



The Psychological Toll: Understanding Hopelessness and Well-being in Civil Services Aspirants

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Abstract: This research examines the complex interplay between hopelessness and psychological well-being in aspirants who have been preparing to take the India Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) civil services examinations. This group is subjected to high levels of academic and social stress. The study, based on a cross-sectional design and 200 participants, explores the deleterious effects of chronic stressors that are linked to the high-stakes UPSC environment, on well-being and worsen hopelessness. The quantitative analyses indicate that all the subscales of psychological well-being (autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and self-acceptance) are significantly negatively correlated with hopelessness and that the overall psychological well-being is the most strongly associated with hopelessness ($r = -0.56, p < .01$). Comparisons by gender showed that the only statistically significant difference was that females were more autonomous, and males were more purposeful in life, with no significant gender differences found in the scores of hopelessness or total well-being. The results confirm the multidimensional model of well-being and highlight hopelessness as a key mediator between psychological vulnerability and compromised flourishing. The findings indicate that both well-being and hope-oriented psychological interventions are required, regardless of gender, to reduce the emotional burden that civil service aspirants face. Future research directions would be longitudinal studies to explain causal mechanisms and examine cultural and dispositional moderators.

Keywords: Civil Service Aspirants, Gender Differences, Hopelessness, Psychological Well-being, Stress and Coping.

Introduction

The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), civil services examinations in India are one of the most competitive and rigorous academic endeavors. The UPSC exam is often regarded as one of the most challenging exams in the world (Manish et al., 2024); it requires a long-term commitment of cognitive ability, discipline, and emotional resilience (Pundir, 2024). Although the examination process is designed to identify the most qualified public servants, the mental pressure placed on the aspirants is rarely discussed. The intense pressure, characterized by long hours of study, constant failures, social alienation, and excessive demands from family and society, is a breeding ground for psychological distress (Pienyu et al., 2024).

Some of the most critical issues in this regard are feelings of despair and worsening mental health (Yadav & Gupta, 2025). Hopelessness, which is a negative attitude towards the future and the possibility of influencing it, is especially relevant when people face recurrent failures, economic pressure, and a sense of no improvement (Topol & Reznikoff, 1982). The psychological well-being, which encompasses the dimensions of autonomy, personal growth, purpose in life, and emotional balance, tends to be compromised in prolonged stress (Nwankwo et al., 2017). Based on empirical observations and anecdotal reports, it is observed that a large number of aspirants go through a constant emotional rollercoaster, characterized by anxiety, self-doubt, demotivation, and, in extreme cases, symptoms of depression and suicidal thoughts.

This study will focus on the two-way relationship between hopelessness and psychological well-being in a sample of civil-service aspirants, specifically examining how chronic academic and social pressures undermine well-being and how the emergence of hopelessness exacerbates this deterioration. This research intends to explore mental health crisis among this group and contribute in tailoring psychological interventions that could break the cycle of emotional burnout and hopelessness.

Review of Literature

Hopelessness as a persistent negative anticipation of future events has always been linked to a low subjective well-being and an increase in psychological distress. On the other hand, flourishing, as operationalized in the PERMA model of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment, is a multidimensional construct that extends beyond the absence of disorder. For civil services aspirants, whose preparation involves extended periods of uncertainty, evaluative pressure, and, in

many cases, social isolation, an explanation of the role played by hopelessness in undermining flourishing is essential to both preventive and interventional efforts (Yildirim et al., 2025).

Hatun (2024) showed that psychological vulnerability, which is a concept describing maladaptive cognitive schemata that increase stress responsiveness, predicted hopelessness ($\beta=.59$, $p<.001$) and psychological distress ($\beta=.29$, $p<.01$). In its turn, hopelessness had a substantial adverse effect on well-being ($\beta=-.62$, $p<.001$). The related serial-mediation model explained 49 percent of the variance in well-being, highlighting hopelessness as a key mechanism in which vulnerability impairs flourishing. Even though Hatun Turkish, married-adult sample is demographically different from civil services aspirants, the cognitive vulnerability pathway can probably be applied to any high-stakes situation that involves a sense of inadequacy and lack of control over outcomes.

A recent expansion of the Positive Education Model to secondary school environments is that the quality of interpersonal climates and dispositional traits has a combined influence on adolescent well-being. Buzzai et al. (2019) show through path analytic modeling that need-supportive behavior ($\beta=0.34$, $p<0.001$), dispositional optimism ($\beta=0.21$, $p<0.001$), and positive affectivity ($\beta=0.20$, $p<0.001$) positively relate to adolescent well-being, whereas negative affectivity ($\beta=-0.18$, $p<0.001$) and need-thwarting behavior ($\beta=0.20$, $p<0.001$). In contrast, academic achievement was a poor predictor and suggests that even among performance-oriented peers, social and dispositional supports have the most substantial effect on psychological flourishing, as opposed to objective measures of performance. Considering these results, civil services coaching conditions that promote autonomy, support, and positive feedback are likely to reduce the degree of hopelessness among aspirants.

Lew et al. (2019) determined that hopelessness ($\beta=0.03$, $p<0.001$), depression ($\beta=0.14$, $p<0.001$), and stress ($\beta=0.06$, $p<0.01$) are the main risk factors of suicidal behavior, and meaning in life is a strong protective factor ($\beta=-0.03$, $p<0.01$) in a sample of 2,074 Chinese undergraduates. Self-blame was also another maladaptive coping strategy that increased suicidal risk. The results are in line with the testimonies of aspiring professionals that repeated experiences of failure may exacerbate depressive symptoms and reduce life purpose unless accompanied by adaptive coping mechanisms and purposive intervention.

Huen et al. (2015) systematically disentangled hope (goal-directed agency plus pathways) and hopelessness. They showed, in a large Hong Kong sample, that hope attenuated the harmful effects of hopelessness on suicidal ideation. Hopeful participants also had significantly reduced suicidal ideation rates despite high levels of measures of hopelessness, further highlighting hope development, such as goal-setting interventions, as a powerful tool of leverage to aspirants who face long-term uncertainty.

Hopelessness is a key mediator of the relationship between cognitive/interpersonal risk factors and impaired well-being across cultures and age groups, and optimism, need for support, meaning, and hope are attenuating buffers. The civil services aspirants work in a scenario of uncontrollable consequences and social comparison, which increases psychological vulnerability and negative affect, making hopelessness a prominent risk to mental health.

Maladaptive cognitive schemas, autonomy-supportive learning environments, strengthening meaning in life, and agentic hope interventions can all have the potential to reduce hopelessness while increasing well-being simultaneously. Longitudinal research designs are necessary to follow candidates through exam periods, helping to elucidate cause and effect and test multicomponent interventions that combine cognitive-behavioral and positive psychology methods.

Objectives

The objective of the research is as: -

- To investigate the relationship between psychological well-being (along its subscales), and hopelessness among Civil Service Aspirants.
- To find out gender differences in psychological well-being and Helplessness among civil service aspirants.

Hypotheses

- H1. There will be a negative correlation between Psychological Well-being and Hopelessness.
- H2. There will be a negative correlation between subscales of psychological well-being and hopelessness.
- H3. There will be no gender difference in psychological well-being and hopelessness

Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational research design to examine the relationship between psychological well-being and hopelessness among civil service aspirants preparing for the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) examinations. The design was chosen as it allows for the investigation of associations between variables at a single point in time without experimental manipulation.

Sample

The study comprised a total of 200 civil service aspirants (100 males and 100 females), selected through purposive sampling. The participants were drawn from coaching institutes and self-study libraries located in Chandigarh region, where aspirants typically prepare for the UPSC examinations. The inclusion criteria required participants to be actively preparing for the UPSC Civil Services Examination for at least one year. Aspirants who had discontinued preparation or were preparing exclusively for other examinations were excluded from the sample.

The age of participants ranged between 23 and 29 years, with the aspirants from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The gender distribution was maintained approximately equal to enable meaningful gender comparisons.

Measures

1. Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS; Ryff, 1989)

The scale measures six dimensions of well-being: Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations, Purpose in Life, and Self-Acceptance. It consists of items rated on a Likert scale. Higher scores indicate higher psychological well-being. The tool has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity in Indian samples.

2. Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS; Beck, 1988)

This 20-item true/false instrument assesses negative expectancies about the future. Higher scores indicate greater hopelessness. The scale has well-established psychometric properties and has been used extensively in Indian research contexts.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive table for the variables.

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	S.D
Autonomy	200	4	21	15.0	3.20
Env. Mastery	200	7	21	14.5	3.07
Personal growth	200	10	21	18.0	2.82
Positive Relations with others	200	3	21	13.0	4.25
Purpose in life	200	6	21	15.0	3.40
Self-Acceptance	200	6	21	16.0	3.38
PSW	200	62	122	91.0	12.1
Hopelessness	200	0	20	4.00	3.85

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the study variables. Civil service aspirants reported moderate levels of psychological well-being across its six dimensions. Among the subscales, Personal Growth (M = 18.0, SD = 2.82) and Self-Acceptance (M = 16.0, SD = 3.38) were relatively higher compared to Positive Relations with Others (M = 13.0, SD = 4.25). The overall psychological well-being (PSW) score had a mean of 91.0 (SD = 12.1), suggesting that, although aspirants showed reasonable levels of well-being, there was substantial variability within the sample. Levels of hopelessness were low-to-moderate (M = 4.0, SD = 3.85), though some individuals reported high hopelessness (range = 0–20).

Table 2: Correlation table.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Autonomy	—							
Env. Mastery	0.40 ***	—						
Personal growth	0.25 ***	0.39 ***	—					
Positive Relations with others	0.17*	0.27 ***	0.17 *	—				
Purpose in life	0.14	0.05	0.34 ***	0.09	—			
Self-Acceptance	0.32 ***	0.46 ***	0.38 ***	0.09	0.13	—		
PSW	0.61 ***	0.69 ***	0.66***	0.56***	0.48 ***	0.64 ***	—	
Hopelessness	-0.30***	-0.45***	-0.46***	-0.20 **	-0.18 *	-0.50***	0.56 ***	—

Table 2 shows the intercorrelations among variables. Consistent with Hypothesis 1 (H1), overall psychological well-being was found to be significantly negatively correlated with hopelessness ($r = -.56, p < .01$). Psychological well-being and its subscales showed negative correlations with Hopelessness, including autonomy ($r = -.30, p < .01$), and strongest correlation for Self-acceptance ($r = -.50, p < .01$) and Environmental mastery ($r = -.45, p < .01$), Personal growth ($r = -.46, p < .01$), while relatively weaker correlations were found for Positive Relations ($r = -.20, p < .01$) and purpose in life ($r = -.18, p < .05$).

Table 3. T-test table

Variables	t-value	Df	P	Mean		95% Confidence Interval		Cohen's d
				Male	Female	Lower	Upper	
Autonomy	-3.62	198	< .001	13.67	15.26	-2.46	-0.72	-0.51
Env. Mastery	-1.45	198	0.147	14.22	14.85	-1.48	0.22	-0.21
Personal growth	1.08	198	0.282	17.71	17.28	-0.36	1.22	0.15
Positive Relations with others	1.23	198	0.219	14.04	13.30	-0.44	1.92	0.17
Purpose in life	2.77	198	0.006	15.39	14.08	0.38	2.24	0.39
Self-Acceptance	-0.90	198	0.370	15.36	15.79	-1.37	0.51	-0.13
PSW	-0.08	198	0.940	90.39	90.52	-3.51	3.25	-0.01
Hopelessness	-0.70	198	0.487	4.59	4.97	-1.46	0.70	-0.10

Table 3 presents the results of independent samples t-tests comparing male and female aspirants. Consistent with Hypothesis 3 (H3), no significant gender differences were observed in overall psychological well-being ($t(198) = -0.08, p = .940$) or hopelessness ($t(198) = -0.70, p = .487$). Similarly, most subscales showed no gender differences. However, two exceptions emerged:

Autonomy was significantly higher among females ($M = 15.26$) compared to males ($M = 13.67$), $t(198) = -3.62, p < .001, d = -0.51$, reflecting a medium effect size.

Purpose in Life was significantly higher among males ($M = 15.39$) compared to females ($M = 14.08$), $t(198) = 2.77, p = .006, d = 0.39$, reflecting a small-to-medium effect size.

Discussion

The aim of the study was to explore the relationship between psychological well-being (and its six subscales) and hopelessness among civil service aspirants and the existence of gender-based differences in these areas. The results provide further insight into the psychological well-being of high-achieving aspirants in competitive, high-pressure environments.

The research found a significant negative relationship between psychological well-being and hopelessness. All subscales of psychological well-being—autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance—had a statistically significant and negative correlation with hopelessness. It is worth noting that the highest negative correlation was found between overall psychological well-being and hopelessness. This supports our first and second hypotheses. These findings are in line with the multidimensional model of well-being developed by Ryff (1989), who argues that well-being is a protective factor that reduces negative psychological consequences. Analyses revealed that the subscales environmental mastery, self-acceptance, and personal growth exhibited very strong negative correlations with hopelessness; thus, they should be considered targets of interventions.

The results presented here support the assumption that increased psychological well-being serves as a protective factor, mitigating the experience of hopelessness in challenging situations such as civil service examination preparation. The negative association between psychological well-being and hopelessness, as observed, gives an initial indication that psychological well-being interventions can reduce vulnerability to hopelessness in people exposed to competitive stress. This finding is further supported by a body of research in the field of positive psychology, which shows that interventions aimed at enhancing self-acceptance and purpose in life—variables consistently associated with lower negative affect—lead to a decrease in hopelessness (Seligman et al., 2005).

The second research aim was to investigate gender differences in the measures of psychological well-being and hopelessness. There were minimal statistically significant differences in gender. The mean scores on autonomy were higher among female participants than among male participants, with a moderate effect size. On the other hand, males had a significantly stronger sense of purpose than females, indicating a small to moderate effect. There were no statistically significant differences between genders on any other dimensions of psychological well-being, the total psychological well-being scale, or hopelessness. It is also interesting that there was no significant gender difference in hopelessness indicating that the levels of hopelessness in both male and female civil service aspirants are similar, probably due to similar environmental and academic stresses, hence partially supporting the third hypothesis.

The current research partially supports the existing literature by documenting gender-related differences in certain aspects of well-being; however, it also indicates that in most subscales and the core construct of hopelessness, gender has a minimal effect on civil service aspirants in this sample. These findings support the quasi-universal character of the psychological stressors faced by potential civil servants and, therefore, suggest interventions aimed at strengthening psychological well-being regardless of gender.

Implications and Future Directions

The findings have a theoretical and practical implication for the design of psychological interventions and support systems for civil service aspirants. The negative correlation between overall well-being and hopelessness means that psychological resilience should be developed in youths who are about to take high-stakes exams. Since well-being is a complex concept, specific interventions such as coaching in autonomy, life skills training with a focus on environmental mastery, and personal growth workshops can be beneficial.

Even though the gender differences were relatively small, the increased autonomy found in females and the increased sense of purpose in life found in males are suggestive of interesting directions to pursue. Future research could be longitudinal in nature to clarify causality, test mediating and moderating factors, and incorporate cultural factors.

Limitations

The current study employs a cross-sectional design and relies on self-report measures, which do not permit definitive causal conclusions and increase the likelihood of shared-method variance. Moreover, the sample size is limited to civil service aspirants from a single region, which restricts the applicability of the results.

Conclusion

Overall, the analysis reveals a strong negative correlation between psychological well-being and hopelessness among civil service aspirants. The few gender variations indicate that male and female aspirants have a common psychological dynamic in terms of well-being and hopelessness. Psychological well-being interventions will likely reduce hopelessness and foster mental health in stressful academic environments.

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