

How do Sources of Meaning in Life Vary According to Demographic Factors?

Melissa E. Grouden, Paul E. Jose

Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Research has identified a variety of sources for deriving meaning in one's life. The present research examined how central sources of meaning varied according to age, gender, and level of education, and, second, whether these sources predicted well-being differentially. A New Zealand community sample of 247 individuals (30 – 69 years) provided open-ended descriptions of the meaning in their lives, rated their meaning in certain domains and completed 11 well-being measures. The most frequently reported source of meaning was family, and the second was interpersonal relations. Differences were found by age, gender, and amount of education, for example, younger individuals were more likely to find personal growth meaningful, whereas older people were more likely to find standard of living and community activities meaningful.

Keywords: Sources of meaning in life; age; gender; education level; well-being

The desire to seek and attain meaning in life is a fundamental human inclination, and although there is variation in how this is approached, for example across different cultures, it is a universal process (Reker & Chamberlain, 2000). In fact, human beings are posited to be the only species to be motivated to piece together life events and experiences in order to make meaning (Emmons, 2005). This longing for meaning is a mechanism through which humans endeavour to create a sense of stability within our ever-changing existence (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Meaning is not only an intrinsic human motivation, but it is “an important construct in the prevention of illness, the promotion of wellness and successful adaptation to life's changing circumstances” (Reker, 2000, p. 39).

When considering meaning in life, the aim is to consider what different experiences and goals make life worth living for the individual rather than the overall meaning of a life. Thus, the experience of meaning is fundamentally

unique and reflective of themes in a person's life, though history, culture, socio-demographics and developmental stage do exert influence over values and beliefs, which in turn shape the nature of the meaning that is constructed (Prager, 1996). “People do not exist in isolation. They have families, live in communities, and share ethnic, gender, and professional backgrounds that generate specific meanings” (Bar-Tur, Savaya, & Prager, 2001, p. 255). Consequently, the meaning that individuals generate is influenced by these variables.

Although there is consensus that finding meaning is of importance, there is an absence of a unifying theory or conceptualisation of what this search constitutes (e.g., Reker & Chamberlain, 2000; Steger, 2009). The idea that two essential aspects of meaning-making are the search for and attainment of meaning is, nevertheless, echoed throughout many conceptualisations (e.g., Frankl, 1963; Reker, 2000; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006).

However, the focus of the present investigation will be on the sources from which individuals derive a sense of meaning (the contents of the experience of meaning), rather than seeking meaning in a more general sense.

What is Meaningful in Life?

Although having meaning in life has been found to be important for a multitude of reasons from the physical to psychological, it is also vital to consider what provides human beings with this sense of meaning. Empirical research indicates that meaning can arise from a variety of sources (e.g., interpersonal relationships, religious activities, personal development, O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996). Typically, individuals experience meaning in several different spheres (Pöhlmann, Gruss, & Joraschky, 2006) and it has been suggested that deriving meaning from multiple sources is in fact protective, as in instances when meaning in one domain is compromised, the remaining sources can be strengthened and thus overall meaning is not compromised (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006).

Central Sources of Meaning

The areas in life from which meaning is derived are termed sources of meaning. Sources of meaning are assembled into overarching categories in varied ways across different investigations: they are described differently, the total number of categories vary, as do the research methods of ascertaining the sources of meaning (Schnell, 2011). One approach to understanding sources of meaning

is qualitative interviews which ask individuals what is meaningful in life. De Volger and Ebersole (1981) found that human relationships, service, belief, life work, growth, pleasure, obtaining, and health were overarching categories which encapsulated the various answers. Similarly, O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996) arrived at six sources of meaning through interviews: human relationships, creativity, personal development, relationship with nature, religiosity/spirituality, and social/political beliefs. Wong (1998) took a slightly different approach and asked participants to describe the nature of an archetypal meaningful life, which produced seven sources of overall meaning. A somewhat more quantitative approach which has been utilised is to ask individuals to rate the degree to which they experience meaning in a list of different domains (e.g., Prager, Bar-Tur, & Abramowici, 1997; Reker & Wong, 1988). Additionally, Delle Fave and colleagues (2010) used a mixed qualitative/quantitative approach with open-ended answers and ratings on the following domains: family, work, interpersonal relations, health, personal growth, standard of living, religiosity/spirituality, leisure/free time, community/society, life in general, and education.

It is evident that there is quite some variation between studies as to how sources of meaning are categorised. However, one consistent finding is that interpersonal relationships have been found to be the most frequently reported source of meaning across numerous studies (e.g., Baum & Stewart, 1990; Debats, 1999; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996; De Vogler & Ebersole, 1981; Yalom, 1980). Social connection appears to be essential to evaluating one's life as meaningful (Lambert et al., 2010). However, when the next most important sources are probed, a varied picture emerges with no consistent pattern. Examples of the second most important sources of meaning include preservation of values (Bar-Tur & Prager, 1996; Prager, 1998), personal growth (Prager, 1996), creativity (O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996), and work (Debats, 1999; Delle Fave et al., 2010).

Variation across the Lifespan

Research has found support for the idea that people's meaning in life becomes more integrated and consolidated with age (Dittmann-Kohli & Westerhof, 2000). Reker and colleagues (1987) discovered that older individuals possess a more established sense of purpose in life, whereas their younger counterparts exhibited a stronger goal focus and anticipated that their futures would be meaningful.

One challenge for meaning, which is characterised by stability, is the constant adaptation required due to the perpetually changing nature of life (Bar-Tur & Prager, 1996). As individuals age, previous and current experiences are constantly re-evaluated in response to personal values so that they may be fitted together into a self-concept (Prager, 1998). It has been suggested that while the sources from which people derive a sense of meaning change at different developmental stages, one's overall level of meaning in life stays constant across the lifespan (Yalom, 1980); this contention has been supported in empirical research (Prager, 1998; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992).

There have been mixed results with regard to differences in sources of meaning according to age. For example, research has unveiled differences according to age with acknowledgment of achievement, personal growth and hedonistic enjoyment as being more important for younger people; whereas, preserving values and financial security were more important for older individuals (Prager, 1996; Prager, 1998). Family has been found to be the most important source of meaning for younger people (Lambert et al., 2010). Religiosity/spirituality, tradition, practicality, morality and reason have been found to be of greater importance in older age (Schnell, 2009). Further, older people have been found to most highly endorse personal relationships, preserving values, humanistic concerns and financial security (Bar-Tur & Prager, 1996).

Gender and Level of Education

There appears to be an influence of gender on the sources of meaning which are deemed important, however

there is some variation between research investigations. Although interpersonal relationships appear to be universally meaningful to people, research has revealed this source to be more important for females (Debats, 1999; Wong, 1998). Furthermore, religiosity/spirituality is more valued by females (Wong, 1998), as are well-being and relatedness; self-actualisation seems to be a central source for males, and this difference is thought to reflect the female/communion and male/agency associations (Schnell, 2009). Another study revealed work, love/marriage, independent pursuits, and leisure as centrally important for males, and birth of children, love/marriage, and work as most meaningful for females (Baum & Stewart, 1990).

Investigations of differences in sources of meaning as a function of education level are few, however it has been found that older adults with higher education possess greater purpose in life overall (Pinquart, 2002). In relation to the more specific sources of meaning, one study revealed religiosity/spirituality, tradition, normality, practicality, and reason to be of reduced significance the more educated individuals become (Schnell, 2009). When considering the realms in life in which people hope to experience meaning and fulfilment, individuals with less education frequently reported the domains of family and health more often than their more educated counterparts, whose life longings tended to emphasise personal characteristics (Kotter-Grühn, Wiest, Zurek, & Scheibe, 2009).

Meaning, Well-being and Age,

Gender, and Level of Education

Previous research has ascertained that having meaning in life is positively associated with happiness and life satisfaction (e.g., Cohen & Cairns, 2011; Park, Park, & Peterson, 2010; Reker et al., 1987; Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Furthermore, feeling that one's life is imbued with meaning acts as a buffer against experiencing depression (e.g., Feldman & Snyder, 2005; Mascaro & Rosen, 2006; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008) and rumination

(Steger et al., 2008). Research has also found that specific sources of meaning were positively related to positive well-being outcomes, but unrelated to negative well-being outcomes (Schnell, 2009). However, it is not known whether various sources of meaning are more predictive of positive well-being as a function of demographic variables, or whether certain sources of meaning are more predictive of well-being for males or females, younger or older people, or those with less or more education.

Goals of the Present Study

Although there is convergence on the idea that relationships with other people make the largest contribution to a sense of meaningfulness, different interpersonal relationships might not have the same degree of impact. There is some evidence to suggest that familial relationships are more strongly linked to meaning than friendships (Delle Fave et al., 2010; Lambert et al., 2010). Research is varied when it comes to unearthing the next most important sources of meaning. Therefore, the current research expected that family would be the most important source of meaning followed by interpersonal friendships (Hypothesis 1). In the absence of consistency in previous research as to the next most meaningful sources, the current investigation endeavoured to explore this order of ranking.

Though there have been differences with what sources are important at different stages across the lifespan, the results have not been consistent. In the absence of consistent empirical research to inform the hypothesis, we turn to theoretical assertions as to what is expected to be meaningful. It is theorised that younger people are preoccupied with self-interests such as identity establishment, materialism, creation of relationships and being productive, whereas in older age, people become more concerned with the well-being of others and humankind in general, finding community activities, welfare of others and religious activities to be of importance (Prager, 1996). We expected that younger individuals would highly endorse personal growth, interpersonal relations, leisure activities and work, and their older counterparts

would value community activities and religiosity/spirituality (Hypothesis 2). Again, findings according to gender have not been consistent across research, but research has shown that males have a preference for agency and females for communion (Schnell, 2009). Thus, we expected that females would more highly endorse interpersonal relationships and religiosity/spirituality, and males would more highly value work (Hypothesis 3). Based on previous research (Kotter-Grühn et al., 2009; Schnell, 2009), we anticipated that family, health, and religiosity/spirituality to be of greater importance to those individuals possessing less education (Hypothesis 4).

Lastly, we expected that the hypothesised important sources of meaning for different age groups, genders, and levels of education would be more predictive of positive well-being. Specifically we anticipated that personal growth, interpersonal relations, leisure, and work would be more predictive of positive well-being for younger people, and community activities and religiosity/spirituality would be more predictive of positive well-being for older people (Hypothesis 5). We hypothesised that interpersonal relations and religiosity/spirituality would be more predictive of positive well-being for females, and work would be more predictive of positive well-being for males (Hypothesis 6). Finally, we anticipated that family, health, and religiosity/spirituality would be more predictive of positive well-being for those with less education (Hypothesis 7).

METHOD

Participants

Participants included in this study were 247 individuals from a wider cross-cultural investigation, the Eudaimonic and Hedonic Happiness Investigation (EHHI). The sample was composed of 139 females and 108 males, and the age of participants ranged from 30 to 69 years ($M = 44.28$ years; $SD = 9.30$). The participants included in this sample were geographically scattered around New Zealand, mostly centring around Wellington and Auckland. The sample included 112 individuals whose education level was non-tertiary, and

135 who held a tertiary degree.

Measures

Eudaimonic and Hedonic Happiness Investigation. The EHHI (Delle Fave et al., 2010) is a mixed qualitative-quantitative questionnaire asking participants to outline their goals, meaning in life and their subjective definition of happiness. The present study will focus on the qualitative descriptions of what participants described was meaningful in their lives, and their quantitative endorsement of meaningfulness in 11 different domains. Participants were asked to "Please list the three things that you consider most meaningful in your present life". Next, participants indicated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*not meaningful at all*) to 7 (*extremely meaningful*), the degree to which they derived meaning from the following domains: work, family, standard of living, interpersonal relationships, health, personal growth, leisure, religiosity/spirituality, community issues, society issues, and life in general.

Subjective Happiness Scale. The Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) is a 4-item measure of global subjective happiness. Participants are asked to describe their degree of happiness in relation to their peers and archetypal happy and unhappy people. An example question is "Compared with most of my peers, I consider myself:" and on a 7-point Likert scale participants choose from 1 (*less happy*) to 7 (*more happy*). Another item is "Some people are generally happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterisation describe you?" and respondents chose an option between 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*a great deal*). The SHS is a reliable measure, with alphas ranging from .85 to .95 (Lyubomirsky & Tucker, 1998). This was also evidenced in the present investigation with an alpha of .87.

Satisfaction with Life Scale. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is a 5-item subjective measure of a person's degree of satisfaction with their life as a whole. Items included are "In most ways, my life is close to my ideal" and "I am satisfied with my life"

and responses are indicated in a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). This scale has good internal consistency, with alphas between .79 and .89 (Pavot & Diener, 1993). This reliability was also seen in the current research as the alpha was .89.

Mental Health Continuum.

The short form of the Mental Health Continuum (MHC-SF; Keyes, 2009) is a 14-item measure of emotional, social, and psychological well-being. Participants indicate how often they felt a certain way during the past month on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*every day*). "Interested in life" is an example of an item in the emotional well-being subscale, "That you had something important to contribute to society", is one from the social well-being subscale, and "That you had experiences that challenged you to grow and become a better person" is an example from the psychological well-being subscale. The scale has demonstrated good internal consistency with alphas greater than .80 (Keyes, 2009). These reliabilities were also found in the present study with alphas of .84 for emotional well-being, .78 for social well-being and .82 for psychological well-being.

Basic Psychological Needs Scale.

The Basic Psychological Needs Scale (BPNS) is a measure stemming from self-determination theory, which posits three basic psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness and competence (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The 9-item measure used here is an adaptation and examples from the three subscales are: "I feel like I am free to decide for myself how to live my life" (autonomy); "People are generally pretty friendly towards me" (relatedness); and "People I know tell me I am good at what I do" (competence). Participants indicate responses on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all true*) to 7 (*very true*). The reliability of the scale is acceptable, with alphas for the subscales ranging from .69 to .86 (Gagné, 2003). In the present research, the alphas were .70 for autonomy, .69 for competence and .76 for relatedness.

Depression Anxiety Stress Scales.

The Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) measure depression, anxiety and stress.

A shortened 7-item version of the depression scale was utilised here. Participants describe how much they felt that statements such as "I couldn't seem to experience any positive feeling at all" and "I felt I wasn't worth much as a person" were applicable over the previous week. Responses were indicated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much, or most of the time*). The DASS has excellent internal consistency with an alpha above .91 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). This was also the case with the current research as the alpha was .88.

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule. The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) measures affective well-being. The scale has 28 items, and individuals are asked how much they experience different feelings on average on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Examples from the positive affect scale include "interested" and "proud" and items in the negative affect scale are "ashamed" and "jittery". The PANAS has demonstrated excellent reliability with alphas of .89 for positive affect and .85 for negative affect (Crawford & Henry, 2004). This reliability was also evident in the current study with alphas of .90 for both positive and negative affect.

Procedure

In late 2010, recruitment of participants began and this process was concluded by mid-2012. A variety of recruitment methods were utilised, for example posters at the university and locations around Wellington city, national newspaper advertisements, and mail-drops in Wellington city. Individuals participated in the research on an entirely voluntary basis and were therefore able to withdraw at any time. The Victoria University of Wellington Ethics Committee granted ethical approval to conduct the research.

Participants completed the questionnaire on-line using the Survey Monkey website. It took approximately 30-40 minutes on average for participants to complete the questionnaire. As a thank you, participants were posted a \$10 voucher of their choice. Participants were sent reminders to complete the questionnaire if they had not done

so after registering for the research. Participants completed the questionnaire in English.

Coding

The qualitative meaning descriptions were coded with the possible 11 codes being: work, family, standard of living, interpersonal relationships, health, personal growth, leisure, religiosity/spirituality, community issues, life in general, and education. Two coders coded 25% of the responses in order to examine inter-rater reliability. Reliability for coding of the things that were described to be meaningful was excellent (Cohen's $\kappa = .94$). Each of the coders coded 50% of the responses analysed here.

Design

As part of the broader EHHI cross-national study, we recruited individuals who would complete a three-way crossed design: age (30–39, 40–49, 50–60+) by gender (male, female) by level of education (tertiary, non-tertiary). The target sample was 216, but we ultimately recruited 247 participants. The crossed design yielded approximately equal numbers of individuals in each of the 12 cells of the design.

RESULTS

So as to avoid producing a huge number of results (if analyses were conducted with all the individual well-being variables), a data reduction technique was employed. The 11 well-being variables were transformed into z-scores and then combined into a single measure of overall positive well-being. The internal reliability of the positive well-being measure was excellent with an alpha of .82.

What are the Most Common Sources of Meaning?

When asked to provide three things that were meaningful in life, participants reported an average of 2.98 responses. Figure 1 delineates the percentages of mentions for the 11 domains. Family was by far the most commonly cited source of meaning in life, with an overwhelming majority of mentions (36.14%). Interpersonal relations was the next most mentioned source of meaning (14.40%), followed by personal life (9.65%) and work (8.83%).

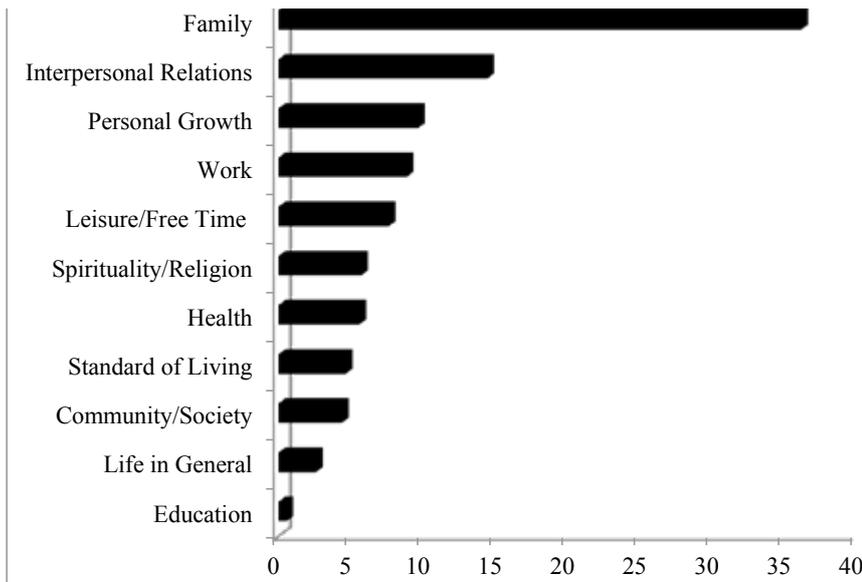


Figure 1. Percentages of qualitative mentions of meaningful things in life.

The least commonly reported sources of meaning were life in general (2.6%) and education (.54%). This result was consistent with Hypothesis 1 (H1), which stipulated that family would be the most commonly reported source of meaning, followed by interpersonal relations. The degree to which other sources were mentioned will help to provide a clearer understanding of other important sources of meaning.

Table 1
Levels of meaning derived from eleven quantitative domains.

Quantitative Domain	M	SD
Family	6.43	1.12
Health	6.30	0.88
Life in General	6.13	1.02
Interpersonal Relations	6.10	1.05
Personal Growth	5.93	1.08
Leisure/Free Time	5.67	1.11
Standard of Living	5.15	1.25
Work	5.13	1.42
Community Issues	4.82	1.33
Society Issues	4.64	1.43
Spirituality/Religion	4.34	2.18

The quantitative ratings of how meaningful various life domains were reflected some variation from the qualitative responses of meaningful things in life. Family was still the domain which people described as most meaningful, but the next most meaningful was health, followed by life in general. (See Table 1)

Family being the most important was also consistent with H1, however health and life in general being the next most important sources was not expected. This may reflect an effect of method of ascertaining meaning: the meaning that comes to mind when asked an open-ended question vs. the degree to which one endorses domains when presented with a list (some of which might not be thought of spontaneously).

Did Sources of Meaning Vary According to Age, Gender, and Level of Education?

Chi-square analyses were performed to examine the relations between qualitatively reported meaning domains and age, gender and level of education. Relationships were found between age and standard of living, $\chi^2(2, N = 247) = 6.06, p < .05$, and community issues, $\chi^2(2, N = 247) = 6.84, p < .05$. People aged 30 – 49 were less likely to rate standard of living and community issues as meaningful compared to those individuals aged 50 – 60. These findings provided minimal

support for H2 which expected older people to endorse community issues more than their younger counterparts (the other hypothesised differences, younger people valuing personal growth, interpersonal relations, leisure activities and work, and older people endorsing religiosity/spirituality, were not evident).

Relationships were found between gender and leisure/free time, $\chi^2(1, N = 247) = 7.60, p < .01$, and life in general, $\chi^2(1, N = 245) = 8.39, p < .01$. This result indicates that leisure/free time was less likely to be reported as meaningful by females than males, and life in general was more likely to be meaningful for females than males. These findings were not anticipated by H3, which expected females to highly endorse interpersonal relationships and religiosity/spirituality, and males to value work.

We also found a relationship between education level and community issues, $\chi^2(1, N = 247) = 4.18, p < .05$. Those individuals with tertiary level education were more likely to report community issues as meaningful compared to those individuals with non-tertiary education. This result did not support H4, which expected family, health, and religiosity/spirituality to be more important to those with less education.

To investigate whether meaningfulness of quantitative domains varied according to age, a three-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was computed on gender (males, females) by age group (30 – 39, 40 – 49, 50 – 60+) by educational level (tertiary, non-tertiary) on the 11 domains of meaningfulness (work, family, standard of living, interpersonal relations, health, personal growth, leisure/free time, religiosity/spirituality, community issues, society issues, life in general). The MANOVA yielded a significant multivariate main effect of age ($F(22, 450) = 1.72, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$), and the univariate result was significant for personal growth ($F(2, 235) = 3.71, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$). A post-hoc Tukey test revealed that individuals aged 50 – 60+ found personal growth to be significantly less meaningful than those aged 30 – 39. This result was consistent with H2, however the other hypothesised age-

related differences were not evidenced. The multivariate main effect for gender was non-significant ($F(11, 225) = 1.34, p = .20$), and this result suggests that males and females did not significantly differ in their endorsement of these domains.

The MANOVA also yielded a significant multivariate main effect for educational level ($F(11, 225) = 1.96, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$), and the univariate results were significant for family ($F(1, 235) = 4.25, p < .05$), standard of living ($F(1, 235) = 11.70, p < .001$), health ($F(1, 235) = 3.83, p < .05$), leisure/free time ($F(1, 235) = 4.20, p < .05$), and life in general ($F(1, 235) = 4.65, p < .05$). A post-hoc Tukey test indicated that individuals with non-tertiary education found the domains of family, standard of living, health, leisure/free time, and life in general, to be more meaningful than those with tertiary education. This result provided support for H4, though the differences in the domains of leisure/free time, standard of living, and life in general were not expected, and we did not find a difference with regard to endorsement of religiosity/spirituality.

None of the two-way interactions nor the three-way interaction reached statistical significance.

Do Age, Gender, and Level of Education Influence the Relationship between Domains and Positive Well-being?

In order to examine whether meaning from various domains differentially predicted positive well-being in relation to age, gender and level of education, moderation analyses were computed. Age was not found to be a significant moderator in any of the cases, so H5 was not supported.

In the first regression, gender moderated the relationship between meaning from personal growth and positive well-being ($\beta = .19, p < .05$). A significant simple slope was found for females (slope = $.16, t = 2.79, p < .01$), indicating that females manifested a positive relation between meaning from personal growth and positive well-being, but males did not (see Figure 2).

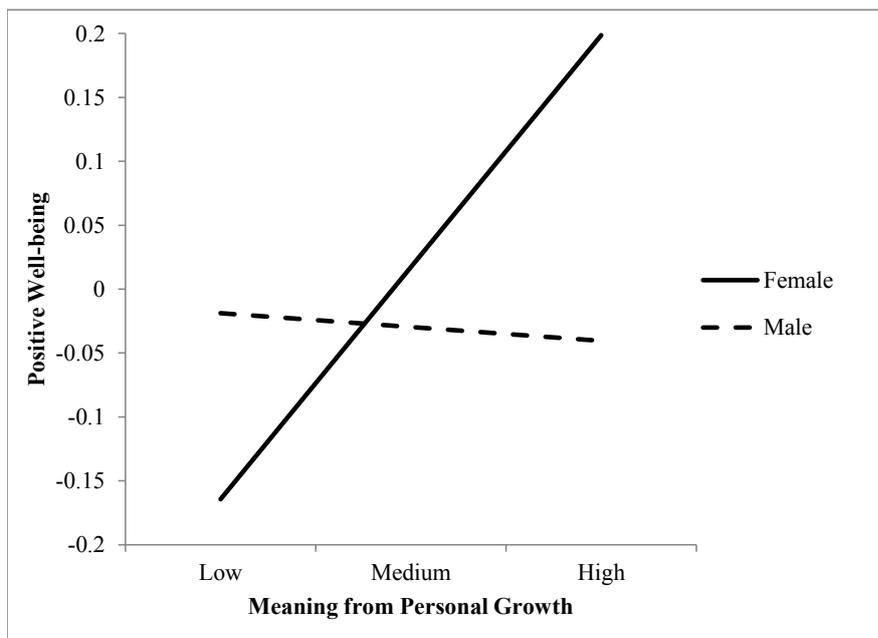


Figure 2. Moderation by gender on meaning from personal growth to positive well-being.

In the next regression, gender moderated the relationship between meaning from life in general and positive well-being ($\beta = .20, p < .05$). Significant simple slopes were obtained for males (slope = $.23, t = 3.50, p < .001$) and females (slope = $.43, t = 7.95, p < .001$), however, it was a more strongly positive relationship for females (see Figure 3).

This result is inconsistent with H6, which expected that interpersonal relations and religiosity/spirituality would be more predictive of positive well-being for females, and work would be more predictive of positive well-being for males.

Level of education was found to moderate the relationship between meaning from religiosity/spirituality and positive well-being ($\beta = .10, p < .05$). A



Figure 3. Moderation by gender on meaning from life in general to positive well-being

significant simple slope was obtained for those with tertiary education (slope = .09, $t = 3.06$, $p < .001$), showing that deriving meaning from religiosity/spirituality was positively related to well-being for those individuals possessing tertiary education (see Figure 4).

4.87, $p < .001$), and non-tertiary (slope = .48, $t = 7.29$, $p < .001$) education levels, however the relationship was stronger for those with non-tertiary education (see Figure 5). These results were not expected by H7, as we anticipated that family, health, and religiosity/spirituality would be more predictive

DISCUSSION

The main goal of this research was to examine the nature of what people find to be meaningful in life and how this might vary according to demographic factors (specifically age, gender, and level of education). Previous research has ascertained the most frequently cited contributor to meaning in life is interpersonal relationships (e.g., Baum & Stewart, 1990; Debats, 1999; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996; De Vogler & Ebersole, 1981; Yalom, 1980), with additional research finding that familial relationships were of particular importance (Delle Fave et al., 2010; Lambert et al., 2010). The qualitative descriptions of meaning in the present research replicated the finding that family is the most important source of meaning in life, followed by other interpersonal relationships. When individuals quantitatively rated the degree to which certain domains were meaningful, family was still the most important, however health and life in general were the next most important; this result was not expected based on previous research and might suggest a degree of lesser insight into the importance of health and life as a whole unless prompted to think of these issues. Personal growth and work were the next most qualitatively mentioned sources of meaning. These findings are consistent with previous research in which personal growth (Prager, 1996) and work (Debats, 1999; Delle Fave et al., 2010) were ranked high. Overall, it appears that when individuals are asked to elucidate the domains in life that are meaningful, relationships with others, especially family, feature heavily and some emphasis is placed on personal development and work endeavours; however when the domains are provided first, health and life in general also feature prominently.

Research has ascertained that meaning in life changes across the lifespan to become more integrated (Dittmann-Kohli & Westerhof, 2000), but generally the degree of meaningfulness in life is relatively constant (Yalom, 1980), with the sources of meaning showing variability in size of contribution (Prager, 1998; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). The present research found that younger

Figure 4. Moderation by education level on meaning from spirituality to positive well-being.

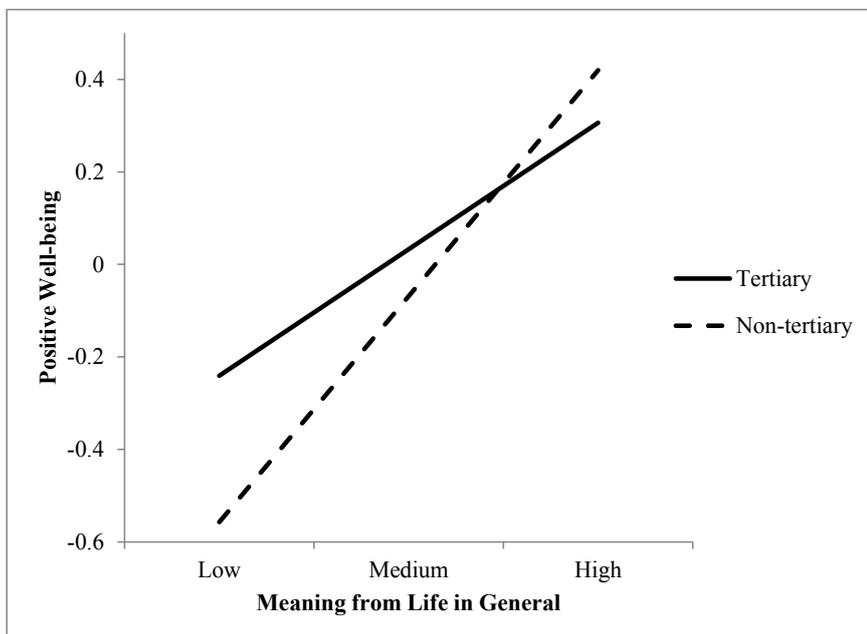
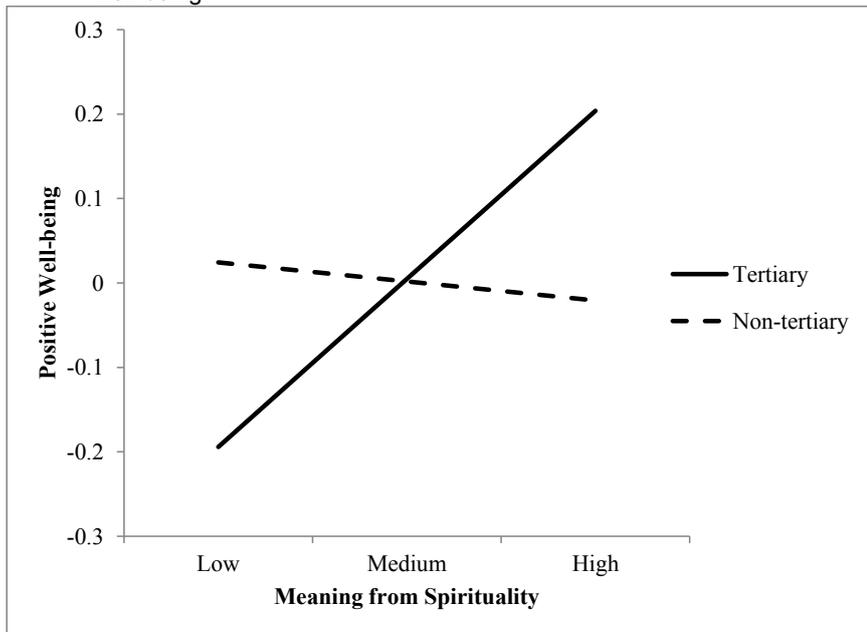


Figure 5. Moderation by education on meaning from life in general to positive well-being.

Finally, education moderated the relationship between meaning from life in general and positive well-being, ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .05$). Significant simple slopes were found for tertiary (slope = .27, $t =$

of positive well-being for those with less education.

individuals aged 30 – 49 were less likely to report that standard of living and community issues were important sources of meaning than their older counterparts aged 50 – 60+. This outcome is generally consistent with research from Schnell, which found that older people place greater importance on practicality and morality (2009), and findings from Bar-Tur and Prager (1994) who found that preserving values, humanistic concerns and financial security were important in older age. Additionally, the present research found that personal growth was more important for those aged 30 – 39 than those aged 50 – 60+; although this result was not predicted by previous research, it has been theorised that identity development and self-exploration is more integral in younger years (Steger et al., 2009). Overall this pattern suggests that older individuals have spent time on tasks important for the self, such as developing an identity and facilitating personal growth, enabling them to put effort into establishing financial security for their family and making a contribution to future generations.

Research examining gender differences in sources of meaning has shown that interpersonal relationships are more valued by females than males (Debats, 1999; Wong, 1998). Other research has revealed that well-being and relatedness are more important for females and self-actualisation is more important for males (Schnell, 2009). The present research showed that leisure activities contributed to males' meaning in life more than females, and deriving meaning from life in general was more important for females. Research on gender differences with regard to leisure activities has suggested that due to gender inequity, females are more constrained from engaging in such pastimes than males. Thus, this difference in meaningfulness may reflect the fact that females are less able to participate in leisure activities, so are less likely to rank this source highly (Shaw, 1994). Further, when considering how different sources of meaning contributed to well-being according to gender, the results showed that meaning from personal growth and life in general predicted well-being for females. The gender difference found

for meaning from personal growth contributing to well-being is consistent with research which has found that personal growth (but not meaning derived from it) was more predictive of well-being for females than males (Robitschek, 1999). The tendency for life in general to be more meaningful for females may suggest that women take a broader perspective when considering meaning, and consider the degree to which their whole life is imbued with a sense of meaning.

Little research has examined variations in endorsed sources of meaning as moderated by level of education, but one study (Schnell, 2009) has found that religiosity/spirituality, tradition, normality, practicality and reason were less important for more educated individuals. The current research revealed community issues to be of greater importance for those individuals possessing a tertiary education, which was not expected. However, involvement with community issues has been found to increase as individuals acquire higher education (Coulthard, Walker, & Morgan, 2002), so this domain may be more meaningful for those with more education because they are more likely to be engaged with their community. Additionally, family, standard of living, health, leisure activities and life in general were deemed to be of greater importance for individuals with non-tertiary education. This pattern is partially consistent with research which found that life hopes pertaining to family and health to be more important for females with less education (Kotter-Grühn et al., 2009); the authors argue that this is due to the fact that individuals with less education are likely to experience disadvantage with regard to health and have experienced less family stability. Additionally those with less education tend to have a lower standard of living (Scott, 2010), so perhaps achievement of meaning in these domains is consequently of greater importance. Lastly, when considering how different sources of meaning might differentially impact well-being in relation to level of education, the present research discovered that religiosity/spirituality predicted well-being for those individuals possessing tertiary education, whereas life in general did

for those with non-tertiary education. This result suggests that for individuals with less education, viewing one's entire life as meaningful, in a global way, is essential in facilitating a sense of well-being. And additionally it shows that although those individuals with tertiary education might experience meaning in a variety of domains, meaning derived from spiritual beliefs is especially important in fostering well-being.

Limitations

The present research is not without limitations. In the present instance, the data were cross-sectional and so while the research has generated some findings pertaining to differences in sources of meaning across the lifespan, these would be better examined using longitudinal data. An aspect of the study, which is both a strength and a limitation, is the use of the mixed qualitative-quantitative design. By asking individuals to describe the nature of the meaning in their life using their own words, greater detail and subtlety in responding is facilitated, however coding this information did result in complex, detailed information being reduced to broad categories. Additionally, this approach has not been standardised, rather it is an exploration into individuals' meaning frameworks, so future research should endeavour to achieve standardisation in order for the research to be more scientifically rigorous and generalisable (Delle Fave et al., 2010).

Practical Implications

This research has provided support to the idea that individuals find interpersonal relationships, especially with family members, to be of utmost importance to their sense of meaning. However it is evident that there is some variation between what is reported to be meaningful in a free recall situation compared to what is rated to be meaningful when individuals are prompted. In particular, the domain of health was noted as meaningful when people were asked to consider a variety of stated domains, but it slipped in importance when people were asked about meaning in life in a free recall methodology. Some domains, such as health, may be 'taken for granted' as they are typically positive and stable for

most people, and it may be that the open-ended format may be less appropriate to assessing these types of domains.

This research also confirmed the idea that meaning in life is fluid across the lifespan with different spheres of life contributing to different degrees of meaning at different ages, for example, financial stability and making a contribution to the wider community both increasing in meaningfulness with age. However, it is also evident that some domains maintained their importance over time, suggesting that some areas of life retain a sense of meaning, regardless of age. It also showed that what is meaningful in life varies by gender and level of education, highlighting how the process of making meaning is affected by demographic and sociocultural forces. This pattern of results has implications for interventions which might be developed around the idea of bolstering a sense of meaning in order to promote well-being: trying to create a “one-size-fits-all” approach or algorithm for achieving a meaningful existence would seem to be unwise, and instead the process seems to depend on individual and life stage characteristics.

Further, the present research has demonstrated that certain meaning domains predict overall well-being, although age, gender, and level of education moderate these relationships. This realisation is useful to know as it validates the belief that demographic statuses shape and mould the acquisition of meaning from different sources. For example, it seems that deriving a sense of meaning from personal growth is vital for women’s well-being. Future research might examine how other factors, e.g., personal qualities such as curiosity and determination, influence the development of an individual’s meaning in life and investigate whether certain domains are more predictive of well-being according to such variables. Further, it would be important to conduct longitudinal research on the sources of meaning in life as it is important to discover how the nature of meaning changes over time, rather than comparing different age cohorts as was done here. In sum, the present research has identified several critical aspects of life which reliably provide people at large with a sense of meaning, but at the

same time the research has highlighted the fact that significant variation between people exists, signifying the individual nature of making meaning.

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Corresponding author:
Paul E. Jose,
P.O. Box 600,
School of Psychology,
Victoria University of Wellington
Wellington, New Zealand 6012
e-mail: paul.jose@vuw.ac.nz.