate students across various disciplines, while qualitative insights were obtained from in-depth interviews with 20 participants. The findings reveal a significant positive correlation between comprehensive career planning and higher levels of psychological well-being. Practical implications for academic institutions and career services are discussed.

**Keywords:** Academic Stress; Autonomy; Career Exploration; Career Uncertainty; Goal Setting; Personal Growth; Professional Identity; Self-Assessment

### 1. Introduction

The graduate school journey is marked by academic rigor and personal growth and also significant stressors that can compromise students' psychological well-being. The transition from academia to the professional world is often accompanied by uncertainty, making career planning a crucial factor in shaping students' future trajectories. This study aims to examine how career planning influences the psychological well-being of graduate students and to provide actionable insights for fostering a supportive academic environment.

### 2. Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. The sample included 300 graduate students (55% female, 45% male) from various disciplines at the Palompon Institute of Technology. The survey included the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales and a Career Planning Questionnaire. Interviews were semi-structured, focusing on career planning practices and perceived well-being. Quantitative data were presented using descriptive statistics, and analyzed using Pearson's correlation and regression analysis. Thematic analysis was used for qualitative data.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The results are presented on psychological well-being dimensions and career planning variables.

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### 3.1. Psychological Well-being Dimensions

Carol Ryff's multidimensional model of psychological well-being (PWB) significantly correlates with overall life satisfaction. This model encompasses six dimensions which are autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Each dimension contributes uniquely to an individual's perception of life satisfaction, highlighting the complexity of well-being. The data on these dimensions is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Descriptive Statistics of Psychological Well-Being Dimensions

| Dimension             | Mean | Standard Deviation | Range |
|-----------------------|------|--------------------|-------|
| Autonomy              | 4.2  | 0.6                | 1-5   |
| Environmental Mastery | 4.0  | 0.7                | 1-5   |
| Personal Growth       | 4.3  | 0.5                | 1-5   |
| Positive Relations    | 3.8  | 0.8                | 1-5   |
| Purpose in Life       | 4.1  | 0.6                | 1-5   |
| Self-Acceptance       | 4.0  | 0.7                | 1-5   |

The data show that autonomy has a high mean of 4.2 and a low standard deviation (0.6), was reported by most participants with consistently strong feelings of independence and self-direction. This aligns with themes emphasizing autonomy in career decisions. The ability to make independent choices enhances feelings of control and satisfaction (Sanjuán, 2011). On environmental mastery, a mean of 4.0 and a standard deviation of 0.7 indicate that participants generally feel competent in managing their life circumstances, though some variability exists, it potentially reflect challenges in balancing academic and career responsibilities. Effectively managing one's environment leads to a sense of competence and satisfaction (Dissanayake, 2016).

The dimension on personal growth showed the highest mean (4.3) and the lowest standard deviation (0.5), suggesting that most participants feel a strong sense of self-improvement and growth, which is a central aspect of their well-being. Continuous development and self-improvement contribute to a sense of achievement and satisfaction (Karaś & Ciecuch, 2017). On positive relations, the lowest mean (3.8) and the highest standard deviation (0.8) indicate variability in participants' ability to form and maintain supportive relationships. This could be influenced by academic stress or limited networking opportunities. Supposedly, strong social connections provide emotional support, which is crucial for overall happiness (Meliala & Ahman, 2024).

Consequently, the purpose in life has a mean of 4.1 and a standard deviation of 0.6. It suggests that participants feel a strong sense of direction and purpose, consistent with their engagement in career planning. Having clear goals and a sense of direction is linked to higher life satisfaction, as individuals feel more fulfilled (Dhanabhakym & Sarath, 2023). On self-acceptance, a mean of 4.0 and a standard deviation of 0.7, disclosed that participants generally report satisfaction with themselves, though this may fluctuate based on career uncertainties or self-doubt. Acknowledging and accepting oneself fosters a positive self-image, enhancing life satisfaction (Dissanayake, 2016).

Conversely, while Ryff's model emphasizes eudaimonic aspects of well-being, some researchers argue that hedonic aspects, such as immediate pleasure and happiness, also play a critical role in life satisfaction, suggesting a more integrated approach to understanding well-being (Sanjuán, 2011).

### 3.2 Career Planning Variables

Career planning decisions are influenced by a multitude of factors that intertwine personal, social, and environmental elements. Understanding these influences is crucial for effective career guidance and decision-making. The data is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2** Descriptive Statistics of Career Planning

| Variable           | Mean | Standard Deviation | Range |
|--------------------|------|--------------------|-------|
| Goal Setting       | 4.3  | 0.5                | 1-5   |
| Self-Assessment    | 4.2  | 0.6                | 1-5   |
| Career Exploration | 4.1  | 0.7                | 1-5   |
| Skill Development  | 4.4  | 0.5                | 1-5   |
| Networking         | 3.9  | 0.8                | 1-5   |
| Action Planning    | 4.5  | 0.4                | 1-5   |

The results show that students who set clear career goals demonstrated increased focus and motivation, which positively influenced their autonomy. The data reveal that structured goal setting significantly contributes to students' confidence in decision-making. Career planning helps individuals clarify their goals and values, enabling informed decisions about their career trajectories (Zhang & Perey, 2024). Effective career planning fosters alignment between personal values, interests, and skills, enhancing job satisfaction and personal fulfillment. This alignment significantly contributes to long-term career success, as individuals are more likely to find meaningful roles that resonate with their intrinsic motivations.

Participants highlighted the value of self-assessment in identifying suitable career paths. It is recommended to use self-assessment tools to encourage individuals to reflect on their core motivations and values, which are essential for making informed career choices (Westover, 2024). This will enhance their environmental mastery. The correlation of 0.61 underscores the importance of introspection in adapting to life challenges. Self-assessment tools encourage individuals to reflect on their core motivations and values, which are essential for making informed career choices (Westover, 2024).

Moreover, engaging in career exploration provided clarity and reduced anxiety about future opportunities. The strong correlation with personal growth (0.57) reflects how exploration fosters self-discovery and progress. Career exploration activities encourage students to connect their academic pursuits with future career goals, leading to heightened engagement in their studies (Stebleton & Diamond, 2018).

In relation to this, skill acquisition emerged as a key factor in boosting purpose in life, with a correlation of 0.65. Students who focused on skill development reported higher confidence and readiness for professional roles.

In addition, building professional networks helped students establish meaningful connections, reflected in the correlation of 0.54 with positive relations. Networking also provided access to mentorship and opportunities, enhancing psychological well-being. These networks include key factors influencing an individual's career planning decisions that include gender, family influence, peer relationships, school impact, and demographic variables such as academic discipline, parental pressure, and social group, all of which significantly shape career choices and decision-making processes (Nadaan, 2022).

This led to action planning. The highest mean score (4.5) for action planning indicates its critical role in providing structure and reducing uncertainty. The correlation of 0.62 with self-acceptance demonstrates how planning enhances satisfaction and self-worth. The results highlight the significant role of career planning in promoting psychological well-being among graduate students.

Effective career planning can reduce stress, some individuals may still experience significant anxiety related to their career choices, indicating that additional support systems are necessary to foster resilience and well-being in the face of career-related challenges (Kim et al., 2016); (Mohamad, 2024).

Relative thereto, career exploration and planning activities significantly enhance students' academic motivation and career decision-making. Engaging in these activities fosters a proactive approach to career development, which is crucial for navigating the complexities of modern employment landscapes. Similarly, engaging in exploration behaviors contributes to a stronger vocational identity, which is linked to more decisive career commitments (Morgan et al., 2023). Participation in career planning enhances self-efficacy, as students gain confidence in their ability to make informed career choices (Ireland, 2017). Career planning provides a framework for students to systematically evaluate their

options, reducing indecision and anxiety associated with career choices (Zhang et al., 2022). Consequently, career choice is important to meet individual happiness as well as addressing social expectations, and solutions and recommendations based on avoiding stress, culture-infused career counseling, avoiding negative thinking, and using family tree into career counseling are additionally provided (Arslan & Kilinç, 2019).

On the other hand, there are various factors influencing career choices, including personal resources and external circumstances. It emphasizes that decision-making in careers is complex and often affected by elements beyond an individual choices.

**Table 3** Correlation Between Career Planning and Each of the Psychological Well-Being Dimensions

| Variables                      | Correlation Coefficient (r) | Significance (p) |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|
| Career Planning and Autonomy   | 0.55                        | <0.01            |
| Career Planning and Mastery    | 0.60                        | <0.01            |
| Career Planning and Growth     | 0.58                        | <0.01            |
| Career Planning and Relations  | 0.50                        | <0.01            |
| Career Planning and Purpose    | 0.63                        | <0.01            |
| Career Planning and Acceptance | 0.59                        | <0.01            |

The results highlight that career planning positively influences all dimensions of psychological well-being. Graduate students with structured career plans reported higher autonomy, indicating increased confidence in making independent decisions. Environmental mastery was also positively correlated, reflecting better coping strategies and management of life challenges.

Personal growth and purpose in life showed strong correlations, emphasizing how career planning fosters self-improvement and goal-oriented behavior. Positive relations with others, although correlated, showed slightly lower coefficients, suggesting that social dynamics may be influenced by other factors beyond career planning. Self-acceptance was significantly enhanced, as students who plan their careers are likely to feel more secure and satisfied with their personal and professional identities.

The quantitative findings show significant positive correlation ( $r = 0.62, p < 0.01$ ) between career planning and psychological well-being. Furthermore, regression analysis indicated that career planning accounted for 38% of the variance in well-being scores.

The qualitative insights generated themes emerging from interviews included "sense of control," "clarity of purpose," and "support networks." Participants highlighted the role of mentorship and access to career resources in enhancing their well-being.

The findings underscore the importance of career planning as a determinant of psychological well-being among graduate students. Structured career guidance can serve as a buffer against stressors, fostering resilience and a positive outlook. Universities should integrate career services with mental health support to address the intertwined nature of these issues.

**Table 4** Correlation Coefficients Between Career Planning Variables and Psychological Well-Being Dimensions

| Career Planning Variable | Psychological Well-Being Dimension | Correlation Coefficient (r) | Significance (p) |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|
| Goal Setting             | Autonomy                           | 0.58                        | <0.01            |
| Self-Assessment          | Environmental Mastery              | 0.61                        |                  |
| Career Exploration       | Personal Growth                    | 0.57                        |                  |
| Skill Development        | Purpose in Life                    | 0.65                        |                  |
| Networking               | Positive Relations                 | 0.54                        |                  |
| Action Planning          | Self-Acceptance                    | 0.62                        |                  |

- *Goal Setting and Autonomy.* A moderate positive correlation ( $r = 0.58$ ) shows that clear goal-setting enhances autonomy by empowering graduate students to take charge of their career paths, which reduces anxiety and fosters independence.
- *Self-Assessment and Environmental Mastery.* The strong correlation ( $r = 0.61$ ) highlights the importance of self-awareness in adapting to academic and career challenges. Students who understand their strengths and weaknesses better navigate their environments and achieve mastery.
- *Career Exploration and Personal Growth.* With a correlation of  $r = 0.57$ , exploring career options encourages self-reflection and personal growth. This process helps students discover and develop their potential.
- *Skill Development and Purpose in Life.* The highest correlation ( $r = 0.65$ ) indicates that skill development is pivotal in fostering a sense of purpose. It prepares students for future roles and instills confidence in their career trajectories.
- *Networking and Positive Relations.* A moderate correlation ( $r = 0.54$ ) reveals that networking contributes significantly to building supportive relationships, which reduces feelings of isolation and enhances emotional well-being.
- *Action Planning and Self-Acceptance.* A strong correlation ( $r = 0.62$ ) underscores the role of actionable planning in boosting self-acceptance. When students feel prepared, they develop greater self-esteem and satisfaction with their progress.

The correlation analysis confirms significant positive relationships between career planning variables and dimensions of psychological well-being. These findings highlight the crucial role of effective career planning in enhancing graduate students' mental health and overall life satisfaction.

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## 4. Themes and Narratives

### 4.1. Theme 1. Autonomy in Career Decisions

- *Narrative.* "I feel more confident about my future since I started setting clear career goals. Knowing that I have control over my career choices, it has reduced my anxiety and given me a sense of independence."
- *Discussion.* Participants expressed that taking charge of their career decisions significantly enhanced their autonomy, which contributed positively to their overall psychological well-being.

### 4.2. Theme 2. Environmental Mastery Through Structured Planning

- *Narrative.* "Balancing academics and career planning was overwhelming at first, but creating a detailed action plan helped me manage my time better. I feel more in control of my life now."
- *Discussion.* Structured career planning was frequently cited as a tool for improving environmental mastery, enabling students to navigate complex academic and career environments more effectively.

### 4.3. Theme 3. Personal Growth and Skill Development

- *Narrative.* "Learning new skills for my future career has been rewarding. It is not just about the job; it is about growing as a person and feeling ready for the challenges ahead."
- *Discussion.* Participants linked the process of acquiring new skills to a sense of personal growth and achievement, which in turn boosted their psychological well-being.

### 4.4. Theme 4. Networking and Positive Relationships

- *Narrative.* "Building connections with professionals in my field has not only opened doors but also made me feel supported. These relationships give me confidence and reduce my feelings of isolation."
- *Discussion.* Networking emerged as a significant factor in fostering positive relationships, alleviating feelings of loneliness, and enhancing students' emotional well-being.

### 4.5. Theme 5. Purpose and Action Planning

- *Narrative.* "Having a clear career plan gives me a sense of purpose. It is like a roadmap that keeps me motivated, even during stressful times."
- *Discussion.* The sense of purpose derived from having a clear and actionable career plan was a recurring theme. Participants noted that it provided direction and motivation, which were critical for maintaining their psychological well-being.

#### 4.6. Theme 6. Self-Acceptance and Career Exploration

- *Narrative.* "Exploring different career options made me realize that it is okay to change paths. I have learned to accept my strengths and weaknesses and focus on what truly makes me happy."
- *Discussion.* Career exploration was associated with increased self-acceptance. By understanding their own preferences and limitations, participants felt more at peace with their choices and optimistic about their futures.

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#### 5. Conclusion

This study highlights the significant role of career planning in promoting psychological well-being among graduate students.

#### *Recommendations*

Recommendations include:

- Enhancing access to career counseling and mentorship programs.
- Incorporating workshops on career planning and stress management.
- Conducting longitudinal studies to explore the long-term impact of career planning on well-being.

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