

Meaning and Purpose in Life and Well-Being: A Life-Span Perspective

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Three hundred men and women at five developmental stages from young adulthood to the old-old completed measures of life attitudes and well-being. Significant age differences were found on five life attitude dimensions: Life Purpose (LP), Death Acceptance (DA), Goal Seeking (GS), Future Meaning (FM), and Existential Vacuum (EV). LP and DA increased with age; GS and FM decreased with age; EV showed a curvilinear relationship with age. Significant sex differences were found for Life Control (LC) and Will to Meaning (WM). Women viewed life as more under their control and expressed a stronger will to find meaning as compared with males. FM, LP, and LC were found to predict psychological and physical well-being; EV, GS, and DA predicted psychological and physical discomfort. Preliminary findings attest to the importance of various life attitudes in promoting health and wellness.

MEANINGLESSNESS has been recognized as a modern malaise that, if left unresolved, can lead to symptoms of anxiety, depression, hopelessness, or physical decline (Frankl, 1978; Klinger, 1977; Ruffin, 1984; Tillich, 1952). The search for meaning, or in Frankl's terminology "will to meaning," may not be as primary as the need for physical survival. Nevertheless, it remains a significant and universal human motive (Frankl, 1978; Maddi, 1970). Meaning refers to making sense, order, or coherence out of one's existence. Purpose refers to intention, some function to be fulfilled, or goals to be achieved. Having a sense of personal meaning means having a purpose and striving toward a goal or goals. Unfortunately, social scientists and health professionals have largely overlooked the meaninglessness and meaningfulness constructs.

One approach to investigate the search for meaning and the psychological significance of meaningfulness (meaninglessness) is to quantify the amount of meaning and purpose that already exists in an individual. To date, empirical studies of meaning and purpose in life have relied almost exclusively on Crumbaugh and Maholick's (1969) Purpose in Life (PIL) test. The PIL is a unidimensional scale designed to measure the degree to which an individual experiences a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Low scores on the PIL have been shown to predict a variety of psychosocial adjustment problems (e.g., Padelford, 1974; Sheffield & Pearson, 1974).

Very few studies have examined age and sex differences. According to Frankl, meaning in life must be personally discovered. This implies that meaning in life may be age-related. Meier and Edwards (1974) found that individuals 25 and over scored significantly higher on the PIL than those 13 to 19 years. Sex differences were not found. Other studies reviewed by Meier and Edwards have not consistently found age and sex differences on the PIL. In these studies, however, the lack of age-related findings may be due to the

restriction in age range of the samples as well as the restriction in the scope of test items.

Recently, Reker and Peacock (1981) developed a multidimensional measure of meaning and purpose in life based on Frankl's (1978) theory of "will to meaning." The Life Attitude Profile (LAP) consists of seven dimensions; namely, Life Purpose (zest for life, fulfillment, contentment, satisfaction); Existential Vacuum (lack of purpose, lack of goals, free-floating anxiety); Life Control (freedom to make life choices, exercise of responsibility); Death Acceptance (lack of fear or anxiety about death); Will to Meaning (striving to find meaning in personal existence); Goal Seeking (desire to achieve new goals, be on the move); and Future Meaning (determination to make the future meaningful, acceptance of future potentialities).

Our multidimensional approach to the measurement of meaning and purpose in life has several advantages. Firstly, it allows us to assess both the perception of meaning and purpose in life and the desire to find meaning and purpose. Secondly, with the exception of the Life Control dimension, the LAP is relatively free of social desirability (Reker & Peacock, 1981). Thirdly, our scale offers a broadly based assessment of life attitudes in that, in addition to measuring meaning and purpose, it incorporates death acceptance and locus of control subscales; both of these constructs are relevant to adjustment and well-being (Gesser et al., in press; Lefcourt, 1976).

Perceived meaning and purpose in life may play an important role in coping with developmental crises. A number of life-span psychologists have theorized about the development of meaning over the life course (Buhler, 1959; Erikson, 1963; Jung, 1971). Most notable is Erikson (1963), who linked societal values with developmental tasks to be accomplished. Meaning for the adolescent, young, and middle-aged adult are centered on establishing a stable identity, forming intimate relationships, and being productive and

creative. The task of late life is to develop a sense of integrity, an appreciation of why and how one has lived. Buhler (1959) identified four developmental phases that emphasize changes in goal setting. In the early phases, successes and failures in life are evaluated and new directions for the course of one's life are contemplated. During the later phase, integration becomes the primary goal. For Jung (1971), meaning in the first half of life is derived through preparation for living; in the later years, meaning is derived through an examination of the "inner" part of life, by the processes of self-reflection and reevaluation.

The purpose of this study was to investigate age and sex differences in meaning and purpose in life across the life span by means of the multidimensional Life Attitude Profile. Guided by Buhler's and Erikson's theory and based on available empirical evidence, the following age-related hypotheses were formulated.

1. Life Purpose (LP) and Death Acceptance (DA) were predicted to increase as a function of age because the discovery of meaning and purpose requires time and maturity and one does not need to come to terms with death until later in life.

2. Existential Vacuum (EV), Goal Seeking (GS), and Future Meaning (FM) were predicted to decrease as a function of age. The goal striving and experimentation tasks of young adulthood give way to the reflective, integrative posture of older adults many of whom have achieved important goals and found meaning and purpose in life. With advancing age, the future of life on earth becomes increasingly shorter; consequently, futurity regarding life on earth may no longer be an important concept to the older individual.

3. Life Control (LC) was predicted to show a curvilinear relationship with age. Young adults have not yet established control over their lives, whereas elderly adults may have to relinquish some of the control. During midlife, however, a sense of personal mastery and responsibility is at an optimum level.

4. According to Frankl (1978), "will to meaning" is a primary and universal human motive; therefore, it was predicted that Will to Meaning (WM) is consistently high at all ages.

A secondary purpose of our study was to examine the relationship between meaning and purpose in life and well-being. Previous studies of meaning and purpose in life have focussed on the absence of meaning and its relationship to illness and social problems. Our approach is to use a multidimensional scale to investigate the relationship of both the presence and absence of meaning and purpose to perceived psychological and physical well-being. In our recent work with elderly individuals, we found that some of our dimensions (e.g., Life Purpose, Life Control, Future Meaning, Existential Vacuum) are importantly related to measures of well-being. It seems reasonable to hypothesize that the same relationships will hold across the life span.

METHOD

Participants

Three hundred subjects, 30 men and 30 women at each of five developmental stages; namely, young adulthood (16 to

29 years); early middle-age (30 to 49 years); late middle-age (50 to 64 years); young-old (65 to 74 years); and old-old (75 years and over) volunteered to take part in the study. Participants resided in a community of 62,000. They were recruited through public advertisement and by word of mouth. None of the participants were institutionalized.

The sociodemographic profile of the young adults can be described as predominantly single (80%); 18% were married; and 2% were separated. The majority had high school and part university education (80%). Half were full-time students (50%); 42% were gainfully employed.

The majority of the early middle-aged were married (88%); 8% were single; 4% were separated or divorced. Seventy-five percent had achieved high school and part university level education. Eighty-five percent were gainfully employed.

Most of the late middle-aged were married (70%); 12% were divorced; 10% were single; and 8% were widowed. Seventy percent had high school and part university level education. More than one-half were gainfully employed (57%); close to one-third were retired (30%).

Nearly one-half of the young-old were married (48%); approximately one-quarter were widowed (23%); one-eighth were either divorced (12%) or single (13%); and only 3% were separated. Forty-five percent had high school and part university education; one-third had post university education (33%). Eighty-eight percent were retired; only 12% were gainfully employed.

Finally, more than half of the old-old were widowed (55%); one-third were married (33%); 7% were single; and 5% were separated or divorced. About one-third had achieved only the eighth grade (32%); 52% had high school and part university. Ninety-six percent were retired; 4% were still gainfully employed.

Instruments

The Life Attitude Profile (LAP). — The Life Attitude Profile (LAP) is a 46-item 7-point Likert scale consisting of seven factorially derived dimensions (Reker & Peacock, 1981). Life Purpose (LP) is a 9-item measure of zest for life, fulfillment, and satisfaction. LP is internally consistent ($\alpha = .83$) and stable over a 1-month period (test-retest $r = .83$). Items include, "Basically, I am living the kind of life I want to live" and "I have discovered a satisfying life purpose." LP is significantly correlated with internal locus of control, the self-concept, and a positive perception of life at present.

Existential Vacuum (EV) is a 7-item measure of lack of meaning in life, lack of goals, and free-floating anxiety. Coefficient alpha and the test-retest correlation are both .81. Items include, "I feel the lack of and a need to find a real meaning and purpose in my life" and "I daydream of finding a new place for my life and a new identity." EV is significantly correlated with measures of alienation, negative perceptions of life at present, a negative self-concept, and death anxiety.

Life Control (LC) is a 6-item measure of freedom to make all life choices, the exercise of personal responsibility, and the perception of internal control of life events. LC has

satisfactory internal consistency ($\alpha = .67$) and stability (test-retest $r = .61$). Items include, "My life is in my hands and I am in control of it" and "I regard the opportunity to direct my life as very important." LC is strongly correlated with a measure of internal locus of control.

Death Acceptance (DA) is a 6-item measure of absence of fear and anxiety about death. Coefficient alpha is .76; the stability coefficient is .82. Items include, "Some people are very frightened of death but I am not" and "Death makes very little difference to me one way or another." DA is significantly correlated with a semantic differential rating of Death.

Will to Meaning (WM) is a 7-item scale of striving to find concrete meaning in personal existence, a search for ideals and values, and an appreciation of life beyond the present. Coefficient alpha and the stability coefficient are .70 and .71, respectively. Items include, "I think about the ultimate meaning of life" and "A period of personal hardship and suffering can help give a person a better understanding of the real meaning of life." WM is significantly correlated with internal locus of control and the ideal self-concept.

Goal Seeking (GS) is a 6-item measure of the desire to achieve new goals, to search for new and different experiences, and to be on the move. The scale has satisfactory internal consistency ($\alpha = .66$) and stability (test-retest $r = .56$). Items include, "A new challenge in my life would appeal to me now" and "I would enjoy breaking loose from the routine of life." GS is correlated with measures of alienation and future orientation.

Future Meaning (FM) is a 5-item measure of future fulfillment, the acceptance of future potentialities, and positive expectations concerning oneself and one's future life. Internal consistency and stability coefficients are .71 and .67, respectively. Items include, "I am determined to make my future meaningful" and "I feel that the greatest fulfillment of my life is yet in the future." FM correlates positively with semantic differential ratings of life in the future, the self-concept, and the ideal self-concept.

The Perceived Well-Being Scale (PWB). — The PWB is a 14-item 7-point Likert scale of psychological and physical well-being (Reker & Wong, 1984). Psychological well-being is a 6-item measure of the presence of positive emotions such as happiness, joy, and peace of mind and the absence of negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and depression. The alpha coefficient was found to be .82 in a

sample of 238 elderly adults. The test-retest correlation over a 2 year period was .79. Items include, "I feel that life is worth living" and "No one really cares whether I am dead or alive." Psychological well-being is positively correlated with happiness and negatively with depression.

Physical well-being is an 8-item measure of self-rated physical health and vitality coupled with perceived absence of physical discomforts. Internal consistency and 2-year stability estimates are .78 and .65, respectively. Items include, "I am in good shape physically" and "I think my health is deteriorating." Physical well-being is positively correlated with happiness and negatively with depression and physical symptoms.

Procedure

The LAP and the PWB were administered in counterbalanced order in a single session. Participants were approached individually and asked to complete the scales at their convenience. Over 90% of the participants contacted completed the instruments.

The data were analyzed by SPSS multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) and correlational methods. Following significant multivariate effects, the 7 LAP dimensions were analyzed by a stepdown procedure. In the stepdown procedure, the LAP dimension which discriminates the age groups most, as determined by individual tests of significance, was entered first followed by the second most discriminating dimension, and so on. Given that the LAP dimensions are intercorrelated, the stepdown procedure identifies only those dimensions making an independent contribution to the age differentiation. In the final step of the procedure, the means of the LAP dimensions are adjusted by covariance for the effects of previously entered dimensions in the hierarchy. All significant univariate F s were tested for linear trends.

RESULTS

The LAP scores were subjected to a 5 (age) \times 2 (sex) MANOVA. The multivariate main effects of age, multivariate $F(28, 1025) = 7.08, p < .001, \eta^2 = .47$, and sex, multivariate $F(7, 284) = 2.43, p < .05, \eta^2 = .06$, were statistically significant. Adjusted life attitude means are presented in Table 1. The life attitude means for men and women are shown in Figure 1.

Age effect. — As predicted, significant univariate age effects were found for LP, $F(4, 286) = 4.07, p < .01, \eta^2$

Table 1. Adjusted Life Attitude Means, Stepdown F s, and Trend Analyses as a Function of Age

Measures	Age					Stepdown F	Trends	
	16-29	30-49	50-64	65-74	75+		Linear	Quadratic
Goal Seeking	31.7	28.3	28.3	25.8	23.3	18.40***	69.30***	<1.00
Future Meaning	27.0	26.8	25.3	24.9	21.8	10.23***	34.54***	4.13*
Existential Vacuum	26.0	23.4	22.5	22.6	24.3	3.19**	2.19	10.09**
Death Acceptance	23.6	26.8	27.6	28.1	31.6	9.77***	35.63***	<1.00
Life Purpose	43.2	44.6	46.9	46.2	48.4	4.07**	13.61***	<1.00
Life Control	30.5	30.7	29.4	31.8	30.0	1.50	—	—
Will to Meaning	33.2	33.6	35.1	35.4	36.2	2.26	—	—

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

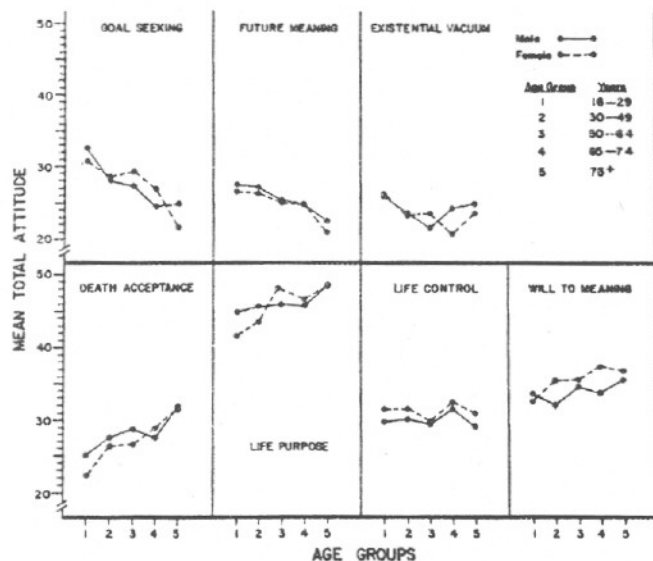


Figure 1. Age and sex differences in the seven dimensions of the Life Attitude Profile (LAP).

= .05, and DA, $F(4, 287) = 9.77, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$. The trends were clearly linear (see Table 1 and Figure 1). A sense of contentment, fulfillment, and satisfaction as measured by LP and the acceptance of death as measured by DA were low during young adulthood, began to level off during early and later middle-age and reached their highest level in old age.

The predicted age-related decreases in GS, $F(4, 290) = 18.40, p < .001, \eta^2 = .20$, and FM, $F(4, 289) = 10.23, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$, were also supported. Strong linear trends were found (see Table 1). Young adulthood is characterized by a high level of goal seeking, followed by a gradual decline spanning early and late middle-age. It is not until the young-old and old-old stages that a marked decrease in goal seeking can be observed. A similar decreasing pattern was found for future meaning.

A significant age effect was also found for EV, $F(4, 288) = 3.19, p < .01, \eta^2 = .04$. However, contrary to the prediction of a linear decrease, EV showed a significant curvilinear relationship with age, resembling a U-shaped function (Table 1). As can be seen in Figure 1, young adults and the old-old are characterized by heightened levels of existential vacuum, whereas the middle-aged, particularly the men, experience the lowest levels.

LC did not show the expected curvilinear relationship with age, nor did it make an independent contribution to the age differentiation. Figure 1 shows that LC is a stable attitude across all ages. Having a sense of one's own responsibility in living is a highly desirable attribute in our culture, and sought after by most people, regardless of their age.

Finally, WM was found to be consistently high across all age groups, as predicted. Given the broad age range sampled in this study, this finding supports Frankl's (1978) view that will to meaning is a primary and universal human motive.

Sex effect. — Significant sex differences were found for LC, $F(1, 285) = 4.00, p < .05, \eta^2 = .01$, and WM, $F(1, 284) = 6.64, p < .01, \eta^2 = .02$. The variance accounted

for, however, was small. Figure 1 reveals that women at all ages viewed life as more under their control ($M = 31.1$) compared with men ($M = 29.8$). Women also expressed a stronger desire to extract meaning out of life ($M = 35.5$) compared with men ($M = 33.9$). It is the early middle-aged and the young-old women, however, who contribute substantially to the sex effect.

Meaning and purpose in life and well-being. — The correlations of life attitudes with perceived well-being for the entire sample and for each developmental stage are shown in Table 2. For the total sample, the life attitudes of FM, LP, and LC were positively related to psychological and physical well-being. A lack of meaning and purpose in life (EV) and the acceptance of death (DA) were associated with perceived mental and physical discomforts. In addition, GS was negatively related to psychological well-being. A high degree of goal striving appeared to detract from one's sense of happiness, joy, and peace of mind.

In general, the pattern of correlations was fairly consistent across the five developmental stages with some minor variation in the magnitude of the relationships. Some developmental differences were evident, however. For example, GS was significantly related to psychological discomfort for the young and early middle-aged groups but not for the late middle-aged and the elderly groups. LC was significantly related to psychological and physical well-being for the young-old and old-old but not for middle-aged and younger adults. DA was significantly related to psychological discomfort for the old-old group only.

DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that several dimensions of life attitudes change over the life course. The direction of change varies in a predictable way. The increasing level of life purpose found in our study is consistent with the findings of Campbell, Converse, and Rogers (1976) that older respondents report higher levels of life satisfaction compared with middle-aged and young respondents.

The increasing acceptance of death by middle-aged and elderly adults is consistent with findings of an inverse relationship between age and fear of death (Kalish, 1976). The greater acceptance of death by the old-old may indicate that these individuals have reconciled their past with their expectations and are prepared to face death (Birren, 1964).

The desire to achieve new goals and the anticipation of a meaningful future were two of the most salient life attitudes to differentiate between developmental stages. Whereas young adults have a strong need to achieve new goals and to look toward future potentialities, elderly people can look back at their past and find meaning in what they have accomplished in life. Fulfilled goals can give the old-old a sense of contentment and the feeling of having achieved a sense of security (Kulys & Tobin, 1980) and integrity (Erikson, 1963).

The unexpected finding of higher levels of existential vacuum among the young and elderly groups, relative to the middle-aged group, requires further explanation. For the young, the uncertainties about one's future and/or the absence of a clear career goal may conspire to foster a sense of

Table 2. Correlations of Life Attitudes with Perceived Well-Being

Well-Being	Life attitudes						
	GS	FM	EV	DA	LP	LC	WM
Total sample (16-93 years)							
Psychological	-.15**	.30***	-.41***	-.15**	.55***	.17**	.07
Physical	.10	.28***	-.19***	-.13*	.27***	.13*	.01
Young adulthood (16-29 years)							
Psychological	-.39**	.34**	-.48***	-.24	.57***	.04	.11
Physical	-.11	.30*	-.41***	.00	.30*	.09	.08
Early middle-age (30-49 years)							
Psychological	-.30*	.24	-.49***	-.06	.52***	.21	-.25*
Physical	-.13	.21	-.18	.01	.30*	.01	-.02
Late middle-age (50-64 years)							
Psychological	-.09	.36**	-.42***	-.19	.59***	-.07	-.02
Physical	.07	-.02	-.21	-.16	.25*	-.12	-.08
Young-old (65-74 years)							
Psychological	.02	.31*	-.38**	-.12	.47***	.51***	.22
Physical	-.06	.22	-.34**	.03	.28*	.32**	.01
Old-old (75-93 years)							
Psychological	.03	.47***	-.14	-.27*	.52***	.31*	.23
Physical	.07	.23	-.14	-.23*	.33**	.31*	.09

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

futility and emptiness. Middle-aged adults, especially men, may feel that they have found their niche in life, or that they "have arrived." The return to increasing levels of existential vacuum among elderly individuals, particularly the men, may be due to role loss, reduction of active participation, and the loss of close friends and relatives. This pattern for EV is strikingly similar to the pattern of suicide rates in North America which are highest in young and elderly adults. Lifton (1979) suggested that suicide is strongly influenced by the lack of meaning and purpose in life. Thus, the LAP may have potential for identification of suicidal individuals.

Sex differences were found for two of the seven LAP dimensions. For LC, women at all ages view life as more under their control than men do. Although research with the locus of control construct has not consistently found sex differences, women may score higher on LC because it primarily measures self-direction and freedom to make life choices (Strickland & Haley, 1980). Alternatively, the sex differences may be the result of a greater tendency of women to respond in a socially desirable manner (Reker & Peacock, 1981).

The sex difference for WM, particularly for the early middle-aged and the young-old groups, is intriguing. The stronger will to meaning in these women may be a consequence of dissatisfaction with the traditional woman's role and reflect an attempt to determine what to do with the rest of their lives (Rubin, 1979). The vacuum created by the "empty nest" may also be an impetus to find meaning in new roles.

Six of seven LAP dimensions are significantly associated with perceived well-being. Meaning and purpose in life are associated with positive feelings of mental and physical

health; lack of meaning and purpose predicts perceived psychological and physical discomforts. Consistent with Shupe's (1985) conclusions regarding the importance of perceived control, we found that having a sense of control of one's life was a strong predictor of psychological and physical well-being, especially for the young-old and old-old. The significant negative correlation of GS and EV with psychological well-being suggests that these dimensions reflect unfulfilled needs which reduce psychological well-being. DA was found to be a significant predictor of well-being, particularly in the old-old. Contrary to Erikson's view that acceptance of death ought to enhance feeling of well-being, high death acceptance is associated with low psychological well-being. Thus, it appears that individuals who are satisfied with life and have a purpose for living are most anxious about giving it up.

The results, based on cross-sectional data, only yield information on age differences, not age changes *per se*. Consequently, observed differences may be due to factors confounded with age. Needed are longitudinal studies that permit direct examination of changes in life attitudes in the same individuals over time. A potential limitation of our study is the lack of information on the physical health status of the participants. We did find, however, that the mean perceived physical well-being scores were consistently high for all age groups (range 37 to 43, out of a possible 56). Thus, although we cannot rule out the influence of physical health status, we remain confident that this factor was minimal. We also were unable to match the age groups on a number of demographic variables. This limits the generalizability of our findings.

An important question not addressed by the present study is the direction of the meaning in life and well-being rela-

tionship. Does a strong sense of meaning and purpose lead to a higher level of well-being, or does a high level of well-being influence one's attitude toward life? Also, there is the possibility of a third unidentified variable influencing both meaning in life and well-being. Prospective panel studies and path analytic methodologies are needed to address these issues.

Finally, the whole issue regarding the effect of meaningfulness (meaninglessness) on existential coping, adjustment processes, and health outcomes remains an uncharted territory awaiting exploration. The present study used subjective measures of well-being. Future studies should use more objective measures of health status to evaluate the impact of meaningfulness (meaninglessness). A further extension of our work might explore the *sources of meaning* for individuals at each developmental stage.

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