

SEARCH FOR MEANING IN LIFE IN MIDDLE AGED HOMEMAKERS AND ITS IMPACT ON LIFE SATISFACTION

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Abstract: The present study aims to explore the relation between search for meaning in life in middle aged homemakers and life satisfaction. To determine this relation 30 female participants aged 49-54 years from upper middle socio-economic status completed two questionnaires: Meaning in life (MLQ developed by Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) and Satisfaction with life scale (SWLS developed by Diener et al., 1985). The results obtained depict that there is a significant negative co-relation between search for meaning in life and life satisfaction ($r = -.49$, $p < 0.01$). This finding has important implications as this search for meaning in life represents lack of meaning in life and if this search does not culminate it can lead to a host of psychopathological problems.

Keywords: homemakers, lack of meaning, life satisfaction, middle age, search for meaning.

Introduction: The subject of meaning in life is a broad one and has been the muse of philosophers and psychologists alike since time immemorial. There are numerous ways in which meaning in life has been defined however on pooling these various definitions together Mascaro and Rosen^[1] have found two facets of meaning which are 'that it provides a coherent framework for viewing life leading to a sense of purpose or direction' and 'brings a sense of fulfillment'. According to the evolutionary perspective on meaning in life exemplified by Klinger^[2] humans developed the need to relentlessly seek out what they needed from their environment and this translated into goal fulfillment and a sense of purpose. This sense of purpose provides a background against which all encounters or experiences would have to be sorted. An experience which is viewed as disturbing and which cannot be explained based on the present sense of purpose will trigger a search for the relative meaning of the experience. What evolved then was a biologically-motivated compulsive search for meaning. In the contemporary meaning literature, Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan and Lorentz^[3] define the search for meaning in life as "the strength, intensity, and activity of people's desire and efforts to establish and/or augment their understanding of the meaning, significance, and purpose of their lives" (p.200). In the range of theories about meaning, searching for meaning is sometimes viewed as a positive or natural process, while others view searching for meaning as a sign of instability, motivated by disequilibrium. There are also opinions that treat the search for meaning as being potentially motivated by healthy and unhealthy circumstances^[4].

The findings of Steger, et al.^[5] supported what they call the Presence to Search model. This model assumes that meaning is an important psychological quality that is sought when an individual feels a lack of meaning. It is not always the case, though, that a lack of meaning becomes a search for meaning.

Maintaining a sense of meaning is only one thing that can restore well-being.

In middle age especially at 49-54 search for meaning in life or finding lack of meaning in life gains renewed interest as it is at this stage when individuals have achieved most of the goals they had set out from themselves and hence find themselves at the edge of a cliff. This search for meaning seems to have an impact on one's subjective well-being, which refers to people's cognitive and affective evaluations of their lives^[6] (p.34). Subjective well-being comprises three essential elements across two dimensions: 1) affective, or high positive affect and low negative affect; and 2) cognitive, or life satisfaction^[7]. According to Lucas, Diener, and Suh^[8] the affective components represent two broad, underlying dimensions of basic emotions that consistently emerge across various situations and cultures, while the cognitive component refers to one's global evaluation of one's life through which one examines the tangible aspects of his or her life, weighs the good against the bad, and arrives at a judgment of overall satisfaction (p. 616). These two dimensions of subjective well-being are thought to be related yet distinct. Life satisfaction is somewhat more stable and partially independent from one's affective state at the time of judgment.

Many studies have been conducted across life span to study the relation between purpose and meaning in life and aspects of psychological well-being including life satisfaction and affect. In their investigation of young adult women and older adults, Zika and Chamberlain^[9] found strong positive correlations between purpose and life satisfaction ($r=.66$) and positive affect ($r=.59$) for both younger and older samples. Compton et al.^[10] who also included participants from late adolescence through old age, used Antonovsky's (1987) Sense of Coherence measure to operationalize purpose in life; these authors found strong relations among purpose and life satisfaction ($r=.65$, measured by Diener et al.'s^[11]

SWLS). Steger et al. (2006) employed MLQ-P and found strong positive relations among purpose and life satisfaction ($r=.46$, $p<.001$; measured by the Satisfaction with Life Scale; Diener et al.^[11]), they also found strong negative relations among purpose and depression ($r=-.48$, $p<.001$) and neuroticism ($r=-.23$, $p<.01$). The above represents but a few of the growing body of studies that have uncovered positive relations among purpose as life goal and aspects of PWB (e.g., Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz^[3]).

Inversely, it seems to be the case that the absence of having identified a purpose may have negative psychological consequences. Steger et al.^[12] found that people searching for a purpose are on average more likely than those not searching to be depressed, neurotic, and low in self-esteem (the relationship between searching and life satisfaction was non-significant in the negative direction, $r=-.12$). Similarly, Reker et al.^[13] found a significant negative relationship between goal seeking, which was designed to measure the degree to which one desires a new set of goals in life (Reker & Peacock^[14]) and PWB in their young adult (16-29 years old) and early middle-age (30-49 years old) samples ($r=-.39$, $p<.01$ and $r=-.30$, $p<.05$, respectively). These results led the authors to conclude that high goal seeking could reflect unfulfilled needs which reduce PWB. (p. 48), which may be the consequence of a lack of purposeful life goals.

Objective: To understand the effect of search for meaning on life satisfaction in middle aged homemakers.

Method Participants: Thirty middle aged homemakers between 49-54 years, having a sound educational qualification and from upper middle socio-economic strata participated in the study. These participants did not have any clinically diagnosed psychological disorders.

Measures: Two psychological tests namely Meaning in life Questionnaire and Satisfaction with life scale were used. *Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)* (Steger et al.^[12]): The Meaning in Life Questionnaire assesses two dimensions of meaning in life using 10 items rated on a seven-point scale from "Absolutely True" to "Absolutely Untrue." The Presence of Meaning subscale measures the how full respondents feel their lives are of meaning. The Search for

Meaning subscale measures how engaged and motivated respondents are in efforts to find meaning or deepen their understanding of meaning in their lives. The MLQ has excellent reliability, test-retest stability, stable factor structure, and convergence among informants.

Satisfaction with life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al.^[11]): SWLS is a widely used and well-validated measure of life satisfaction. The SWLS is a short (five-item) questionnaire designed to measure peoples' cognitive judgments of their global life satisfaction. Its psychometric properties are well-documented and it has been validated in a wide variety of populations (Diener^[6], Diener & Suh^[8]). Respondents use a 7-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree to rate the scale's five items. A number of other measures of life satisfaction have been developed, though the SWLS has been the most commonly used and have garnered the most empirical support.

Procedure: A total of 70 participants were contacted through three main mediums namely in person, via phone and via internet. These individuals were given a brief up on the study being conducted and informed about their rights and risks of participation which were minimal in the present case. These individuals were also provided with a packet containing the informed consent form and two psychological tests, which they were asked to fill and return to the researcher. The total number of individuals who replied was 45. Based on the data obtained, the scores for each participant were calculated and they were categorized into two groups- the '*presence group*', those participants who scored above 24 on the MLQ-Presence subscale and below 24 on the MLQ-Search subscale were included in this group, the second group formed was the '*search group*', those participants who scored above 24 on the MLQ-Search subscale and below 24 on the MLQ-Presence subscale were included in this group. Only the MLQ-Search group which comprised of 30 females was included in the present study.

Result: The result obtained in the present study has been depicted in table 1 and Pearson Product Moment correlation has been employed as a measure to test the relation between search for meaning in life and satisfaction with life.

Table 1: Pearson Product Moment correlation between search for meaning and satisfaction with life scale (SWLS) for middle aged homemakers

Scale	Mean	SD	Correlation Coefficient
MLQ-S	27.23	11.72	-0.49**
SWLS	20.9	16.39	

** Significant at 0.01 level, P value < 0.006523, N = 30

The result obtained depicts moderate but significant negative correlation ($r = -0.49$, $p < 0.01$) between search for meaning and satisfaction with life for middle aged homemakers. This implies as the search for meaning in life increases satisfaction with life decreases.

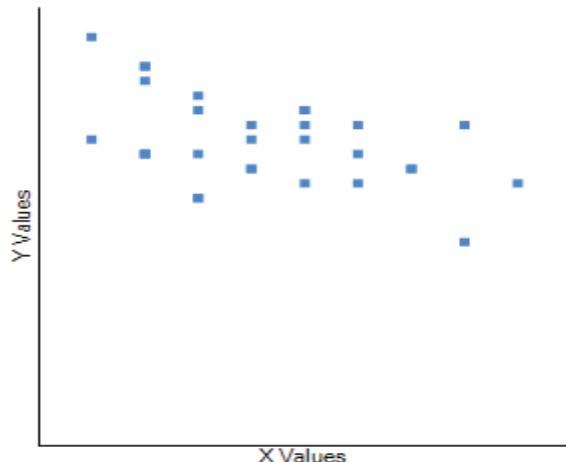


Figure 1: Graph of correlation for MLQ-S (X) scores and SWLS (Y) scores.

Discussion: Human beings are biologically primed to be searchers which is often depicted by the quality of children to seek to question everything that comes in their sight, so it is no surprise that humans are beings who will be in search of meaning; people try to comprehend meaning from their experiences, including the experience of life itself. Meaning is the web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our experience and formulate plans directing our energies to the achievement of our desired future. Meaning provides us with the sense that our lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are more than the sum of our seconds, days, and years (Steger^[15]). Comprehending our experience in this way builds the cognitive component of meaning in life (Steger^[15]). The cognitive component of meaning also may provide a foundation from which people develop the aspirations and identify the pursuits that provide their lives with a sense, purpose and mission. This sense of purpose comprises the motivational component of meaning, which is the other half of the conceptual core of meaning in life (Steger^[15]). The motivational component i.e. purpose undergoes a change during different stages in life, as each stage has its own existential questions and it is only in middle adulthood that a time for re-evaluation occurs. This phase of re-evaluation focuses on many issues which have relevance directly to re-researching meaning of life and its ultimate purpose (Weiler and Schoonover, 2001). Taking a leap from this the present study aims to understand the relation between search for meaning in life and subjective well-being in middle aged homemakers.

The results obtained indicate a small but significant negative correlation ($r = -.49$, $p < 0.01$) between search for meaning ($M = 27.23$, $SD = 11.72$) and satisfaction

with life ($M = 20.9$, $SD = 16.39$). The MLQ (tool which is used in the present test) assesses meaning in life, which is a prominent indicator of psychological well-being (PWB; see e.g., Ryff and Singer^[16]). The SWLS assesses life satisfaction, which is a leading measure of subjective well-being (SWB; see e.g., Diener^[6]). PWB research articulates a set of criteria believed to be necessary for optimal human functioning, and is theoretically concerned with people's full engagement with life and fulfillment of their potential. For example, Ryff's^[17] theory of PWB asserts that the attainment of wellbeing involves purpose in life, meaningful relationships, self-acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery, and personal growth. PWB research draws on theory to identify external criteria by which everyone's well-being is judged. In contrast, SWB research measures well-being as each individual's global perceptions of an abundance of life satisfaction and positive affect and absence of negative affect (see Diener^[6]). Meaning in life, which is the extent to which people experience their lives as comprehensible and full of meaning and purpose, is representative of PWB, and life satisfaction, which is the extent to which people have positive cognitive evaluations about their lives as a whole, is representative of SWB (Lent^[18]). Research has consistently demonstrated relations between measures of meaning and well-being. Those who feel their lives are meaningful are more optimistic and self-actualized (Compton et al.^[19]), experience more self-esteem (Steger et al.^[12]), and positive affect, as well as less depression and anxiety (Steger et al.^[12]) and less suicidal ideation. In addition, clinical populations also report lower meaning in life (Crumbaugh and Maholick, 1964^[19]). The relations between life satisfaction and other indices of well-being are pervasive and well-established across a large number of studies. Overall,

those who are satisfied with their lives are less depressed and have higher self-esteem and optimism, and there is some indication that clinical populations score lower on the SWLS and that their scores increase over the course of therapy (for reviews see Diener et al.^[6]; Pavot and Diener^[11]).

Middle adulthood for women is even more challenging as they undergo a phase of re-assessment and re-alignment of their values and sense of self including recognition and rebalancing of key polarities, this impacts the activities which are considered important and worthwhile as their meaningfulness is put to question. For women mostly children are their center of attention however when women reach middle adulthood the children become independent and do not need them for most things, hence their most meaningful activities are challenged and they are left with a sense of void. In terms of values in middle adulthood individual's two key polarities which are brought to the surface are immortality versus mortality, which bring to light that while younger individuals seem to feel they are immortal and it is only in midlife the realization occurs that it may be half over and individuals want to make the best of what remains. In middle adulthood this feeling of mortality also surfaces as individuals realize that people who they have relations with and who are older start passing away like some participants parents had passed away, and since relations also add meaning in life evaporation of these relations leads to a sense of meaninglessness moreover for women relations are much more important than males and women derive their self-esteem and self-worth from the relations they keep. Once a cycle of evaporation of meaning from activity starts, individuals are forced to search for meaning which is like a natural biological instinct (Wong^[20]) as it is aids survival and if they do not search for it they end up putting their well-being at risk

(Pressman^[21]). Hence for middle aged homemakers there seems to be a sort of recession from all sides in terms of family and relations. It is here that they may begin to question as to what they have done with their lives and may fall into a cycle of learnt helplessness which ultimately paves the way for depression.

Conclusion: Having a meaning in life is the core of being. However the search for meaning in life assumes an ever important role in the lives of middle aged homemakers as the centrality of their life is challenged in middle age. This segment of population has largely been ignored by researchers as they do not seem to be directly linked to the gross domestic product per say. It is the need of the hour that the due focus should be given to this segment as empowerment is not just of the self but also of the soul.

The present study suffers from a number of limitations. To begin with the sampling technique employed is purposive incidental and hence results of the results obtained cannot be generalized to be entire population. The size of the sample is also small ($N= 30$) and hence the results obtained can also be due to the small sample size. To completely understand if the results hold true the sample size should be made larger. This study is a correlational study; correlational data cannot provide conclusive tests of any causal model. Nonetheless, correlational data provide information regarding the potential nature of causal relations. Uncorrelated variables are probably not causally link, inverse correlations imply different causal relations than positive correlation and moderated relations suggest important influences on causal relations.

Despite these limitations the present study is a step towards increasing the understanding of the search for meaning in middle aged homemakers and its implications on life satisfaction.

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