

Meaning in Life Through a Cultural Lens: Interplay of Self and Society

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Article Info

Article history:

Received: December 30, 2024

Revised: February 09, 2025

Accepted: February 18, 2025

Keywords:

Meaning in life;

Self-control;

Personal growth;

Connected with others;

Connected with nature.

Kata Kunci:

Makna hidup;

Pengendalian diri;

Pertumbuhan pribadi;

Keterhubungan dengan orang

lain;

Keterhubungan dengan alam.

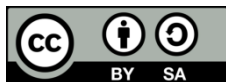
ABSTRACT

The determinants of meaning in life are important concepts in psychology and philosophy and are widely discussed in the literature today. This paper explores these and suggests that the factors that contribute such a meaning can be categorized according to two broad areas: self-related factors and other-related factors, the former including self-control and personal growth, and the latter including our connections with others and with nature. This study employs a literature analysis method and conducts a critical discussion in analyzing the research problem. Further, the paper draws on current research and theoretical perspectives in order to develop the conceptual framework, and the implications of these findings are discussed for a better understanding the nature of meaning in life. Finally, the paper offers a fairly global analysis of the determinants of meaning in life, and highlights the importance of both individual and social factors in determining this critical aspect of our lives.

ABSTRAK

Determinan makna hidup merupakan konsep penting dalam psikologi dan filsafat yang banyak dibahas dalam literatur saat ini. Makalah ini mengeksplorasi konsep tersebut dan mengusulkan bahwa faktor-faktor yang berkontribusi terhadap makna hidup dapat dikategorikan ke dalam dua area utama: faktor yang berhubungan dengan diri sendiri dan faktor yang berhubungan dengan orang lain. Faktor yang berhubungan dengan diri sendiri mencakup pengendalian diri dan pertumbuhan pribadi, sedangkan faktor yang berhubungan dengan orang lain mencakup hubungan dengan sesama serta keterhubungan dengan alam. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode analisis terhadap literatur dan melakukan diskusi kritis dalam menganalisis permasalahan penelitian. Lebih lanjut, makalah ini mengacu pada penelitian terkini dan perspektif teoretis untuk mengembangkan kerangka konseptual, serta membahas implikasi temuan tersebut dalam upaya memahami hakikat makna hidup secara lebih baik. Akhirnya, makalah ini menawarkan analisis yang komprehensif mengenai determinan makna hidup dan menyoroti pentingnya faktor individu maupun sosial dalam menentukan aspek fundamental kehidupan manusia ini.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Do we really need to have meaning in life, or can we just live our life without even thinking about such a question? Does it matter that we know “the essence” of life when we can actually live without even wondering about such a question? Human beings are the only beings that can question their own existence in such a way, and the biggest goal in an individual’s life is often to find its meaning and purpose. The questions about the meaning of human life are age old. Our sense of life’s meaning is at the core of our experience and is also at the core of whatever we do. It is only through a feeling of meaning that we make sense of our existence. In life we find meaning through a sense of purpose, and this makes

our life worthwhile. Frankl (1978) aptly pointed out that a firm sense of meaning is essential for optimal human development, and Bruner (1990) stated it more directly, indicating that without meaning systems “we would be lost in a murk of chaotic experience and probably would not have survived as a species in any case” (p. 56). Meaning in life is not just a theoretical or philosophical construct; it has a bearing on human health and well-being. Jung, as cited in Jaffe (1970), asserted that absence of meaning is related to psychopathology, and Yalom (1980), in an empirical study confirmed earlier clinical observations that to live without meaning, goals, or values can provoke distress (Yalom, 1980).

While thinking about what makes life meaningful, several perspectives in the literature can be found, especially in the literature related to philosophy and existential psychology. In an attempt to formulate a single definition of meaning, a person can ask what the essence of meaning is; however, a single generic answer to this question is not possible to find since the meaning of life differs from person to person and from day to day. What is important to bear in mind therefore is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at any given moment, as Frankl has indicated (Frankl, 1970). Frankl for example speaks of the uniqueness of meaning, and that meaning refers not only to a quality of a situation but even the quality of a person's life as a whole since life is a combination of uniquely experienced situations (Frankl, 1970). Frankl asserted that “man's search for meaning” (the title of his famous book) is the primary motivation in a person's life and is not a “secondary rationalization” of instinctual drives (Frankl, 1970). Meaning serves a number of important functions in human life (Frankl, 1992). First, meaning provides a purpose for our lives, and secondly it provides values or standards by which we can judge our actions. It gives us a sense of control over the events in our life, and last, it provides us with a feeling of self-worth. When people are unable to find meaning in their life or if they lose the sense of meaning that they once possessed, they can become distressed. Further, emotional problems can result from a failure to find meaning in life, and this, according to Frankl, can be resolved only through finding something that makes life worth living (Frankl, 1992).

It follows that what determines meaning in life should be the key research issue to be investigated. In order to clarify this issue, this study conceptualizes the determinants of meaning in life as consists of two broad categories which are self-related and other-related. Furthermore, self-control and personal growth are considered as the influencers of self-related determinants of meaning in life and connected with others and connectedness with nature are considered as the influencers of other-related determinants of meaning in life. These are the topics that will be elaborated and discussed hereafter.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Self-Related Derminants of Meaning in Life

2.1.1. Self-Control

The benefits of self-control have been demonstrated across a variety of domains—from academic achievement to health (De Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Individuals for example scoring

higher (vs. lower) on trait self-control are less likely to engage behaviors that are unhealthy, procrastination, substance abuse, and delinquent behaviors, and they are more likely to enjoy stable romantic relationships, have successful careers, be trusted by others (Moffitt et al., 2011; Pronk, & Righetti, 2015; Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011; Tangney et al., 2004). It is not surprising that several recent studies have demonstrated that strong self-control is positively associated with higher life satisfaction, and a greater positive and less negative affect (Cheung, Gillebaart, Kroese, & De Ridder, 2014; Grund, Grunschel, Bruhn, & Fries, 2015; Hofmann, Luhmann, Fisher, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2014; Wiese et al., 2018).

However, people not only strive for a happy life; they also seek a life that has meaning (Steger, Oishi, & Kesebir, 2011). Does self-control make one feel happy and satisfied, and does it help one find meaning in life? A person for example may want to harm another, but control that feeling; in that case, can it be said that the person that controls his or her feeling of hatred, but still has the feeling, is happy? Even though life satisfaction and meaning in life are often positively connected with each other (Steger & Kashdan, 2007), the factors that contribute to life satisfaction are sometimes unrelated to or even undermine the perception of meaning; and the factors associated with a stronger sense of meaning do not always predict higher life satisfaction and happiness (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2013; Oishi & Diener, 2014).

As meaning in life has been linked to important life outcomes—from marriage to mortality risks (Hill & Turiano, 2014; Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016)—an inquiry into the antecedents of a sense of meaning in life can make a significant contribution to the research in this area. In the present research, whether the beneficial attributes of self-control extend to the perception of meaning in life is explored. Here, the association between self-control and meaning in life and its potential mechanisms is explored, including successful goal progress and the experience of structure in life.

Self-control represents the ability to overcome tempting desires in order to achieve long-term goals (De Ridder, Kroese, & Gillebaart, 2017). Most definitions of self-control in the literature emphasize the ability to engage in goal-directed behaviors (Hagger, 2013), and successful progress with goals is often mentioned among the most important benefits of good self-control (Tangney et al., 2004). In addition, high levels of self-control have been associated with less impulse behavior (Frieze & Hofmann, 2009) and stronger reliance on beneficial habits and daily routines (De Ridder & Gillebaart, 2017). Therefore, strong self-control is likely to promote goal progress and to have the potential to bring more order, structure, and coherence into a person's life.

Both goal progress and a sense of structure are central to the perception of meaning in life, and meaning in life can be defined as the extent to which a person feels that his or her life has significance and is directed by goals that he or she values (Heintzelman & King, 2014; King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006; Martela & Steger, 2016). An individual's goals have been historically regarded as helping one to understand the purpose of his or her life (Battista & Almond, 1973). Further, conceptual and theoretical study has emphasized that goals are a source of perceived meaning (Emmons, 2003, 2005); for example, in the “four

needs for meaning framework,” Baumeister (1991) proposed that an individual’s actions result in meaning as long as they support goal attainment.

A sense of coherence has been asserted to be another important aspect of meaning; this includes the perception of comprehensibility, structure, connections, and order (Heintzeman & King, 2014; Martela & Steger, 2016). Life for example is perceived as being meaningful when it is structured and predictable and therefore “makes sense to the person who lives it” (Heintzeman, Trent, & King, 2013, p. 2). Several theoretical perspectives have indicated the importance of structure and order as sources of meaning. For example, according to terror management theory, the perception of the world as a structured and orderly place can be a source of meaning and can counteract mortality concerns (Vess, Routledge, Landau, & Arndt, 2009). Similarly, in the meaning maintenance model (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006), a structured conception of reality can be seen as an important factor that supports the maintenance of meaning. Indeed, a number of empirical studies have suggested that the experience of structure and coherence in a person’s everyday life (e.g., exposure to coherent vs. chaotic linguistic triads) can lead to a stronger perception of a life as meaningful (Heintzeman et al., 2013).

Taken together, as self-control is associated with successful progress with a person’s goals and involves the ability to organize and structure one’s life, potentially including in that life coherence, comprehensibility, and order, it is proposed here that the benefits of self-control can extend beyond general life success and happiness, and facilitate the individual’s perception of life as meaningful.

2.1.2 Personal Growth

Abraham Maslow’s theory of human motivation emphasizes the importance of personal growth and self-actualization in achieving a meaningful life. According to his hierarchy of needs, individuals experience a fundamental drive to satisfy their physiological needs and their needs for safety; this, according to him, is followed by higher-level needs—for example the need for love and belonging, feeling good about oneself (esteem), and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Self-actualization includes achieving one’s full potential and realizing one’s special talents and abilities.

Maslow suggested that self-actualization is crucial for the experience of a meaningful life—when people are able to self-actualize, they can experience a sense of purpose and this can add to a deeper feeling for life’s meaning (Maslow, 1970). It is a process that involves ongoing growth and development, as people attempt to become the best they can be and follow their passions.

Research has indicated that an individual’s growth is closely and positively linked to the feeling that he or she is experiencing meaning in his/her life., as can be seen in the following details.

- a) In terms of self-discovery, a person’s growth often involves exploring his or her values, beliefs, and identity, and this can contribute to a sense of meaning (Waterman et al., 2010); as individuals achieve insight into their “true selves” and explore what matters most to them, they can better pursue goals that are aligned with their values and sense of purpose.

- b) Regarding a person's psychological well-being, a person's growth can be seen to be associated with a greater degree of psychological well-being, an important component of course of a meaningful life (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). As individuals develop their skills and sense of mastery, there is a greater chance of them being able to have positive emotions and to be satisfied with their lives, including having a sense of purpose.
- c) In terms of a person's lifelong learning, it can be seen that personal growth involves such a commitment, as this can provide an individual with greater opportunities for growth, both personal and professional, as Kegan has pointed out (Kegan, 1982). People that readily accept new challenges are more likely to find meaning in their lives, as they expand their skills and views of life.
- d) Finally in terms of purposeful action, it can be seen that an individual's growth can inspire him or her to engage in action that has a purpose, for example engaging in meaningful work and activities that are creative (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When individuals are motivated by personal growth, they are more likely to engage in activities that are in line with their values, thus contributing to their feeling of meaning and purpose in life.

In conclusion, it has been indicated above that personal growth is positively related to a person's feeling that he or she is living a life with meaning and purpose; and this can be followed by the experiences of self-discovery, well-being, lifelong learning, and action that is interpreted as having purpose.

2.2 Other-Related Determinants of Meaning in Life

2.2.1 Connectedness with Others

The idea that our social relationships directly influence the meaning that we attribute to existence cannot be doubted; as social animals we are deeply motivated to form social bonds that can be relied upon (e.g., Ryan & Deci 2001), and we receive psychological rewards when our need for belonging is met (e.g., Baumeister & Leary 1995). In fact, the perception of social relatedness has been asserted to be one of the strongest determinants of psychological well-being (e.g., Ryan & Deci 2001); on the other hand, social isolation has been considered to often lead to depression and other negative outcomes (e.g., Williams 2012). Social relationships provide a context for all three facets of meaning in life—coherence, purpose, and significance—and these organize our experience, give our lives purpose, and allow us to feel that our lives matter.

The experience of meaning is often created through interdependence with other people, and even though culture provides us with a shared reality that allows us to make sense of our world, it is our specific social relationships that are most relevant to our feelings of meaning; for example, parenthood or caring for a loved one that is dying from a terminal illness can certainly bring clarity to one's purpose in life. Similarly, the perception that one's life matters often hinges on the belief that one's actions have helped to make the world a better place for others. As de St. Aubin (2013, p. 248) concludes, "the dynamics of generativity are heavily implicated in many of the meaning making paths adults traverse. It is one of the developmental forces that shapes and is shaped by faith, work, love, community

engagement, suffering, and death adults experience . . . meaning via generativity.” Moreover, our close relationships also help us to restore a feeling of meaning during difficult times—when life gives us challenges, we often turn to others that are close to us to make sense of a given situation. Talking or sharing stories with others helps us to reevaluate the situations in which we find ourselves in a more positive light and to understand ourselves in a broader sense (McAdams & Olson 2010).

Cross-sectional and daily diary studies have shown that the feeling of belonging or other positive social interactions (e.g., social support) can predict one’s feeling of having meaning in life above other independent variables (e.g., Hicks & King 2009a, Hicks et al. 2010b). Martela et al. (2018) for example demonstrated that perceptions of both social relatedness and the belief that one has had a positive impact on others’ lives uniquely predicts a person’s interpretation of his or her meaning in life, even when other basic psychological needs and moods are accounted for (see also Zhang et al. 2019, study 3). Belongingness as indicated above also predicts the ability to articulate that meaningfulness; and indeed when one attempts to enhance his or her feelings of belongingness it can in fact increase the belief that one’s life is meaningful (Lambert et al. 2010). These beliefs are in line with our everyday life experiences, which indicate that many people explicitly indicate that social relationships are a primary source of meaning in their lives (see, e.g., Lambert et al., 2013).

Further, research has shown that people that feel connected with others tend to engage in more prosocial behavior, and they exhibit greater empathy and compassion towards them (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Vollhardt, 2009). These qualities can contribute to an individual's sense of purpose and meaning in life by encouraging a feeling of having contributed to “the greater good”.

2.2.2 Connectedness with Nature

A great deal of research today suggests that being connected with nature is closely related to our sense of meaning and purpose, as can be seen in the following details.

- a) Being connected with nature can provide us with a sense of interconnectedness. For example, when we feel connected to the natural world, it can provide us with a feeling of meaning and purpose, as Mayer and Frantz point out (Mayer & Frantz, 2004), and this sense of interconnectedness can help us feel that we are a part of something bigger than ourselves, as stated above, in this way providing us with a greater perspective on life.
- b) Being connected with nature can also give us a deeper appreciation of life, as being in nature can provide us with a sharpened sense of meaning and purpose, and Nisbet et al. have suggested (Nisbet et al., 2011). For example when people spend time in nature, they often become more aware of its beauty and complexity, and this can help them develop a deeper appreciation for life and its purpose.
- c) Being connected with nature also is connected with environmental concern; people that feel that they are connected with nature are more likely to engage in behaviors that support the environment, and this can in turn be followed by a feeling of personal meaning and purpose, as Tam has indicated (Tam, 2013).

When people feel responsible for the natural world in a personal way, they will engage in actions to protect it.

- d) Finally, a person feeling that he or she is connected with nature includes a variety of health benefits, for example reduced stress and increased well-being (Bratman et al., 2012); and when people feel physically and emotionally healthy, they are more likely to have a positive outlook on life and experience greater meaning and purpose.

In conclusion, feeling that you are connected with nature can contribute to a sense of meaning and purpose in life—when you feel a sense of interconnectedness with the natural world, appreciate the beauty and complexity of nature, engage in positive environmental behaviors, and experience the health benefits of spending time in nature, you are more likely to feel purpose and meaning in life, as indicated above.

3. METHOD

This study employs a literature review and critical discussion approach to explore the determinants of meaning in life through a cultural lens. A literature review is a well-established method for synthesizing existing research, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of key theoretical and empirical contributions. In this paper, scholarly works from psychology, philosophy, and related disciplines are examined to identify and categorize the factors that contribute to meaning in life.

Following the literature review, a critical discussion is conducted to analyze the interplay between self-related and other-related factors in shaping meaning in life. This involves evaluating existing theories, identifying gaps in the literature, and integrating perspectives from different cultural contexts. By critically engaging with prior studies, the paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how meaning in life is determined by both individual agency and social influences. This methodological approach enables a broad and integrative exploration of meaning in life, emphasizing the relevance of both self and society in shaping this fundamental human experience.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Self-related and other-related determinants of meaning share similarities, for example their potential to enhance a person's sense of purpose and fulfillment; however, there are also important differences. One important difference is that self-related determinants of meaning focus on individual characteristics and behaviors, while other-related determinants focus on social and environmental factors. Self-related determinants, for example self-control and personal growth, emphasize the importance of the agency of the individual and one's personal responsibility in finding meaning and purpose in life. On the other hand, other-related determinants, for example connectedness with others and nature, emphasize the importance of social and environmental contexts in shaping a person's sense of meaning and purpose.

Another difference is that the self-related determinants of meaning in life tend to be more inwardly focused, while other-related determinants tend to be more outwardly focused.

Self-control and personal growth for example involve personal reflection and self-improvement, while connectedness with others and nature involves a sense of belonging and connection to something outside oneself.

Additionally, the self-related determinants of meaning in life tend to be more goal-oriented, while other-related determinants tend to be more experiential—self-control and personal growth involve setting personal goals and working towards them, while connectedness with others and nature involves experiencing a sense of connection and sometimes of awe.

Overall, both self-related and other-related determinants of meaning in life are important for a person's growth and well-being; however, they differ in their focus and approach, with self-related determinants emphasizing personal responsibility and growth, and other-related determinants emphasizing social and environmental factors in shaping an individual's sense of meaning and purpose, as indicated. What might not be immediately apparent however is that self-related and other-related determinants of meaning in life can be seen to be interconnected and can influence each other in various ways. Here are some examples of those interconnections:

- a) Self-control and personal growth can enhance one's ability to connect with others and nature; for example, an individual that has developed self-control may be more capable of sustaining positive relationships with others and may also be more mindful of his or her impact on the environment, and this in turn can lead to a deeper connection with nature.
- b) Being connected with others and with nature can also provide individuals with the support and inspiration they need in order to maintain self-control and achieve personal growth; for instance, an individual that is connected with others may receive emotional support that helps him or her remain motivated and “on track” toward his or her personal goals. By the same token, being connected with nature can offer a sense of peace and serenity, and this can encourage one's personal growth and development.
- c) Self-related and other-related determinants can also reinforce each other in a positive feedback; for example, an individual that is committed to personal growth may be more likely to seek out meaningful connections with others and nature, and this in turn can lead to further personal growth and fulfillment. Similarly, an individual that is connected with others and nature may feel more motivated to work towards his or her personal goals and develop him/herself further.

Overall, self-related and other-related determinants of meaning in life are interdependent and can work together to create a sense of purpose and fulfillment; and by nurturing both aspects, individuals can create a well-rounded and meaningful life that allows them to thrive both personally and socially.

5. CONCLUSION

The search for meaning is a fundamental pursuit in human life, and researchers have identified various determinants that add to a person's feeling of purpose and significance.

Two broad categories of determinants have been identified, as indicated earlier: self-related determinants and other-related determinants. Self-related determinants of meaning in life refer to an individual's personal abilities and characteristics that contribute to his or her sense of purpose and direction—and these determinants include self-control and personal growth. Self-control refers to an individual's ability to regulate his/her behavior and emotions so that long-term goals can be achieved, and this ability is closely related to self-discipline and self-regulation, both of which are essential to the development of a person's sense of purpose and direction, as indicated above. Personal growth on the other hand refers to an individual's desire and ability to participate in activities that encourage personal development, for example learning new skills, pursuing goals that are considered meaningful, and exploring new experiences. This determinant is closely connected with the concept of self-actualization, as noted earlier; that is, the realization of a person's full potential.

On the other hand, other-related determinants of meaning in life refer to the individual's connections with others, society, and the natural world, as noted earlier; being connected with others involves positive social relationships, including intimate ones, and friendships and connections with a person's community, and these relationships can give individuals a feeling of belonging, purpose, and support. Further, feeling that you are connected with nature refers to an individual's relationship with the natural world, and this includes both the environment and the living things in it; this determinant is closely related to the notion of eco-spirituality, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living things and the importance of the preservation of the natural world and our responsibility to do so.

Overall, as can be seen in the above discussion, both self-related and other-related determinants are important for giving a person a sense of meaning and purpose in life; self-related determinants allow individuals to develop a strong sense of identity and direction, and other-related determinants give individuals a sense of belonging and connection with the wider world. It was also seen that by balancing both of these determinants, people can develop a deeper and more meaningful sense of purpose in their lives.

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