

**INDIVIDUAL PERCEPTIONS OF MEANING IN LIFE AND
MEANINGLESSNESS**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

SHIVANI GAITONDE

Submitted to Honors and Undergraduate Research
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as an

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

Approved by
Research Advisor:

Dr. Joshua Hicks

May 2015

Major: Biomedical Sciences

Psychology

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	1
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	2
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION	3
Defining meaning in life	3
Defining meaninglessness.....	4
Differences between meaning and meaninglessness	5
Objectives and hypothesis.....	6
II METHODS	9
Participants	9
Procedure	9
Materials	10
III RESULTS	12
Analysis of questionnaire.....	12
Analysis of essay responses	14
Exploratory findings	17
IV CONCLUSIONS.....	20
Interpretation of themes	20
Thematic similarities and differences	22
Interpreting exploratory correlations	24
Future expansions	27
REFERENCES	29

ABSTRACT

Individual Perceptions of Meaning in Life and Meaninglessness. (May 2015)

Shivani Gaitonde
Department of Psychology
Texas A&M University

Research Advisor: Dr. Joshua Hicks
Department of Psychology

Much research has been conducted to define meaning in life and identify its correlates, but the construct of meaninglessness is not as well understood. Are meaning and meaninglessness perceived as part of the same spectrum? How exactly do individuals define these terms? Thus, the primary purpose of this study is to compare and contrast what people think of and associate with meaning and meaninglessness. Furthermore, we explore the possibility that individuals with similar beliefs and ideas may also perceive meaning in life in a similar way. For this study, participants (n = 209) were administered an online questionnaire composed of items assessing meaning in life, values, religiousness, risk for depression, political ideation, and socioeconomic status. Additionally, participants were given an open-ended prompt to discuss their interpretation of either meaning or meaninglessness. These responses were then coded to find common themes in individual perceptions of meaning and meaninglessness, and these themes were analyzed to find possible correlations with participants' responses on the questionnaire. With these findings, we can better understand the phenomenon of meaninglessness and better help those who experience it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Joshua Hicks for his constant support and assistance in preparing my study and thesis. Additionally, I thank Dr. Hicks' graduate students Billy Davis, who helped me obtain approval for my project, and Jinhyung Kim, who taught me how to use Qualtrics and helped program my survey. Lastly, Amy Arndt and the other research assistants in Dr. Hicks' PSYC 485 lab have helped me analyze findings and code subjects' essay responses.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, man has sought answers to the elusive questions: What is the meaning of life? Why are we here? From the early works of philosophers like Socrates and Aristotle to the existential novels of authors like Albert Camus and Leo Tolstoy, mankind has grappled with this question of meaning. On one hand, man seems to need purpose and meaning to thrive. But if man neither finds this purpose nor recognizes that meaning exists at all, he ultimately creates the crisis of *meaninglessness*.

Defining meaning in life

To better understand what meaninglessness is, it is essential to first define meaning. A well-studied construct in social psychology, *meaning in life* generally describes one's feelings of purpose and importance beyond themselves (Kleiman, 2013). People who believe their life is meaningful tend to relate those beliefs to spirituality and morality, suggesting that spiritual obligations, belief in a higher power and the need to choose right over wrong are all motivations for purposeful, well-intended behavior. There are many correlates to meaning in life, but most importantly, it is strongly associated with overall psychological wellness, happiness, life satisfaction and general positive affect (McMahan, 2011).

Steger (2006) argues that meaning in life involves both the search for and the attainment of meaning. A person who seeks meaning may not have yet found it, while a person who believes they have found meaning may still continue to search for more understanding. Finding meaning

in life is thus a continual process of discovery, in which the journey is as critical as the ultimate goal.

Victor Frankl, one of the eminent psychologists who first inspired research in meaning, believed man is motivated not by innate drives or pleasure principles, but rather by a *will to meaning* (Frankl, 1963). Man is not simply driven to action, as any other animal, but rather, man is capable of striving for meaning and using free-will to achieve a goal (Yalom, 1980). Meaning in life can be established when a person is aware of both the external world and their internal ability to act for a purpose (Steger, 2006). In this way, the individual understands their obligations and comprehends where they fit into their environment and society, providing motivation to achieve personal goals and aspirations.

Defining meaninglessness

Irvin Yalom, Viktor Frankl and Salvatore Maddi were some of the first to discuss the crisis of meaninglessness, defining it as an *existential neurosis* or *sickness*. According to Benjamin Wolman, meaninglessness is “a failure to find meaning in life; a feeling that one has nothing to live for, nothing to struggle for, nothing to hope for... unable to find any goal of direction in life, the feeling that though individuals perspire in their works, they have nothing to aspire to” (Yalom, 1980). Meaninglessness arises from the existential belief that the world has no meaning, indifferent and lacking any divine plan. In contrast to meaning, meaninglessness is associated with suicide and negative perception of life (Van Tongeren & Green, 2010).

Salvatore Maddi (1967) extensively characterized the *existential neurosis* or *sickness*, or crisis of meaninglessness, using the same diagnostic model as any other clinical psychological illness. Cognitively, meaninglessness involves an inability to find truth, interest or purpose in life. A person experiencing meaninglessness shows symptoms of boredom, depression and listlessness, and a marked indifference and apathy towards any decision.

Differences between meaning and meaninglessness

While meaning in life has been more extensively studied, research in meaninglessness is still in its infancy. Often, studies concerning meaninglessness simply use scales for meaning and reverse-code the results, making the assumption that the two constructs are opposites. Though it is simpler to conceptualize meaninglessness as merely the absence of meaning, current literature suggests the two could be separate ideas. A person who feels his or her life lacks meaning may not necessarily feel that his or her life is meaningless. Rather than perceiving meaning and meaninglessness as two extremes on a single spectrum, it would be more accurate to describe them as related but not antonymous. In other words, a meaningful life may equate to finding purpose, fulfillment and coherence, whereas a meaningless life would not only lack purpose, fulfillment and coherence, but also go a step beyond and expand into different dimensions.

In order to tease apart the differences between meaning and meaninglessness, it is necessary to identify exactly which motifs are characteristic of each. Blocker (1974) proposed that meaninglessness arises from the unsuccessful search to find meaning, suggesting there is overlap between the two constructs. For example, the belief that one's life has purpose or significance is correlated to meaningfulness, whilst the belief that one's life has no purpose or is insignificant is

correlated to meaninglessness. On the other hand, though meaning is correlated to spirituality, happiness, and general positive well-being, it is uncertain that meaninglessness is directly associated with the absence of any of these. Instead, meaninglessness is thought to be more strongly associated to depression, existentialism and suicidal tendencies, beyond simple absence of meaning (Kinnier, Metha, & Keim, et. al, 1994).

Objectives and hypothesis

Content analysis of individual essay responses

Because the idea that meaning and meaninglessness are distinct still lacks empirical support, the goal of this study is to gain further insight into how both these constructs are perceived. Do individuals conceptualize meaning and meaninglessness in the same way that literature defines them, or is there a discrepancy between the learned and layman's definition? Thus the primary objective of this study is to explore the differences and similarities in how people personally interpret meaning and meaninglessness. By presenting participants with open-ended essay prompts that reveal how participants interpret meaning or meaninglessness, essay responses can be subsequently coded for commonly used words or themes. Text analysis software, such as the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) program, can aid in coding the essay responses and determining which aspects of meaning and meaninglessness overlap and which aspects are unique.

The process of *content analysis* focuses on analyzing and objectively identifying common themes throughout a number of related essay responses (Smith, Reis, & Judd, 2000). Both the verbal material of a response, such as word choice used and specific constructs mentioned, and

the nonverbal material, such as point-of-view, length of sentences and overall response, can provide insightful information. Coders can then interpret these findings and quantify the similarities and differences between related essay responses. The reasoning behind the use of essays and essay-coding methods is that participants are not constrained by closed-ended questions or primed to respond in a certain way. In addition, word choice, essay length and recurring motifs in an open-ended response reveal more about a person's views than a simple scale or questionnaire can. By developing a detailed coding protocol and using quantitative findings, we can more reliably ascertain commonalities and differences between participants' views of meaning and meaninglessness.

For this portion of the study, we hypothesize that individuals perceive meaning and meaninglessness as distinct constructs, characterized by different dimensions. In terms of coded essay responses, we predict that participants' word choice and associations in describing meaning are distinctly different from those describing meaninglessness.

Exploration of correlates

A secondary, strictly exploratory aim of this study is to see if a relationship exists between an individual's beliefs and his or her perception of meaning and meaninglessness. Much is known about the factors correlated with how meaningful or meaningless one's life is, but this portion of the study focuses more on the correlates for how individuals think and their *perceived* definition of these constructs. Using a questionnaire of items from scales for meaning in life, depression, religion and spirituality, political ideology and values, we can potentially examine how these factors might influence an individual's interpretation of meaning and meaninglessness, and

whether individuals with similar beliefs may also have similar conceptions of the two constructs. In addition, the inclusion of face-valid items, which assess participants' perceptions of meaning and meaninglessness, can serve as a reliability measure for the earlier essay portion of the study. While findings from this portion of the study will be interpreted cautiously, any potential correlations found could provide interesting insight into why the definitions of meaning and meaninglessness are so wide-ranging, and more generally, how individuals' experiences and beliefs influence the way they think.

CHAPTER II

METHODS

Participants

Participants in this study were between 18-67 years of age ($M = 35.84$, $SD = 11.514$). 209 participants, 45% female and 55% male, completed the study. The participants identified as: 79.4% White or Caucasian, 6.7% Black or African-American, 5.3% Asian, 1.9% American Indian, and 6.7% other.

Procedure

Surveys were developed electronically using the Qualtrics testing program and distributed online via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) database. Each questionnaire was composed of scales or items assessing the following: meaning in life, risk for depression, religiousness, values, political ideation and socioeconomic status. In addition to the previous items, participants were also prompted to write an essay response describing their perception of either a meaningful or meaningless life. The essay portion of the study was between-subjects design in which participants were randomly assigned to respond to either the "meaningful" or "meaningless" prompt, not both. This design was deemed most appropriate because participants' descriptions of either meaning or meaninglessness would not be influenced by being asked about the other. Each trial was approximately 30 minutes, and participants were compensated \$1 following completion of the survey.

Specifically, participants were presented with the following open-ended essay prompt to complete in their own words: “If someone says his or her life is [meaningless/meaningful], what does that person mean? Describe that person’s feelings, thoughts, behaviors, etc. as a result of his or her life being [meaningless/meaningful]. Be as specific as possible and use your own experiences.” To code essay responses, the researchers initially looked over every essay to find common themes and recurring word choice. Finally, research assistants, who were unaware of the full purpose of the study, were tasked with assigning a value of “1” to every response in which a specific theme or phrase was mentioned, allowing each response to be quantified.

Materials

Items from various scales were combined to produce the questionnaire portion of the study. Meaning in life was assessed with the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ, Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), which has two subscales. The Presence of Meaning subscale, which looked at how meaningful participants felt their lives were, and the Search for Meaning subscale, which described how actively participants searched for meaning, were assessed with items ranked from 1 (Absolutely Untrue) to 7 (Absolutely True). The Personality Assessment Inventory (PAI, Morey & Boggs, 1991) was used to measure risk for depression and diagnosable psychiatric disorders and is divided into Affect, Cognitive, and Physical subscores.

The Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI-10; Worthington et al., 2003) was used to determine religiousness and spirituality of participants. Items were again rated on a seven-point scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree), with higher scores related to higher levels of spirituality. Face-valid items assessing participants’ self-ratings of religiousness were also used.

The Schwartz Value scale (Schwartz, 2003) was used to assess values of importance to each participant. The values include: power, achievement, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, security, openness, self-transcendence and conservatism. Items were rated on a nine-point scale, from -1 (Opposed to my values) to 0 (Not important), to 7 (Supreme importance). Political ideation was measured with three face-valid items and scored from 1 (very liberal) to 7 (very conservative). Socioeconomic status was assessed with one face-valid item (i.e. "What is your net income?").

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Analysis of questionnaire

Initial examination of the questionnaire portion of the study indicated that of 251 participants who began the study, only 209 completed it in its entirety. Descriptive statistics of each of the scales in the questionnaire are summarized below in *Table 1, 2, 3 and 4.*

Table 1. Summary of Schwartz values scale

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Power	215	-1.00	7.00	2.4899	1.74721
Achievement	215	1.25	7.00	4.4791	1.35348
Stimulation	215	.00	7.00	3.7597	1.77751
Self-Direction	215	1.40	7.00	5.2028	1.26128
Universalism	215	.75	7.00	4.7909	1.38361
Benevolence	215	2.00	7.00	5.2595	1.16771
Tradition	215	-.40	7.00	3.6777	1.49115
Conformity	215	1.00	7.00	4.4593	1.45747
Security	215	.60	7.00	4.3467	1.29561
Openness	215	.90	7.00	4.4812	1.35317
Self-Transcendence	215	1.94	7.00	5.0252	1.15548
Conservatism	215	.87	7.00	4.1612	1.26486

Table 2. Summary of religious commitment and meaning in life scales

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Religious commitment	213	1.00	5.00	2.0371	1.25941
Meaning in Life- Presence	251	1.00	7.00	4.7036	1.53553
Meaning in Life- Search	251	1.00	7.00	4.2112	1.55575

Table 3. Summary of political ideation scales

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Political orientation	209	1	7	3.51	1.690
Political party preference	209	1	7	3.56	1.770

Table 4. Annual net income distribution

	Frequency	Percent
Less than \$20,000	39	18.7
\$20,000 to \$34,999	42	20.1
\$35,000 to \$49,999	34	16.3
\$50,000 to \$74,999	46	22.0
\$75,000 to \$99,999	28	13.4
\$100,000 to \$149,999	16	7.7
\$150,000 or More	4	1.9

The participants' demographic breakdown is summarized in Figure 1.

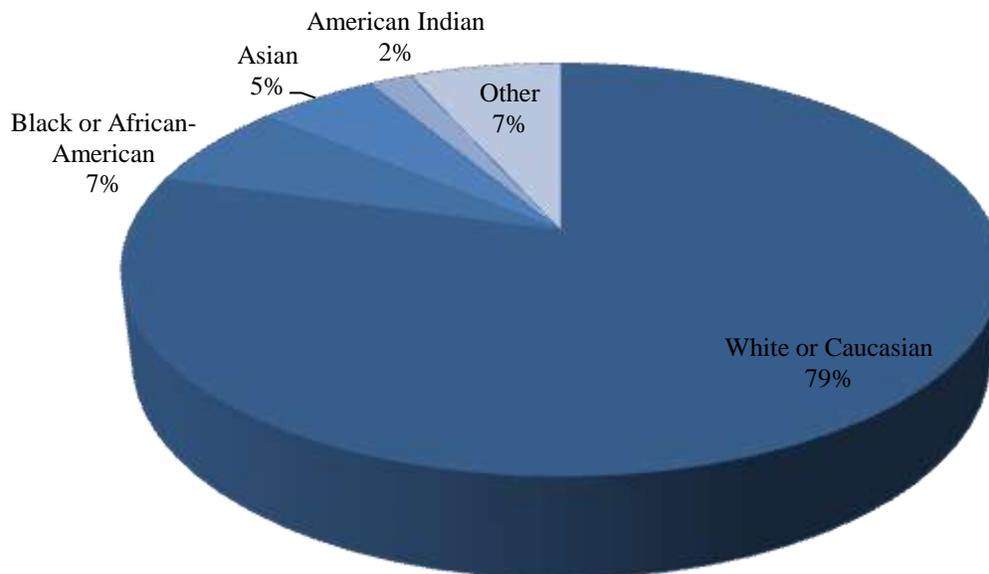


Figure 1. Distribution of ethnicities in participant sample.

Analysis of essay responses

The analysis of the free response portion of the study required use of SPSS software. Essay responses were first sorted by construct into the “meaningful” group and “meaningless” group, depending on what prompt they were asked to respond to. Responses in which participants mistakenly answered the opposite prompt (e.g., described meaning when they were asked about meaninglessness or vice versa) or did not answer a prompt at all (e.g., left item blank or responded with random letters) were thrown out.

Next, every essay in both groups was briefly examined to identify recurring themes and motifs associated with either meaning or meaninglessness. Once a list of the most common themes was prepared as a guide for interpretation, each essay response was read again more carefully with

these themes in mind. Each theme present received a value of “1” and each absent theme received a value of “0”. Multiple raters were used to ensure reliability and following the initial coding process, the researcher reviewed all essay responses to make certain that coding was consistent.

Finally, any new motifs noticed that did not fit into the original guide list were described in an “Other” section. The frequency of occurrence of every theme, including those described in the “Other” section, was measured. Any theme present in at least 10% of the responses was made into a major category and themes present in fewer than 10% of the responses were included in the “Other” category. For the “meaningful” prompt, the final list of most commonly mentioned motifs were: Goals/ Purpose, Happiness/ Satisfaction, Close relationships, Significance of self and one’s actions, Positive achievements/ Self-betterment, Beliefs/ Devotion, and Unique for everyone. Figure 2 and Table 5 describe the frequency of each of these themes.

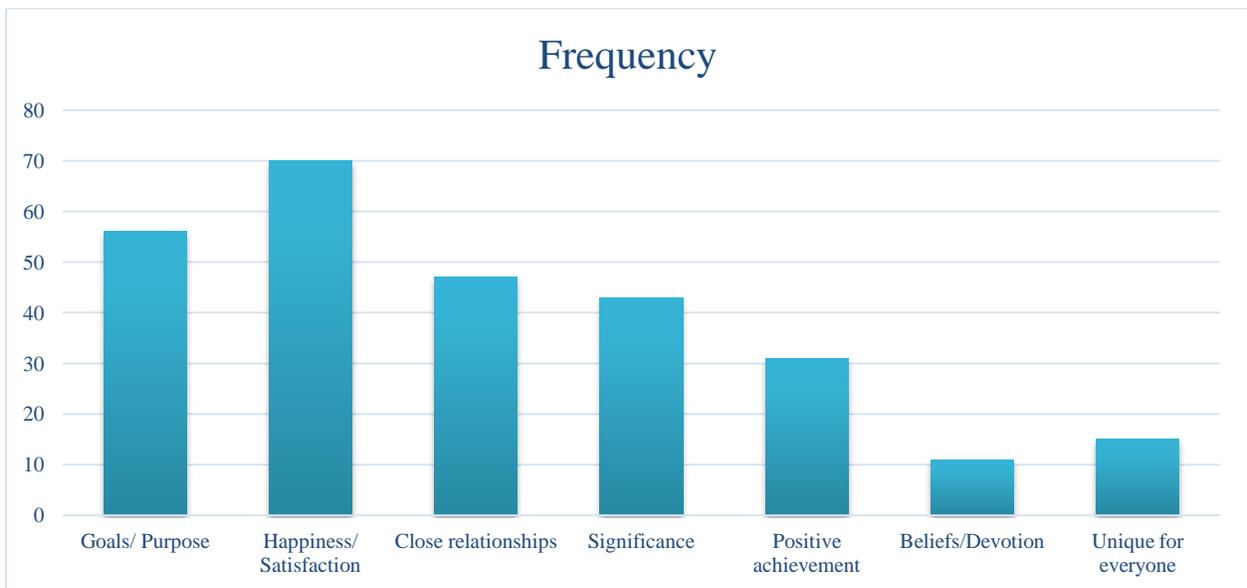


Figure 2. Frequency histogram of themes mentioned for the “meaningful” prompt group.

Table 5. Themes for “meaningful” prompt group and percentage of responses in which theme was mentioned

Theme	Percent of Responses Mentioned
Goals/ Purpose	56%
Happiness/ Satisfaction	70%
Close relationships	47%
Significance of self and one’s actions	43%
Positive achievements	31%
Beliefs/ Devotion	11%
Unique for everyone	15%

For the "meaningless" prompt, the most commonly mentioned motifs were: Lack of Goals/ Purpose, Unhappiness, Lack of Close Relationships, Unimportance, Depression/ Negativity, Confusion, and Apathy/ Routine. Figure 3 and Table 6 depict the percentage of time these themes were mentioned.

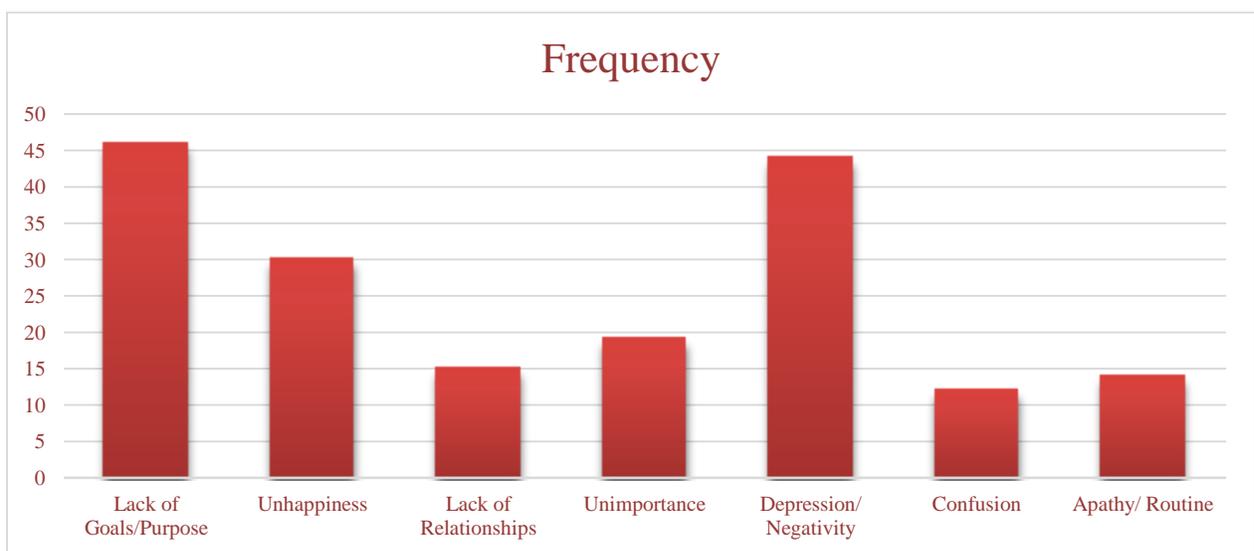


Figure 3. Frequency histogram of themes mentioned for the “meaningless” prompt group.

Table 6. Themes for “meaningless” prompt group and percentage of responses in which theme was mentioned

Theme	Percent of Responses Mentioned
Lack of Goals/ Purpose	46%
Unhappiness	30%
Lack of Close relationships	15%
Unimportance	19%
Depression/ Negativity	44%
Confusion	11%
Apathy/ Routine	14%

Exploratory findings

The secondary aim of this study was to analyze how a participant’s personality traits and beliefs might influence the themes they associate with either meaning or meaninglessness. Bivariate correlations were calculated to determine if participants who shared common traits were more likely to use the same word choice and motifs in their essay responses. The traits considered were those assessed in the questionnaire portion of the study, including: age, gender, income, political ideation, self-reported religiousness, RCI scores, MLQ presence and search scores, Schwartz values scores, and PAI scores. Table 7 and 8 summarize the Pearson correlation r values calculated for the themes associated with meaning and meaninglessness, respectively. The correlations significant at $p < 0.05$ or lower have been noted for emphasis.

Table 7. Bivariate correlations between themes associated with “meaning” and individuals’ personality traits

	<i>Goals/ Purpose</i>	<i>Happiness/ Satisfaction</i>	<i>Close relationships</i>	<i>Significance of self and actions</i>	<i>Positive Achievement</i>	<i>Beliefs/ Devotion</i>	<i>Unique for everyone</i>
<i>Age</i>	-.247	-.014	.146	-.017	.030	.159	-.031
<i>Gender</i>	.080	.088	.199	.098	.188	-.153	-.075
<i>Income</i>	.187	.103	.018	-.039	.104	.042	.189
<i>Political ideation</i>	-.113	-.034	-.130	-.206	-.055	.098	.074
<i>Religiousness</i>	.072	.274	-.230	-.136	.019	.067	-.098
<i>Theist vs Atheist</i>	.078	.330	-.104	-.143	-.031	-.097	-.162
<i>RCI</i>	.035	.172	-.248	-.179	-.006	-.035	-.117
<i>MLQ (presence)</i>	.142	.114	.007	-.104	.122	.078	-.045
<i>MLQ (search)</i>	-.143	.178	.062	.130	-.022	-.174	-.104
<i>Power</i>	.117	-.014	-.102	-.231	-.078	-.018	-.040
<i>Achievement</i>	.110	.037	-.082	-.153	.062	.097	-.040
<i>Stimulation</i>	.137	-.065	-.060	-.123	.111	.032	.032
<i>Self-Direction</i>	.196	-.025	.013	-.015	.244	-.010	.077
<i>Universalism</i>	.260	-.056	.033	.145	.216	.030	.066
<i>Benevolence</i>	.145	.023	.008	-.043	.148	.025	.046
<i>Tradition</i>	.043	.145	-.145	-.218	-.090	.107	-.172
<i>Conformity</i>	.061	.043	-.107	-.220	.088	.118	-.116
<i>Security</i>	.109	.054	.071	-.111	.054	.042	-.023
<i>Openness</i>	.181	-.055	-.035	-.090	.184	.018	.057
<i>Self- Transcendence</i>	.229	-.022	.024	.065	.204	.031	.063
<i>Conservatism</i>	.078	.091	-.074	-.208	.017	.101	-.120
<i>Depression (affect)</i>	-.250	-.059	-.108	-.025	-.161	-.078	-.028
<i>Depression (cognitive)</i>	-.202	-.085	-.148	-.016	-.225	-.085	-.038
<i>Depression (physical)</i>	-.160	-.027	-.105	-.130	-.244	-.023	.030
<i>Depression (total)</i>	-.221	-.063	-.130	-.057	-.223	-.069	-.015

Table 8. Bivariate correlations between themes associated with “meaninglessness” and individuals personality traits

	<i>Lack of Goals/ Purpose</i>	<i>Unhappiness</i>	<i>Lack of Close relationships</i>	<i>Unimportance</i>	<i>Depression/ Negativity</i>	<i>Confusion</i>	<i>Apathy/ Routine</i>
<i>Age</i>	-.098	-.062	-.061	-.049	-.017	-.039	.038
<i>Gender</i>	-.056	.038	.170	.143	.096	-.031	.083
<i>Income</i>	-.164	-.026	.176	.190	.064	.160	.010
<i>Religiousness</i>	-.178	.045	.083	.009	-.100	.091	.085
<i>Theist vs Atheist</i>	-.045	-.013	-.014	-.060	-.097	.170	.141
<i>RCI</i>	-.191	-.022	.067	-.045	-.195	.282	.020
<i>Political ideation</i>	-.084	-.015	.007	-.019	-.213	-.113	-.104
<i>MLQ (presence)</i>	-.041	.074	-.042	-.109	-.053	.254	.064
<i>MLQ (search)</i>	-.052	-.032	-.028	.076	.170	-.024	-.001
<i>Power</i>	-.046	-.143	-.037	-.066	-.167	-.003	-.047
<i>Achievement</i>	.056	-.068	.009	.000	-.001	.193	.021
<i>Stimulation</i>	-.020	-.037	-.122	.028	-.062	.167	.009
<i>Self-Direction</i>	.100	-.048	-.046	.013	.094	.128	.053
<i>Universalism</i>	-.075	.047	.013	.044	.180	.197	.172
<i>Benevolence</i>	.129	.006	.092	-.022	.187	.171	.061
<i>Tradition</i>	-.174	-.125	-.027	.186	-.137	-.004	-.071
<i>Conformity</i>	-.007	.036	-.087	-.160	-.001	.261	.035
<i>Security</i>	-.157	-.115	-.106	-.005	-.038	.317	.088
<i>Openness</i>	.034	-.046	-.100	.024	.004	.168	.030
<i>Self-Transcendence</i>	.019	.032	.053	.016	.203	.205	.135
<i>Conservatism</i>	-.125	-.075	-.080	-.064	-.068	.281	.015
<i>Depression (affect)</i>	-.056	-.120	.020	-.115	.096	-.170	-.139
<i>Depression (cognitive)</i>	-.018	-.065	.006	-.111	.088	-.203	-.144
<i>Depression (physical)</i>	-.137	-.129	.079	-.089	.132	-.261	-.118
<i>Depression (total)</i>	-.074	-.113	.036	-.114	.112	-.225	-.144

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

The primary purpose of this study was to understand how individuals conceptualize the constructs of meaning and meaninglessness, and to define the themes and motifs that individuals most closely associate with each. By using content analysis to quantify participants' essay responses, the frequency of usage of each "meaningful" theme could be measured and compared to that of each "meaningless" theme. Further examination of the data can help us answer the question: Are meaning and meaninglessness opposite ends of a spectrum, or are they separate constructs entirely?

Interpretation of themes

Before the themes associated with meaning and meaninglessness can be compared, they must be clearly defined and described. Because the length, ideas and diction of each essay response varied widely, the researchers developed a strict protocol for determining whether a theme was present or not. Table 9 and 10 summarize how broadly each theme was defined and key phrases indicative of each.

Table 9. Themes for "meaning" defined by key words

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Defined as "Present" if response includes key words such as:</i>
<i>Goals/ Purpose</i>	Goals, purpose, reason for [getting out of bed/living/etc.], work, job, calling
<i>Happiness/ Satisfaction</i>	Happy/happiness, at peace, content, satisfied, enjoying/enjoyment, full life, pleasure
<i>Close Relationships</i>	Relationships, Friends/friendship, family, mother/father, children, love/kindness to others
<i>Significance of self and</i>	Feelings of importance/significance/value/self-worth/confidence,

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Defined as “Present” if response includes key words such as:</i>
<i>one’s actions</i>	actions have larger impact on [others/future/universe/etc.]
<i>Positive Achievement/ Self-betterment</i>	Achievement, positive impact on others/world, betterment of self/world, good intentions, active, striving
<i>Beliefs/ Devotion</i>	Beliefs/belief system, devotion, religion, spirituality, greater power, guiding ethical/moral code
<i>Unique for everyone</i>	Unique, depends on experience/individual, many ways to find meaning

Table 10. Themes for “meaninglessness” defined by key words

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Defined as “Present” if response includes key words such as:</i>
<i>Lack of Goals/ Purpose</i>	No goals, no purpose, no reason for [getting out of bed/living/etc.], lack direction/motivation
<i>Unhappiness</i>	Unhappy, sadness, discontent, loneliness, feeling unfulfilled/empty/dissatisfied, lacking pleasure/joy
<i>Lack of Close Relationships</i>	No friendships, no family, poor relations with others, isolated/alone/disconnected
<i>Unimportance</i>	Feelings of unimportance/insignificance, actions have no effect on [others/future/universe]
<i>Depression/ Negativity</i>	Depression, negativity/pessimism, negative self-opinion, low self-esteem/self-worth, hate their [life/job/etc.]
<i>Confusion</i>	Misunderstood, confused, don’t know what to [do/feel/think]
<i>Apathy/ Routine</i>	Apathy, stuck in routine/rut, boredom, don’t care, just exist

The most frequently mentioned themes in individuals’ responses regarding meaning (see Figure 2 in the previous chapter) were Happiness/ Satisfaction (70% of responses), Goals/ Purpose (56% of responses) and Close Relationships (47% of responses). Likewise, the most frequently associated themes for meaninglessness (see Figure 3 in the previous chapter) were Lack of Goals/ Purpose (46%), Depression/ Negativity (44%) and Unhappiness (30%). Understanding the frequency distribution for the themes related to either construct helps in determining exactly how meaning and meaninglessness are conceptualized. For example, since 70% of participants

associated a meaningful life with Happiness/ Satisfaction while only 11% mentioned Beliefs/ Devotion, the former is probably a more central, universal aspect of meaning.

Thematic similarities and differences

When the major themes associated with meaning and meaninglessness are compared, both similarities and differences are immediately obvious, as seen below in Table 11.

Table 11. Compare and contrast themes associated with “Meaning” and “Meaninglessness”

	<i>Meaning</i>	<i>Meaninglessness</i>
<i>Similar Themes</i>	Goals/ Purpose	Lack of Goals/ Purpose
	Happiness/ Satisfaction	Unhappiness
	Close Relationships	Lack of relationships
	Significance of self and one’s actions	Unimportance
<i>Unique Themes</i>	Positive Achievement/ Self-betterment	Depression/ Negativity
	Beliefs/ Devotion	Confusion
	Unique for everyone	Apathy

Four of the themes related to meaning have a matching counterpart related to meaninglessness – “Goals/ Purpose” versus “Lack of Goals/ Purpose”, “Happiness/ Satisfaction” versus “Unhappiness”, “Close Relationships” versus “Lack of Relationships”, and “Significance” versus “Unimportance”. The fact that these thematic pairs are almost exact opposites suggests some overlap in how these constructs are conceptualized. Thus, there is some merit to the theory

that meaning and meaninglessness are opposite ends of a spectrum, defined by varying levels of a common set of themes.

However, the remaining themes found for meaning had no matching counterpart related to meaninglessness, and vice versa. While participants associated a meaningful life with positive achievements and spiritual beliefs, they did not describe a meaningless life in terms of failure and atheism or lack of beliefs. Interestingly, even though meaning was frequently described by participants as being uniquely derived from every individual's own experiences, the same was not true of meaninglessness. This suggests that while people believe there are many unique sources of meaning, the experience of meaninglessness is less unique, less variable between individuals.

One caveat to note is that some errors could have arisen due to a skewed sample. Because the sample of participants obtained from Amazon's Mechanical Turk was not proportionately divided by income level or ethnicity, the results could be less relevant to the general population. Ultimately, the set of participants from the MTurk database was still the most representative and appropriate sample possible, since meaning and meaninglessness, the focus of this study, are constructs that the average person may not think about.

In addition, the depth and length of each response varied widely. Although participants were prompted to explain their ideas as fully as possible, another unforeseen problem was that several responses were fewer than 20 words and thus limited in themes mentioned. This could impact the validity of our findings as it is impossible to know exactly why some individuals wrote much

shorter responses than others; perhaps, these participants wanted to complete the survey faster, or perhaps they actually did not have other novel ideas to add. Participants also did not know the purpose of this study, so they may have refrained from mentioning different but related themes in their responses to preclude appearing redundant.

Interpreting exploratory correlations

The secondary aim of this study was to determine if there were any correlations between an individual's personality traits and how they perceived meaning or meaninglessness. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated between the participants' traits, such as age, income and meaning in life scores, and the phrases they used to describe either meaning or meaninglessness. As a preface to this discussion, it is important to remember that these correlations are still exploratory. Even those significant at the $p < 0.001$ level may not be authentic, while those that are not technically significant are in fact authentic. Some phrases were mentioned in fewer than 20% of responses, which resulted in a relatively small sample size and a greater likelihood of errors in calculating correlation coefficients. Given these potential sources of error, both the strength and the reasonableness of the correlations will be considered.

Correlates for meaning

After calculating Pearson's correlation coefficients between the seven major motifs related to meaning and individuals' personality traits, a few significant correlations were discovered. First, participants who were older were less likely to associate goals and purpose with a meaningful life, ($r = -.247$). One possible explanation for this is that older individuals have fulfilled many of their life goals already, such as having a family or establishing a career, so they now find

meaning from other sources. In addition, individuals who prized certain values, such as self-direction ($r = .196$), universalism ($r = .260$), and self-transcendence ($r = .229$), were more likely to associate goals and purpose with meaning, perhaps because these values emphasize striving beyond oneself and working towards the good of all. Participants who exhibited a higher risk for depression on all subscales of the PAI were less likely to mention goals and purpose, (Affect: $r = -.250$; Cognitive: $r = -.202$; Overall: $r = -.221$). Similarly, these same participants were also less likely to associate meaning with achievement of those goals or self-betterment, (Cognitive: $r = -.225$; Physical: $r = -.244$; Overall: $r = -.225$).

Participants who rated themselves as highly religious ($r = .274$) or theist ($r = .330$) were more likely to mention happiness as an element of a meaningful life. This could suggest that such individuals find religion and spirituality a source of both meaning and happiness. Interestingly, people who were more religious ($r = -.230$) or scored highly on the RCI ($r = -.248$) were less likely to describe close relationships with others as an aspect of meaning. Perhaps since many religious belief systems focus on a relationship with God or a divine figure, relationships with other people are not seen as central an aspect of meaning. On the other hand, women were more likely than men to associate close relationships with meaning ($r = .199$), which seems intuitive based on traditional female stereotypes.

People who rated themselves as more politically conservative ($r = -.206$) or showed a preference for conservative values like power ($r = -.231$), tradition ($r = -.218$), and conformity ($r = -.220$) were less likely to describe significance of oneself and one's actions as an essential element of meaning. Meanwhile, individuals who show preference for values that challenge conformity,

such as self-direction ($r = .244$), universalism ($r = .216$), and self-transcendence ($r = .204$), are more likely to describe positive achievements and self-betterment as a major aspect of meaning. Comparing these findings, it seems that people who favor conformity and traditionalism are more likely to associate a meaningful life with those same behaviors, including fitting in with the status quo, and those who favor self-transcendence and growing beyond oneself associate a meaningful life with achievement-centered behavior.

Correlates for meaninglessness

Examination of the Pearson's correlation coefficients between the major constructs related to meaninglessness and individuals' personality traits revealed some significant relationships as well. First, individuals who scored highly on the RCI were less likely to mention a lack of goals or purpose ($r = -.191$) or depressions and negative self-outlook ($r = -.195$) when describing a meaningless life. On a related note, people who rated themselves as more conservative were also less likely to associate depression and negativity with meaninglessness ($r = -.213$). While it is not immediately evident why these correlations might exist, it is clear that the two themes, Lack of Goals/ Purpose and Depression/ Negativity, are related.

The most highly correlated theme was Confusion. Individuals who favored values such as achievement ($r = .193$), universalism ($r = .197$), conformity ($r = .261$), security ($r = .317$), self-transcendence ($r = .205$), and conservatism ($r = .281$) were more likely to associate meaninglessness with confusion. Additionally, participants who were more religious were more likely to associate meaninglessness with confusion, ($r = .282$). The same was true for participants who described their own life as meaningful, ($r = .254$). One speculative explanation

is that people who turn to religion or strongly believe in the aforementioned values are more likely to seek concrete, definite answers. Hence, they would associate meaninglessness to confusion, an absence of that certainty. Inversely, participants who showed higher risk for depression on the PAI were less likely to relate meaninglessness with feelings of confusion or not knowing, (Cognitive: $r = -.203$; Physical: $r = -.261$; Overall: $r = -.225$). People who have a high risk for depression, a type of mental and emotional confusion itself, may not necessarily feel their own life is meaningless and are thus less likely to associate the two constructs.

Furthermore, participants who were more likely to mention unimportance or insignificance in their responses were also more likely to have a higher income ($r = .190$) and value tradition ($r = .186$). Compared to individuals with little material wealth, people with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to feel that not making a significant impact on or contribution to the world is undesirable. Finally, individuals who strongly preferred the value of self-transcendence were more likely to describe meaninglessness with depression and negative self-outlook ($r = .203$). Since depression is essentially an inability to transcend oneself due to mental illness, it is logical that these participants would associate such an inability with meaninglessness.

Future expansion

Because there are some sources of error stemming from a sample that was not perfectly representative of the population, the exploratory portions of this study still need further support. We can conclusively say that an individual's traits have some influence over the ways that he or she conceptualizes meaning and meaninglessness, and we have a better idea of the central thematic elements of each construct. However it is still unclear exactly what traits are the most

predictive, which themes are the most highly correlated and how strong these correlations are. With a larger sample, perhaps identifying the major themes associated with meaning and meaninglessness will be easier and the findings more externally valid.

Looking back at the findings of this study, it can be concluded that meaning and meaninglessness are related constructs but they are not simply opposite ends of a spectrum. The hypothesis was partially correct, since there is a good deal of overlap between the two, but there are also elements unique to each. Because individuals actually conceptualize the two constructs in different terms and do not think of them as simple opposites, it is important that this distinction is applied to future meaning in life research. One direct application of this research is the development of scales specific to the construct of meaninglessness, rather than perpetuating the erroneous assumption that low meaning in life scores are equivalent to high meaninglessness scores. Ultimately, understanding how people think of meaninglessness can help us understand exactly how to help individuals that experience this crisis.

REFERENCES

- Blocker, G. (1974). The meaning of meaninglessness. *Springer Netherlands*.
- Frankl, V. E. (1985). Man's search for meaning. *Simon and Schuster*.
- Heine, S. J., Proulx, T., & Vohs, K. D. (2006). The meaning maintenance model: On the coherence of social motivations. *Personality and Social Psychology*, 10(2), 88-110.
- Kinnier, R. T., Metha, T., Keim, J. S., Okey, J. L., et al. (1994). Depression, meaninglessness, and substance abuse in "normal" and hospitalized adolescents. *Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education*, 39(2), 101-111.
- Kleiman, E. M. (2013). A meaningful life is worth living: Meaning in life as a suicide resiliency factor. *Psychiatry Research*, 210(3), 934-939.
- MacDonald, D. A. (2000). Spirituality: Description, measurement, and relation to the five factor model of personality. *Journal of Personality*, 68(1), 153-197.
- McMahan, E. A., & Renken, M. D. (2011). Eudaimonic conceptions of well-being, meaning in life, and self-reported well-being: Initial test of a meditational model. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 51(5), 589-594.
- Maddi, S. R. (1967). The existential neurosis. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 72.4, 311.
- Morey, L. C., & Boggs, C. (1991). *Personality assessment inventory (PAI)*. PAR.
- Schwartz, S. H. (2003). A proposal for measuring value orientations across nations. *Questionnaire Package of the European Social Survey*, 259-290.
- Smith, C. P., Reis, H. T., Judd, C. E. (2000). Handbook of research methods in social and personality psychology. *Cambridge University Press*.

- Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M. (2006). The meaning in life questionnaire: Assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life. *Journal of counseling psychology*, 53(1), 80.
- Steger, M. F. (2006). Making meaning in life. *Psychological Inquiry*, 23, 381-385.
- Steger, M. F., Hicks, B. M., Krueger, R. F., & Bouchard, T. V. Jr. (2011). Genetic and environmental influences and covariance among meaning in life and spirituality. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 6, 181-191.
- Worthington, E. L., Wade, N. G., Hight, T. L., Ripley, J. S., McCullough, M. E., Berry, J. W., ... & O'Connor, L. (2003). The Religious Commitment Inventory--10: Development, refinement, and validation of a brief scale for research and counseling. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 50(1), 84.
- Yalom, I. D. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy*. Basic Books.