

Does the Upkeep of a Daily Routine Affect Well-being?

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## Introduction

Daily routines serve to provide structure and assist people with maintaining a consistent schedule in which they can accomplish the tasks required of them throughout their day-to-day lives. There is a direct connection between following out routines and the experience of meaning in life. When people have a sense of coherence, meaning in life is higher (MIL; Heintzelman & King, 2019). Carrying out routines in a consistent manner affects MIL regardless of the type of routine activity or other forms of external stimuli such as unexpected distractions or stressors (Mohideen & Heintzelmann, 2022). How does the enactment of routine behaviors, or the absence of them, influence elements of our mental health and subjective well-being? Additionally, is it possible for a lack of coherence to increase feelings of subjective well-being, and how does this effect compare to what can be achieved through routine structure?

While the structure of routines can often provide comfort for some, routines are often hard to regularly follow as people are consistently faced with challenges that block their ability to uphold a coherent routine (Dreier, 2011). Altering daily routines can be either exciting, or jarring, for people who experience this phenomenon (Baldessarelli, 2018). Altering routines may provide a more diverse set of life experiences than the monotonous, structured routine would be able to provide (Oishi et al., 2020). We will examine the relationship between incoherent external stimuli (e.g., lack of routine) and psychological richness to determine how the absence of routine structure influences the diversity of experience perceived by individuals. Previous research has stated that routine conduct is correlated with greater subjective well-being since it increases perceptions of Meaning in Life. (Hybholt, 2015). However, there is a gap within the current body of research pertaining to routine coherence as there is no literature that links this phenomenon to perceptions of psychological richness. Due to this, we intend to examine the

ways in which the absence or disruption of routine enactment will affect MIL in tandem with psychological richness.

It's also possible that many people don't understand how their daily routines are likely to affect their subjective well-being. People often make predictions about how certain events will make them feel, but it is common for these predictions to exacerbate the reality of their affects (Kahneman & Snell, 1992). The tendency to falsely predict one's affective response to stimuli is often caused by an impact bias in which people overestimate both the intensity and duration of their emotional responses (Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). This is an interesting phenomenon to study in relation to the effect that routine upkeep has on subjective well-being due to the attachment established between people and the coherence of their daily schedule. Would people benefit from allowing more freedom into their routine, or are they right to maintain a strict and coherent schedule? We intend to further examine the relationship between predicted and reflected affective responses alongside our investigation of the effect of routines on mental well-being.

### **The Present Work**

I hypothesize that the partaking in daily routines will increase feelings of meaning in life but decrease feelings of psychological richness. This hypothesis is supported by the existing body of research which suggests that coherent habits and routines create an increased perception of meaning in life and life satisfaction (Reich & Williams, 2003). However, there is also evidence that a variety of life experiences and nonmonotonous structure is correlated with an increased perception of subjective well-being due to feelings of psychological richness (Oishi, Choi, Liu, & Kurtz, 2021). I examined the association between coherence of routines and meaning in life/psychological richness using affect forecasting. I used affective forecasting to test whether people predict that they will feel greater meaning in life and/or psychological

richness when imagining a scenario in which they purposefully alter their daily routine. I then measured the effect of coherence on mental well-being by asking participants to report their feelings of meaning richness, purpose, happiness, coherence and significance after either imagining following their routine activities or being instructed to alter an aspect of their routine. I predict that, overall, participants will experience less feelings of meaning but more feelings of richness when asked to switch up their routine activities due to the increased feelings of psychological richness that is correlated with a diverse variation of experiences (Oishi & Westgate, 2021).

Do people expect to experience a greater sense of meaning and/or richness when they adhere to a daily routine? Using affective forecasting, I investigated the relationship between routine coherence, meaning in life, and psychological richness in an ecologically valid setting. First, participants were asked to list their daily routines, then they were placed in two separate conditions where they either were told to imagine they were carrying out this routine or imagine that they were forced to change it. I then asked participants to report how they predict they will feel if the events they imagined were to really happen by answering questions related to meaning in life and psychological richness. I hypothesized that participants would anticipate feeling more meaning when adhering to a daily routine and more psychological richness when altering their daily routine.

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

We aimed to collect 200 participants. Participants were 366 undergraduates from the University of Florida (286 women, 74 men, 6 self-identified) who completed an online survey via Qualtrics,  $M (SD)_{age} = 20.55 (5.12)$ ,  $range = 18-59$ . Sixty-five-point three percent identified

as Caucasian/White/European, 11.2% checked more than one ethnicity, 19.4% identified as Latino(a)(x)/Chicano(a)(x)/Mexican, 4.9% identified as South Asian, 4.6% identified as African American/Black/Caribbean, 7.1% identified as East Asian, 3.3% identified as Southeast Asian, 2.5% identified as Middle Eastern, 3.3% as multi/biracial, and 0.6% identified as another identity not listed. We measured participant's subjective social status ("Now think about your own life. Please tell us where you think you would be on this ladder, right now;" 1 = worst off, 5 = middle class, 10 = best off). 0% of participants classified themselves as the worst off, 13.4% of participants classified themselves between worst off and middle class, 18.3% of participants classified themselves as middle class, and 58.7% of participants classified themselves between middle class and best off. 1.4% of participants classified themselves as the best off. Study 1 was approved by the University of Florida's IRB. Data can be found at:

[https://osf.io/ceydb/?view\\_only=b61470e75aef4656af3ca7ca7c104e44](https://osf.io/ceydb/?view_only=b61470e75aef4656af3ca7ca7c104e44).

### ***Procedure***

Participants completed a survey on Qualtrics where they were given instructions to imagine the events of the next day and report their attachment to the place they will be spending their day at. Next, they were asked to list off navigational directions to reach this place as if they were telling them to a stranger. Then participants were asked to imagine that they were going to alter their method and/or route of transportation the next day and rate how they believe they will feel about the experience (e.g., how enjoyable and meaningful it would be).

### ***Manipulation***

Participants were randomly assigned by the Qualtrics program to one of two conditions. Those in the *routine scramble condition* were instructed to imagine that they are taking a different transportation method and/or route to their destination the next day, whereas

participants randomly assigned to the *normal routine condition* were instructed to imagine that they carry out their transportation routine as they usually would. Participants in all conditions were then asked to fill out a survey, keeping in mind whichever transportation instructions they were given to imagine, in which they report how they foresee themselves feeling about their lives after the experience (e.g., how much meaning or psychological richness they will perceive).

### ***Dependent Variables***

Participants in all conditions were first asked to discuss the first place they will go to in their routine the next day. They were then asked to fill out a Place Attachment Scale (Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2005) in which they rated each item (e.g., "I feel like this place is a part of me") from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Participants were then asked questions regarding this destination such as "How often have you been to this place?", "How do you typically get to this place from your current home?", and "How well do you know how to get to this place from your current home?" before they were asked to write down precise step-by-step instructions on how to get from their home to this place as if they were directing someone else.

Participants in the Normal Routine condition were asked to imagine that they were carrying out this routine the next day. They were shown their own written instructions on how to get from their home to the place in question as a reminder of their routine. Participants in the Routine Scramble condition were also shown their own written instructions, but they were instead asked to imagine altering their routine by changing their method of transportation, route of transportation, or both while getting from their homes to their previously indicated first destination. Participants in the Routine Scramble condition were then asked to write out how they would plan to alter their transportation routine. Participants in all conditions were asked to complete a comprehension check to ensure that they understood the directions for the

imagination period. Then they were asked to take one minute to imagine step-by-step how they would carry out the routine or altered routine from start to finish for the next day that they have previously indicated.

Participants in all conditions were then asked to fill out a series of questions regarding how they anticipate the experience they imagined would make them feel. These questions included asking how happy/enjoyable, personally meaningful, or psychologically rich the experience would be, whether the experience has a purpose, made sense, or was valuable, and how attached each participant felt to their destination. Participants rated each statement (e.g., how *happy/enjoyable* would this experience be?) on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much so). Participants were then asked to provide as much detail as possible to describe the experience they imagined including the method of transportation they would take and how many minutes they imagined it would take for them to reach their destination.

Participants in all conditions were asked questions relating to their current state of being (e.g., how meaningful or psychologically rich they believe their life has been so far), which were compared to the answers they reported when asked how they believed they would feel after altering or adhering to their routine. Dependent variables of meaning in life and psychological richness were compared between participants' reported current and predicted affects by using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ: Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) and the Psychologically Rich Life Questionnaire (PRLQ: Oishi et. al, 2019). Additional variables measured in this survey included satisfaction with life (SWLS: Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), Big 5 personality traits (BFI: John & Srivastava, 1999), and good life perception (GLS: Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005) scales. Moderators such as sense of direction (SBSOD: Hegarty et. al, 2002) and openness to change (ACS: Derryberry & Reed, 2002) were also

included in the online surveys. All scales included asked participants to rate each item (e.g., “My life has been monotonous”) from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

## Results

An independent samples *t* test was used to analyze the data for this study in order to compare the difference between the Routine Control and Routine Scramble populations for each variable. Participants in the Routine Scramble anticipated that they would experience less feelings of meaning,  $d = 0.39$ , 95%CI (0.17, 0.60), psychological richness,  $d = 0.06$ , 95%CI (-0.16, 0.27), happiness,  $d = 0.29$  95%CI (0.08, 0.51), coherence,  $d = 0.87$  95%CI (0.65, 1.10), purpose,  $d = 0.85$  95%CI (0.64, 1.08) and significance,  $d = 0.63$  95%CI (0.41, 0.85) when compared to those in the Routine condition. We previously predicted that participants in the Routine Scramble condition would experience greater feelings of psychological richness than those in the control condition.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations Across Condition in Study 1

| Variable               | Condition                  |                           | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>d</i> (95% CI)  |
|------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|--------------------|
|                        | Scramble<br><i>n</i> = 170 | Routine<br><i>n</i> = 172 |          |           |          |                    |
| Happiness              | 4.62(1.89)                 | 5.21(1.89)                | 2.72     | 340       | .006     | 0.29 (0.08, 0.51)  |
| Psychological Richness | 4.09(2.18)                 | 4.30(2.10)                | 0.52     | 340       | .689     | 0.06 (-0.16, 0.27) |
| Meaning                | 3.41(2.18)                 | 4.26(2.93)                | 3.57     | 340       | <.001    | 0.39 (0.17, 0.60)  |
| Coherence              | 4.62(2.63)                 | 6.80(2.40)                | 8.08     | 340       | <.001    | 0.87 (0.65, 1.10)  |
| Purpose                | 4.76(2.51)                 | 6.80(2.20)                | 7.93     | 340       | <.001    | 0.85 (0.64, 1.08)  |
| Significance           | 4.21(2.24)                 | 5.68(2.20)                | 5.82     | 339       | <.001    | 0.63 (0.41, 0.85)  |



Participants in the Routine condition all around reported better experiences of subjective well-being than those in the Routine Scramble condition. This could be due to an over-inflation of emotions attached to routines, meaning that participants believe that scrambling their daily routine will be a more negative experience than it would be in reality. However, the p-value indicated for the result from the psychological richness scale in particular was very large, meaning that the results are inconclusive. Thus, we are unable to infer any conclusions for the measure of psychological richness in this sample.

### **Discussion**

This study supports the notion that maintaining a consistent routine is likely to increase one's experience of meaning in life. Altering one's routine can lead to an increase of diversity within one's life experiences, which likely increases feelings of psychological richness (Oishi & Westgate, 2022). This thesis contributes to an existing body of research that aims to increase general knowledge surrounding the improvement of mental health and well-being throughout the lifespan of an individual. Mental well-being consists of many different factors, but relies to some extent on coherence, significance, and purpose, all of which encompass the empirical definition of meaning within the context of social psychology (Steger et. al, 2006).

Our study aims to showcase how incoherence can benefit one's well-being by adding the element of psychological richness to their perception of life, which contrasts with the benefit of meaning in life (MIL) that external coherence provides. The next step beyond this study would be to create a reality-based scenario in which participants must adhere to or alter their daily routine and have them report their feelings of MIL, psychological richness, etc. In a similar fashion to those in the current affective forecasting study. By having participants recreate the scenario introduced within this current study and actively carry out their routine method/route of

transportation or alter it, we can compare how the results of scrambling a routine would actually affect participants' subjective well-being rather than how they anticipate these actions would cause them to feel. Not only would this study enhance our understanding of the connection between routines and subjective well-being, but it would also increase our understanding of affective forecasting as a whole and the impact biases held against the altering of daily routines.

The current study showcases that participants often underestimate the benefits that incoherence could provide for their mental well-being, which contradicted our hypothesis that those in the routine scramble condition would experience greater perceived levels of psychological richness. However, I predict that the results of this next study will showcase the idea that participants expect the altering of their routine to have a more negative effect on their well-being than it would actually have, and that the benefits of routine scrambling are underestimated when discussed in tandem with the concept of psychology richness. These anticipated results for a future study would prove that there are benefits for one's mental well-being from both adhering to a daily routine and scrambling their routine activities, but these benefits manifest in different ways.

The results of this study could have significant implications for clinical therapeutic practices as the increased understanding of how routines affect mental well-being could aid psychologists in the treatment of their clients. By discussing how adhering to or adjusting daily routines can affect one's perception of meaning and richness, clients will be able to apply what they learn in a clinical setting to their daily lives and interpret how the coherence of their daily routines may benefit or impede their mental well-being. Further research should be conducted in populations that participate in mental health counseling and how this advice could change their perceptions of their own daily life and well-being.

Future studies should expand the current work by adding more elements to their experiments to test the generalizability of these results. Thesis studies can accomplish this by instructing participants to further scramble their routine by listing off other activities other than route or method of transportation to alter throughout their day.

It is also worth noting that the participants of this study are primarily undergraduate students in the United States between the ages of 18-22. Therefore, this study should be conducted on a wider population that includes a more diverse sample size with various ages and identities. More specifically, college students are likely to report different perceptions of meaning and richness when compared to the rest of the population due to their role as a younger demographic taking goal-oriented steps required to obtain a career for themselves. It would be interesting to compare individuals of various educational backgrounds and socioeconomic standings to discover how these economic influences affect the perceptions of meaning and richness tied to the coherence of external stimuli.

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