



The Impact of Career Choice (Passion Vs. Obligation) on Life Satisfaction and Happiness among Working Adults

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Abstract: Career choice is one of the most important decisions made in a person's life, and it not only affects one's professional life but also has a significant impact on his/her psychological well-being. People select their career paths according to their personal interests and internal passions while others choose their careers because of external requirements from family members and financial obligations and societal expectations. The fundamental elements which people use to make their career choice decisions will determine their ability to achieve career success throughout their adult life which results in developing their personal satisfaction and happiness. The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of passion-driven versus obligation-driven career choices on life satisfaction and subjective happiness among working adults. This study will use Self-Determination Theory combined with vocational psychology and positive psychology theories to investigate how intrinsic motivation in career choice affects psychological well-being compared to extrinsic career choice motivation. The psychological implications of career motivation are especially important in today's society which is characterized by economic competition and social comparison. The study examines how career orientation affects life satisfaction results which contributes to the body of knowledge in counselling psychology organizational psychology and mental health research. The study results will help with career guidance and work satisfaction and psychological interventions which aim to enhance

psychological well-being in adults.

Keywords: *Career Selection, Passion-Driven Career, Obligation-Driven Career, Life Satisfaction, Happiness, Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation.*

1. Introduction

“Pleasure in the job puts perfection in the work.”

~Aristotle

But what happens when the job is not chosen out of pleasure? When it is chosen out of pressure?

Working adults view their profession as more than a job because their work defines their core identity. The practice establishes the person's daily timetable and their employment status which determines their financial situation and social standing and personal value. The majority of adults dedicate most of their awake time to activities connected with their professional responsibilities. The reason for choosing a profession establishes the foundation of motivation which affects both life satisfaction and overall happiness throughout a person's life.

People in modern society choose their career paths because they need to balance their personal ambitions with their work obligations. Some individuals pursue professions fueled by intrinsic passion—curiosity, interest, personal meaning, and a sense of calling. The social norms and economic conditions which people face create career paths which people select because of their responsibility to family members and their need to maintain social status and their need to prevent financial problems. The two career paths enable people to succeed in their professional lives, yet they produce different impacts on their mental health. The study investigates how people choose their career paths based on their dedication to their work versus their commitment to fulfill their responsibilities.

People define their adult identity through their professional lives. Erik Erikson defined adulthood through two major developmental stages which adults undergo to develop their identity and their ability to generate life (Erikson, 1950). The Life-Span Life-Space Theory of Donald Super shows that people need continuous career development which links to their self-concept (Super, 1980). People choose jobs which match their self-assessed skills and work preferences and personal principles. People experience increased psychological satisfaction when their self-concept matches their job requirement.

Intrinsic motivation serves as the foundation for passion-driven career selection. Edward

Deci and Richard Ryan developed Self-Determination Theory which explains that people develop intrinsic motivation when they pursue activities for their natural appeal instead of seeking outside benefits (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Positive psychology defines happiness as something that exists when people find purpose in their lives and connect with others. Martin Seligman defined well-being as the combination of positive feelings and active participation and social bonds and life purpose and personal achievements (Seligman, 2011). Furthermore, research in Vocational psychology demonstrates that people who consider their job a ‘calling’ experience greater happiness and better mental health (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997).

The foundation of obligation-driven career selection derives from external factors such as family expectations financial stability social prestige cultural norms fear of uncertainty and parental investment. People in collectivistic societies choose their career paths according to what their family members want. Although these decisions bring security and stability, they do not always match with what people want for themselves. People who pursue a career path because they want to fulfill external requirements will experience psychological problems.

Life satisfaction describes how people judge their total quality of life through cognitive assessment. Happiness includes the emotional states of happiness and satisfaction together with positive feelings. Ed Diener showed that happiness includes both emotional components and cognitive assessment elements (Diener, 1984). People spend most of their adult lives at work which makes their job satisfaction vital for determining their overall life contentment.

Research about career satisfaction has expanded, yet there exists a research gap which investigates how passion-driven and obligation-driven career choices impact life satisfaction and happiness of working adults. The present study investigates how initial motivation affects long-term happiness.

Therefore, career choice is more than selecting a profession, it is choosing a direction for one’s identity, daily experience, and long-term fulfillment. The decision-making process originates from two fundamental drivers, which include personal interests and societal expectations, because these drivers determine the path which individuals will pursue throughout their lives.

As Carl Rogers suggested, psychological well-being arises when individuals live in congruence with their authentic selves (Rogers, 1961). The present study seeks to examine whether such congruence in career choice translates into greater happiness among working adults.

Because ultimately, the question is not only: “What do you do for a living?”

But also: “Why did you choose to do it?” And perhaps, hidden in that “why,” lies the secret to happiness.

1.1 Hypothesis

H1: Individuals who choose careers based on passion will show higher satisfaction in life and happiness than those who choose careers due to obligation (money/family).

2. Review of Literature

Rahmasari et al. (2026) examined the relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic motivators and student well, being in the context of higher education. Results found that intrinsic factors included student accomplishment, autonomy and purpose whereas extrinsic conditions encompassed the evaluation process and faculty recognition, and intrinsic motivators explain the variance in mental health and academic performance of students better than extrinsic determinants. This article reinforces the idea that internal sources of motivation are preeminent in explaining subjective well, being and academic functioning, with intrinsic motivation being a better predictor of academic motivation as well as general psychological functioning.

Xu et al. (2026) studied how several motivation profiles such as intrinsic (affiliated, eager, authentic, passionate) vs. disengaged pursuers (struggling, obligated, sleepwalking, leaving) are related to indicators of well, being and career outcomes for working adults. Results showed that the intrinsically motivated profiles experienced greater levels of positive affect, life satisfaction, job satisfaction, and career commitment and were happier than the disengaged low, motivation groups, lending support to the view that internally motivated engagement (passion) in one's life and career is associated with improved subjective well, being and satisfaction in life than other types of careers regardless of their low motivation or obligation.

Sen, V., et al. (2025). explored the relationship between intrinsic motivation and life satisfaction at school on expectations for achieving career goals among female students in India. The findings showed that intrinsic motivation coupled with satisfaction about life at school were highly correlated and significantly influenced students' desires to be successful and have a clear picture of the career path they wanted to take. Academic satisfaction also served as a mediating variable between intrinsic motivation and occupational goals/directions.

Spitzer et al. (2025) implemented and evaluated an intervention to boost the intrinsic

motivation and psychological well, being of medical students. The intervention proved effective; the impact of the self, experience group sessions significantly increased students' internal motivation and well, being relative to control. This study is an important demonstration of the hippocampus where intrinsic motivational engagement can be developed through intervention in higher education and also illustrates the benefits in the broader well, being domain.

Oncu (2025) investigated the motives of first year university students choosing a medical career. Applying the principles of the models of Social Cognitive Career Theory and Expectancy, Value Theory, Oncu found that 'intrinsic motives including the personal desire of choosing medicine, perceived self, efficacy, and moral satisfaction' (p. 6) had a more significant effect on career choice; as opposed to extrinsic motives such as financial prosperity and prestige. The findings of this study suggest that there is a greater internal motivation for an early career choice and continued commitment to one's profession which can be applied to the concept of motivation as a lifecycle process that enhances self, satisfaction.

3. Materials & Materials

3.1 Research Design

In this current research, a quantitative, cross-sectional, comparative method was utilized to explore the effects of career motivation a passion versus obligation. A cross-sectional design allowed the research to compare naturally occurring differences between working individuals with intrinsic and extrinsic choices of a career.

3.2 Participants

A total of 154 participants took part in the study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 53 years ($M = 36.88$ years). The sample consisted of working professionals and individuals from broad range occupational backgrounds.

Based on responses to the career motivation items, participants were categorized into:

- 39 participants (25.32%) – Passion-driven
- 115 participants (74.68%) – Obligation-driven

Participation was voluntary, and no financial or academic incentives were provided.

3.3 Inclusion Criteria

- Given an informed consent
- Completed all items of the scale

- Currently engaged in a career

3.4 Exclusion Criteria

- Gaps in answers
- Missing data on some items of the major scale

3.5 Variables

The independent variable was Career Choice Type, defined as Primary Motivation for Career (Passion-driven vs Obligation-driven). The dependent variables were Life Satisfaction, defined as cognitive evaluation of life measured using SWLS (5 items, 7-point Likert), and Happiness, defined as subjective well-being measured using Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (29 items).

3.6 Measures

Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS): The SWLS developed by Diener et al. in 1985 uses five items to evaluate total life satisfaction. The assessment uses a 7-point Likert scale which ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree) to record participant answers. People who achieve higher scores show more life satisfaction. The scale has shown to be reliable across cultures.

Oxford Happiness Questionnaire: The 29-item self-report scale developed by Hills and Argyle assesses four aspects of happiness which include subjective happiness and positive affect as well as life enjoyment and psychological well-being. Respondents rate their opinion on a 6-point Likert scale with higher mean items and scores result in higher happiness levels.

Career Motivation Classification: The participants used structured items to demonstrate their internal motivation for engagement in financial and obligation, related activities. The scoring results indicated which of the following groups of participants participated more:

- Passion-driven
- Obligation-driven

3.7 Data Analysis

The study calculated the Descriptive statistics, the researchers found out the means and the standard deviation means for Life Satisfaction and Happiness. Later the researchers compared the two groups which were Passion-driven tendencies and Obligation-driven tendencies by using independent samples t tests. Cohen's d method was used to derive effect sizes.

3.8 Research Objectives

- To assess the satisfaction in life and happiness among working adults.
- To classify participants based on passion- driven vs. obligation- driven career choice.

- To compare the mean LWS scores between the two groups.
- To interpret how internal motivation (passion) and external expectation (obligation) relate to satisfaction in life and happiness.

4. Resources & Procedure

4.1 Consent

The study informed participants about its aim and the measures that were in place to keep the answers confidential. The study gained an informed consent digitally.

4.2 Data Collection

Participants first completed their demographic details which included their age, gender and occupation details. The participants then answered all three assessments which included:

- Career motivation items
- Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS)
- Oxford Happiness Questionnaire

4.3 Scoring

- The SWLS scores were calculated by averaging the five items.
- The happiness scores were calculated by averaging 29 items after doing the reverse-scoring, items were modified.
- Group classification was done after the participants answered the career motivation questions.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of their data, and their right to withdraw at any time. Digital informed consent was collected before the start of the data collection. No personal information was collected.

5. Results

The participants were divided into two groups based on their primary career motivation which resulted in Passion-driven and Obligation-driven categories.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1. *Descriptives*

Group	N	Mean	SWLS	Mean OHS	SD
Passion-driven	39	19.00	1.20	3.91	0.68

Obligation driven	115	14.15	1.47	4.36	0.66
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Life Satisfaction

The Passion-driven group had higher life satisfaction mean score of 19.00 and a SD = 1.20 than the Obligation-driven group which reported an average life satisfaction mean score of 14.15 and a SD = 1.47.

Happiness

The Passion-driven group achieved a mean happiness score of 3.91 with a SD = 0.68 while the Obligation-driven group obtained a higher mean score of 4.36 with a SD = 0.66.

Inferential Statistics***Life Satisfaction***

The researchers used an independent samples t-test to assess life satisfaction differences between Passion-driven and Obligation-driven participants. It is found that life satisfaction scores showed a statistically significant difference because $t(152) = 3.92$ $p < .001$.

Happiness

The second independent samples t-test was used to assess happiness differences between two groups. The results revealed a statistically significant difference: $t(152) = -3.68$, $p < .001$. The magnitude reflects a medium effect size, suggesting a meaningful difference in happiness between groups.

Table 2. Independent Samples t-test Results

Variable	T- Value	Df	P- Value	Effect- Size
Life Satisfaction	3.29	152	< .001	0.72
Happiness	-3.68	152	< .001	0.25

Correlation Analysis

The Pearson correlation analysis to study how career motivation affects well-being results.

Passion Motivation and Life Satisfaction

The researchers found a strong positive correlation which showed $r = .59$ $p < .001$. The findings suggest that higher passion-driven motivation will lead to higher level of satisfaction.

Passion Motivation and Happiness

There is a small effect in the relationship which is statistically significant.

Effect Size

Cohen's d indicated:

- Life Satisfaction: $d \approx 0.72$ (medium effect)
- Happiness: $d \approx 0.25$ (small effect)

(Bar Graph on the last page)

6. Discussion

The current research investigated how different types of career motivation which include Passion-driven and Obligation-driven motivation affect the psychological well-being of working adults who are 18 to 53 years old. The present research showed exactly what researchers expected because Passion-driven people achieved better Life Satisfaction results than Obligation-driven people at a statistically significant level ($p < .05$). The research shows that people who believe they have freedom to choose their career path tend to assess their life experiences with more positive results. People use life satisfaction as a mental assessment tool to evaluate their overall life situation. The important difference between the two groups shows that people who follow their career path will achieve their personal goals and success and happiness in life. People spend most of their time working during the day which means their work satisfaction will affect their overall life assessment.

The Oxford Happiness Scale results showed that Passion-driven participants achieved higher scores than other groups but this difference between the groups did not reach statistical significance ($p > .05$). The finding gains significance because it shows that happiness exists as an emotional state which people experience through various aspects of their life including their career drive and their relationships and their financial position and their social relationships and their character features.

The current study results show how career motivation affects different aspects of psychological health. The combination of both studies shows that Passion-driven career choices lead to greater Meaning in Life and Life Satisfaction but they do not increase that much Happiness. Most research studies show that Meaning in Life has the strongest and most reliable impact. People who selected their professions based on their natural interests demonstrated higher levels of career dedication and professional goals. People who follow their personal interests through their work activities achieve existential fulfilment through their main life pursuit of career development.

The Self-Determination Theory developed by Ryan and Deci in 2017 states that people who have autonomous motivation will experience better life results because they will satisfy their fundamental human needs for independence and skill development and social connection. People who drive themselves through obligations will encounter outside restrictions which will decrease their ability to make independent choices.

People who work because they have to do so will establish boundaries which help them make money but this way of working does not help them build natural interest or find their real purpose.

Life Satisfaction results further strengthen this argument. Participants who followed their passions assessed their life experience as more positive than other participants did. The research found that people who select their career paths need autonomy because it helps them develop their life purpose and assess their overall existence. The large differences between Meaning in Life and Life Satisfaction also imply that intrinsic career choice influences existential and cognitive wellbeing. Moreover, the results are consistent with previous research which found individuals with intrinsic motivation to be psychologically healthier.

The lack of a significant difference between Happiness scores provides an important theoretical distinction. Happiness describes how someone feels emotionally and is typically more state dependent and relates more to situational variables than Meaning or Satisfaction. Factors such as broader influences in life and cultural influences in context and adaptation and coping and time frame may explain the lack of difference with Happiness. In an Indian culture which emphasizes on upholding responsibility through work, the ability to afford emotional security and financial security may be a promoting factor toward a person 's wellbeing, despite its incongruence with his or her core value.

These results suggest that intrinsic motivation affects more in terms of stability and reflection than it does in terms of instability or fluctuation in mood. Meaning in Life and Life Satisfaction are viewed as being relatively stable constructs; happiness can be altered in the short term. Career passion impacts the underlying psychological structure not the living day by day psychological state.

In collectivist cultures like India, a person's career choice is not usually a decision made solely by that individual. The choice of a career is heavily based on cash security and social status. However, from the findings of this study, it can also be inferred that although an obligation might

serve the purpose of providing emotional stability, it will not generate a profound sense of existential meaning. Hence, the findings created important implications for practice, which include the following: career counselling should encourage exploration of one's intrinsic interests, families should support autonomy in conjunction with guidance, and educational systems should facilitate the discovery of a passion.

Results support the Self-Determination Theory strongly, where the wilful motivation (passion-driven choice) appears to lead to enhanced well-being with regards to meaning and satisfaction, while controlled motivation (obligation-driven choice) does not necessarily decrease overall happiness, but does not lead to a greater level of existential fulfilment.

Although the current study had many significant findings, there are several limitations that should be noted. The use of self-report measures may lead participant response bias. The cross-sectional design of the current study limits the extent to which conclusions can be used to infer causation. The culture of the sample was very similar and may limit the ability to compare with other cultures. Future research could explore long-term effects of career motivation on an individual's overall well-being with the use of longitudinal studies.

7. Conclusion

Overall, this research demonstrates that career motivation influences a person's psychological well-being specifically in terms of the construction of happiness and satisfaction. Passion people mentioned having existential and cognitive presence. Happiness seemed to be more related to the larger context of living rather than job and personal passion fit. The study showed that Passion-driven career choices lead to greater Meaning in Life and Life Satisfaction but they do not increase that much Happiness. These findings highlight that intrinsic motivation contributes more toward stable and reflective aspects of well-being such as meaning and satisfaction, while happiness remains influenced by multiple situational and external factors. Obligation-driven choices may provide stability and structure, but they do not generate a strong sense of purpose or existential fulfilment.

Hence, as we continue in modern career conversations how to balance passion and obligation to otherwise give rise to an overall positive well-being, the emphasis may be on upon not either or, but the combining of both. Future research could explore long-term effects of career motivation on an individual's overall well-being with the use of longitudinal studies and more

diverse samples to better understand the long-term psychological impact of career choices.

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Conflict Of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Figures

Effect Size

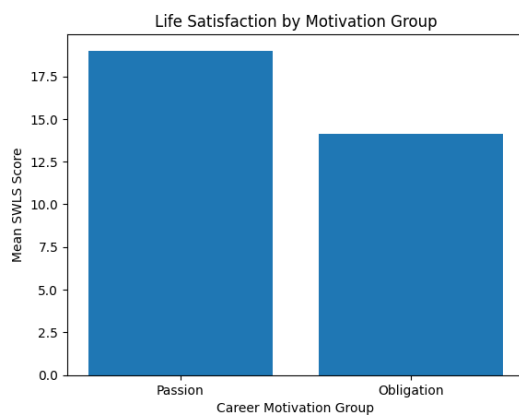


Figure 1

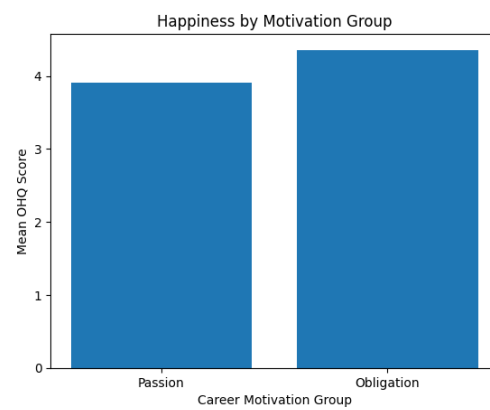


Figure 2