

Understanding of Purposefulness and Meaning in Life in Collectivistic Culture of Pakistan: A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract

In conjunction with the growth of Positive psychology, attention to study purposefulness and meaning in life has increased over the past years. However, the ambiguity in existing definitions of purposefulness and meaning in life have prompted current study authors to look into it. The psychological phenomena of purposefulness and meaning in life are grounded on Western perspective. There is a need to explore Islamic perceptives. To get the knowledge about the purposefulness and meaning in life, opinions of young adults aged 19 – 25 ($M = 22.30$, $SD = 1.34$) years were sought. Focus group discussions were utilized to gain insight into what purposefulness and meaning in life are in collectivistic culture of Pakistan. The answers were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis approach. Similar content was observed throughout the definitions of purpose in life and meaning in life. The major components stressed upon were religion, career, education and relationships as purpose in life and to pursue them also contribute to meaning in life. Moreover, participants who talked about purpose in life also explained meaning in life lucidly, suggested the subtle differentiation between them. These findings can direct the further studies and the development of positive interventions based on purpose in life and meaning in life in future.

Keywords: *meaning in life purposefulness, definitional issues, young adults*

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Received:
12-09-2022
Revision Received:
13-12-2022
Accepted:
22-12-2022

Introduction and Literature Review

Viewpoints on purpose and meaning in life have been transformed. The nature of these constructs have shifted from philosophical to the functional in everyday lives of young adults. Until recently, there was greater inclination towards factual concepts and lesser inclination towards feelings and subjective experiences of the purpose and meaning in life. Consequently, the difference between these terms was mostly ignored till the recent past by the social scientists that were more concerned with experimental studies. Another reason for neglecting the difference between concepts of ‘meaning in life’ and ‘purposefulness’ was that they were considered beyond the reach of modern objectivistic scientific methodology due to their philosophical nature (Bronk et al., 2010; Burrow & Hill, 2011; Damon et al., 2003). As soon as the focus of experimental investigation shifted towards the components of the meaning and purpose in life, the nature of these two subjects became more accessible. Therefore, a shift has been seen from their philosophical nature (Damon et al., 2003).

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Scholars across different disciplines have taken the interest to study purposefulness and meaning in life, little is known about young adults' conceptions of purposefulness and meaning in life across different cultures. Therefore it is important to understand how are purposefulness and meaning in life being thought or defined by young adults from collectivistic cultures? Do young adults from collectivistic cultures take purposefulness and meaning in life as similar or different terms? Having a strong sense of purposefulness and meaning in life has been found to build a wide variety of positive social, physical, emotional and psychological outcomes (Burrow & Hill, 2011; Hill & Turiano, 2014; Sillick & Cathcart, 2014; Steger, 2012) and a reduced risk of psychopathologies (Park et al., 2010) but research based evidence suggest that purpose and meaning in life may differ when it comes to their predictors and correlates (George & Park, 2013).

The role of lay conceptions of positive psychological topics such as gratitude, dispositional styles, happiness, and creativity in the advancement of interventions have been studied (Blackwell et al., 2007; Lambert et al., 2009; Lopez-Perez, 2016; Sanchez, 2015). Therefore exploring the young adults' conception of purpose in life and meaning in life may be of great importance because both construct have been increasingly focused by intervention studies to promote positive youth development (Bronk & Mangan, 2016; Burrow et al., 2018; Cheng et al., 2015; Yeager et al., 2014).

In earlier researches the concepts of meaning in life and purposefulness in life have been used interchangeably (Frankle, 1985; Ryff & Singer, 1998). However, the experience of purpose and meaning in life is explored by only a small number of studies (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Damon et al., 2003). Therefore, one difficulty that has arisen in the more recent research on purposefulness and meaning in life has been finding clarity regarding definitions and applicability of these terms. The definitional issue of purpose in life and meaning life such as how both are similar or different remain the focus of the researchers (Burrow, 2018). Scholars across a broad array of disciplines have mentioned that the constructs of meaning in life and purposefulness have been treated synonymously but through the use of these terms two different underlying constructs have been conveyed (Damon et al., 2003; George & Park, 2013; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Ratner et al., 2019; Weinstein et al., 2012).

Thus an advance and better understanding of these terms is required as both purpose and meaning in life have been frequently used by researchers in the development and application of interventions for the positive development, hedonic and eudemonic wellbeing, happiness and life satisfaction of youth, (Bronk & Mangan, 2016; Burrow et al., 2018; Bronk & Finch, 2010; Hill et al., 2013; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Zh et al., 2017). In doing so, better interventions using these psychological assets may be planned for positive youth development (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Burrow et al., 2010; Benson, 2006; Yuen et al., 2017).

Rationale

This study aims to understand how young adults from collectivistic Islamic culture of Pakistan define what purpose in life and meaning in life means to them, how they define them. In this study, the overlap and divergence between the two constructs has been explored. Indigenous literature on the concept of 'meaning in life' and 'purpose in life' is not enough to explain the difference between them for young adults. The study is significant in terms of exploring the similarity and difference between the young adults' conception of purpose in life and meaning in life. Current research will contribute to future studies with better knowledge of the conception of these terms and will also contribute to intervention based studies such as the development and application of positive interventions upon these psychological assets.

Objectives of the study

1. To examine the understanding of "purpose in life" for young adults.
2. To examine the understanding of "meaning in life" for young adults.
3. To examine the overlap and divergence between the conception of "purpose in life" and

“meaning life” among young adults.

Research Questions

1. How young adults define purpose in life?
2. How young adults define meaning in life?
3. What is the similarity and difference between purpose in life and meaning life?

Method

Research Design

In this study, phenomenological qualitative research design has been used. Focus Group Discussions, that provide in-depth views, were conducted for data collection.

Study Participants and Recruitment

Participants in this study were recruited through purposive and convenient sampling from universities of three cities of Pakistan; Lahore, Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The sample comprised 22 (50%) females and 22 (50%) males. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 25 years ($M = 22.30$, $SD = 1.34$). Among the sample 54% ($n = 24$) reported they were of Punjabi ethnicity, 33% ($n = 14$) identified as Muhajir, and 13% ($n = 6$) identified themselves as of Pukhtoon ethnicity. Overall 6 focus group discussions (i.e., two focus group discussions each of females, males, and combined females and males) were conducted. The eligibility criteria for focus group discussions were young adults age 19 to 24, belonging to Muslim collectivistic culture and must be students of some educational institutes. The exclusion criteria for the current study were adults above age 24. The details of participants in each focus group discussion have been given in table 1.

Table 1

Details of Focus Group Participants

Sr.no	Gender	Total	Age		Moderator
			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
1.	Girls	8	21.38	1.51	Girl
2.	Girls	8	22.00	1.31	Girl
3.	Boys	8	23.00	1.07	Boy
4.	Boys	8	21.88	.64	Boy
5.	Girls ($n = 6$)	12	22.50	1.38	Girl
	Boys ($n = 6$)				
6.	Girls ($n = 6$)	12	23.33	1.37	Girl
	Boys ($n = 6$)				
	Total	56	22.30	1.34	-

Ethical Considerations

At first, focus group guide was prepared with the help of available literature. University students were then approached from different universities after seeking permission from administration of institutions. Participants were provided with the consent form that contained information about the purpose of the research. After having written consent from the participation, they were recruited in the focus group. They were verbally instructed about area under study and were informed about their right of participation and withdrawal at any time they want. Formal permission for recording FGDs was also taken. They were assured of the confidentiality and privacy of their identities. Each session took an average of 90 minutes time.

Data Transcription

The obtained data were transcribed manually after consulting the transcription manual (Braun & Clarke, 2012). A group of researchers with five years' experience of research transcribed the data. To translate the data in other languages, the Back translation (Squires, 2009), as a well-established method, was used. At first, the data obtained in the source language was translated to the target language. In the second step, the translated data was again translated back to the source language. The translation was evaluated and verified by using the criteria given by Squires (2009).

Qualitative Code Development

The study used Content Analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Saldana, 2012; Tesch, 1990) to transform a large amount of text into a highly organized and concise summary of results to analyze transcribed data from focus group discussions. Before the data analysis, responses were coded into different themes for building a thematic codebook by using this deductive method. This thematic codebook was then used by the researcher to examine the recorded responses and even created new codes if deemed necessary. The review of an extensive literature helped the researcher to identify a number of definitions along with relevant components of purposefulness and meaning in life. Theoretically similar content of purpose in life and meaning in life, identified during the review of the transcribed data, were then grouped under broader themes.

Following the set procedure for qualitative analysis, five PhDs level qualitative research experts were engaged to review the coding categories. Each research expert was given the transcribe data with a request to evaluate coding categories being derived from the responses and placed under different themes. Due to highly abstract nature of the data, the researchers scored the presence of theme by a score of 1 and absence of it as 0. They research experts were asked to review the coding and the positioning of data in each category. Then the coding categories were verified with the help of committee approach. The committee comprised of seven trained researchers. A day before the session for committee approach, all the researchers were provided with draft of the coded data so that they can review and present their suggestions during committee approach session. A consequent discussion was held between the committee members to remove overlapping of categories. As a result of the consensus among committee members, different categories of the data were created.

Findings and Discussions

Themes that emerged after extensive qualitative analysis along with their content description and verbatim to carefully draw a conclusion about whether there is a conceptual overlap or divergence between the conception of purposefulness in life and meaning in life have been presented in table 2.

Table 2

Themes and Content Description of Purposefulness in life and Meaning in Life

Themes	Content description/ Sub-categories	Examples of purpose	Examples of meaning in life	Frequency			%
				Males (n = 28)	Female (n= 28)	Total (N = 56)	
Education	▪ Securing good grades	<i>To become somebody</i>	<i>There is meaning to</i>	26	27	53	94
	▪ Achieving degree	<i>other than</i>	<i>me in</i>	28	28	56	100
	▪ Learning new thing	<i>who I am with</i>	<i>getting education</i>	20	24	44	78
	▪ Awareness	<i>professional</i>		19	26	45	80
				20	22	42	75

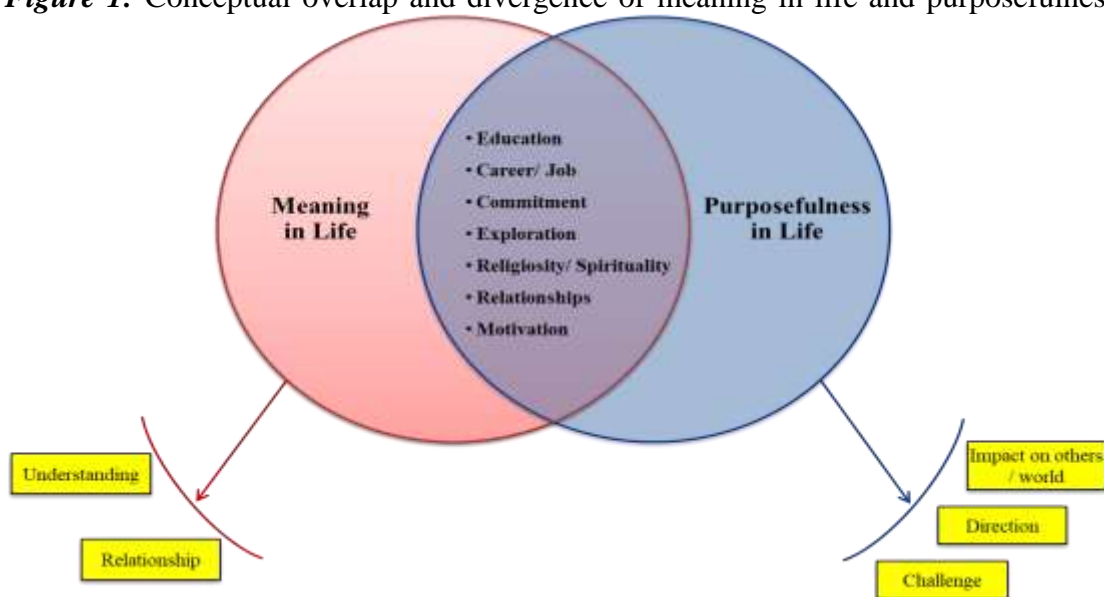
	▪ Productivity	<i>/degree achievement</i>					
Career/job	▪ Based on financial stability	<i>I would definitely</i>	<i>Wanting a job to help</i>	24	25	49	87
	▪ Based on helping others	<i>like to get into a well</i>	<i>my family members</i>	22	19	41	73
	▪ Based on interest	<i>paid job, but something beyond that, like to teach street children,</i>	<i>gives meaning to me in my life</i>	23	20	43	76
Impact on others/world	▪ Making others strong	<i>What services you are</i>		16	19	35	62
	▪ Solving others problems	<i>providing to the world</i>		18	20	38	67
	▪ Serving humanity to overcome emotional difficulties	<i>Making positive</i>		22	24	46	82
	▪ Betterment of society	<i>impact on others</i>		20	22	42	75
	▪ Better future for coming generation			12	19	31	55
	Direction	▪ Goal setting	<i>A journey you never arrived at it</i>		26	26	52
	▪ Keeping tracks	<i>but it keeps you moving</i>		25	24	49	87
	▪ Achieving targets/deadlines	<i>ahead on set tracks and goals</i>		23	27	50	89
	▪ Accomplishments	<i>Giving your time, doing investment of physical and financial resources and consistently sticking to achieve something its when you have found your purpose</i>		22	24	46	82
	▪ Action orientation	<i>Of course, you only commit to things you find meaning in...otherwise you won't be interested</i>		25	23	48	85
Commitment	▪ Involvement/engagement			20	16	36	64
	▪ Concentration			15	16	31	55
	▪ Consistency			18	20	38	67
	▪ Investments (time, energy, resources)			22	18	40	71

Challenge	▪ Taking responsibility to overcome difficulties	<i>You don't find hurdles meaningful in achieving your goals</i>	22	19	41	73
			08	03	11	19
	▪ Preservance ▪ Flexibility ▪ Taking hurdles as opportunity ▪ Thinking about alternatives	<i>but you still stick to them and find alternatives and opportunities in it to overcome</i>	18	20	38	67
			26	22	48	85
			24	20	44	78
Exploration	▪ Development of and search for purpose	<i>Exploring what's our place in the world, why are we here</i>	26	22	48	85
Religiosity/ Spirituality	▪ Making God happy by following His commandments	<i>To serve Allah and actualizing the goals of Him</i>	26	27	54	96
			25	25	53	94
	▪ Values		24	24	48	85
Relaxation	▪ Fun and enjoyment		12	20	32	57
			14	19	33	58
	▪ Having time for self ▪ Not worrying about anything	<i>When we don't cling to duties When things are not comfortable we stop doing it because they are not meaningful</i>	11	17	28	50
Understanding	▪ Making sense of doing everything in life	<i>When you are doing something e.g., walk, having tea etc and you are driving peace and making sense of it its meaningful</i>	11	10	21	37

Relationships	▪ Sense of belongingness to others (family, community members, colleague and fellows)	<i>I want to make people around me happy</i>	<i>to you Having contact with people who are important</i>	24	26	50	89
Motivation	▪ Engagement/fuel/ push towards something	<i>Its within our control to make changes and its motivate us</i>	<i>Forever in love with my family You are only motivated to do things when you find meaning in it</i>	18	15	33	58
Identity	▪ Self and objective recognition	<i>Becoming who you are</i>	<i>Feeling in love with myself</i>	19	13	32	57

The research analysis in this study has produced a total of thirteen main themes that are related to youths’ perception of purposefulness and meaning in life. The results of this study showed that the youth has used the term meaning in life and purposefulness interchangeably with subtle differences between the components of the two. Mostly participants confused the components of purpose in life with the meaning in life and only a few have used the meaning in life to describe purpose in life.

Figure 1: Conceptual overlap and divergence of meaning in life and purposefulness in life



As a point of distinction, the themes reported more for purposefulness in life involved

impact on others, direction, and challenge whereas themes reported more for meaning in life involved relaxations and understanding of what is happening around. Moreover the components of religiosity/spirituality, relationships, motivation, commitment, identity, career, education, and exploration were used for both meaning in life and purposefulness in life. *Figure 1* represents the overall comparison of the both constructs. The question about similarity or difference between general concepts of youth about purpose and meaning in life was so far unknown in a Muslim collectivistic culture of Pakistan. This study made an attempt to explore answers to the research questions through qualitatively investigation with emphasis to determine general concept, understanding, distinction and description of youths' conception of purpose and meaning in life. As evident from current study, there is no significant difference between the concepts of meaning and purpose in life or even between its components in general conception of youth. Moreover, the study failed to distinguish between purpose in life and meaning in life as manifested from figure 1 that there are many overlapping components between the terms meaning and purpose in life. The young adults stressed upon religiosity and spirituality to have a meaningful life and to make God happy and follow His commandments is the ultimate purpose. All other components such as career (to be successful), relationships (supporting family and friends), earning respect, impact on others/world (making the world better place for future generation) are the components revolving around religion and that are personally meaningful to them to live life to the fullest. Within the available literature, researchers have frequently taken meaning and purpose in life as similar constructs, used them interchangeably, and many same scales have been used to measure both constructs (Bundick, 2011; George & Park, 2017; Stillman et al, 2009).

However, despite the lack of evidence from existing literature, this study supports the possibility that youth might view meaning in life and purposefulness as different in their minds. This difference is subtle and many participants have used the components of purpose to define meaning in life such as to involve in family life, career development and to be a part of educational institute to attain knowledge, showing commitment to these purposes, and exploring new opportunities to have achievements, and feeling these purposes as part of one self contributes to meaning in life. This is in line to previous studies (King et al., 2006; Steger et al., 2012). However, few have used meaning in life to define purpose. The findings suggest purpose as a subcomponent of meaning in life as illustrated in different theories (Crescioni & Baumeister, 2013; George & Park, 2016, 2017; Steger, 2016). Life is meaningful when a person has some purpose to pursue. Young people derive purpose from their daily life events and experiences of everyday life that are personally meaningful to them. Therefore meaning in life gives rise to purpose and once the purpose of life is set it becomes personally meaningful to the individuals, having bidirectional relationship (Bronk, 2014; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). The lack of conceptual distinction between meaning and purpose means most studies do not distinguish individuals' experience of meaning and purpose, and there are even fewer studies specifically exploring individuals' experience of purpose (Damon et al., 2003).

Conclusion

In a nutshell, findings of our study demonstrated that purposefulness and meaning in life are theoretically closer according to viewpoints of youth under collectivistic Islamic culture of Pakistan. The findings of our study inform the ways in which future researchers can design, interpret or implement the intervention based studies. With the replication and further studies greater clarity and unique benefits regarding youth conception of purposefulness and meaning in life may be found to foster positive youth development.

Limitations and Suggestions

The present study raises several questions that can be further explored through further researches. A small sample primarily of Punjabi, Pakhtoon and Urdu speakers has been taken for the present study. The influence of difference in ethnic, socioeconomic and regional

background on purposefulness and meaning in life of our youth may further be explored through large diverse samples in future studies for more applicable findings. Moreover, the sample was drawn from students who were attending particular institutions and the findings can tell about how these constructs are used among non-institution-attending youth. The study recommends further exploration of purposefulness and meaning in life over larger and ethnically and socioeconomically diverse population across different types of contexts.

Implications of the Study

Despite above mentioned limitations, findings of this study will surely have important inferences to foster positive youth development through positive psychological intervention. The developing knowledge regarding the purposefulness and meaning in life constructs will not only be helpful for researchers and practitioners in the field of positive psychology but especially for teachers, parents and others concerned about the welfare of youth.

Conflict of interest: There was not any significant conflict of interest in the research.

Funding disclosure: No funding resource.

Author's Contribution: Bushra Saeed (conceptualization, data collection, analysis and write up), Iram Naqvi (supervision, proof reading and final review).

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