

What do we mean when we talk about meaning?

A qualitative study on students' concepts and sources of meaning in life.

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### Abstract

Meaning in life is part of many academic and lay people's ideas of human well-being. For university students meaning in life is an important topic. The experience of meaning includes conceptual beliefs about the structure, and specific sources of meaning. Students' concepts of meaning are largely unexplored, but previous research suggested that they rely on social relationships, altruism, career, and self-actualization and growth as sources of meaning. The present qualitative study examined the concepts and sources of meaning in a sample of four undergraduate university students from different European universities and study programmes. Online interviews with open-ended questions were conducted and the data was analysed through content and thematic analysis. The concept of meaning usually included having purpose, coherence, and significance in life, having multiple fluid sources, and regarding meaning as individually constructed and detected in real-life events. The most common sources of meaning in life were social relationships, self-actualization, altruism, achievement, and positive emotions. Some gender differences emerged for self-actualization and social relationships. Findings about the concept of meaning are potentially new and require validation. Findings on the sources in this study are largely consistent with previous research, apart from the gender differences. Additional research is needed to validate the findings with larger samples and to examine the inconclusive findings about gender-differences.

### **Introduction**

Meaning as part of the positive psychological concept of flourishing has been identified as a key pathway to human well-being (Ryff, 1989; Steger, 2013). A person's life can be described as meaningful when it is experienced as having some larger sense beyond trivial or momentary matters (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006). Or as Steger (2013) eloquently formulated it: "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." (p. 212). Beyond philosophical ideas, meaning in life is thought to be an important factor for well-being in lay people's concepts of meaning (King, 2014). As meaning in life is a salient topic for young adults (Hill et al., 2013), the current interview study explores the concepts and real-life sources of meaning in the lives of undergraduate university students.

Meaning or purpose in life is considered a central factor in many of the different conceptualizations of human well-being. Having a sense of meaning in life contributes to well-being in general as an integral element of the positive psychological concept of flourishing. Keyes' (2002) framework of positive mental health includes feelings of purpose in life as one ingredient of psychological well-being. To name a few more examples, meaning or purpose are also part of Ryff's (1989) six dimensions of well-being, the five elements described by Seligman (2010) and it was found among four components in the general theory of positivity suggested by Fredrickson and Losada (2005). In the eudaimonic perspective, a purpose in life was deemed to be an antecedent and central criterion of well-being (Ryff, 1989; Steger, 2013).

Generally speaking, meaning in life promotes well-being and guards against negative outcomes of mental illness (Morgan & Farsides, 2009). Meaning works as a motivational factor (Steger, 2013) and from an existentialist perspective it is an extremely effective coping mechanism and even a basic human need (Hoffmann, 2009). Self-reported meaning in life is

linked to a higher quality of life (Krause, 2007) and better self-reported health (Steger, Mann, Michels, & Cooper, 2009). There is also an association with meaning in life and lower occurrence of psychological disorders (Steger & Kashdan, 2009), as well as with decreased mortality for older adults (Krause, 2009).

King (2014) noted that many scholars ascribe an adaptive role to the experience of meaning in life, that is, a factor for human survival itself. Thus, considered that meaning in life might play a similar role as sunlight, or various nutriment, this essential nature of meaning in life implies that it is *not* an unattainable ideal. Otherwise, humanity would have likely gone extinct for long. It must rather be a quite commonly available experience to people and must be placed and treated in everyday life of the average person (Heintzelman & King, 2015; King, 2014). The commonness of the experience of meaning then supports the importance of shifting the research focus away from the question about the meaning *of* life (Debats, Drost, & Hansen, 1995). As Frankl (1985) argued, we need to examine the situational experience of meaning *in* life instead of searching for answers on the meaning of human existence itself. The task is to find the conditions that can enable the experience of meaning in life (Bennett, 1984).

Scholars in meaning research have proposed different concepts to define meaning and terminologies are still used ambiguously (Hicks & King, 2009). The terms meaning and purpose are sometimes treated synonymously, while other scholars treat them as separate constructs (Martela & Steger, 2016). There is no evidence for ordinary people making a distinction between meaning and purpose (Heintzelman & King, 2015), but academic definitions seem to move towards including purpose as one component of meaning. The available academic approaches to meaning in life cannot account for the complexity of the construct in its entirety (Hicks & King, 2009), but currently there is consensus on two key components for the experience of meaning in life: (1) having fundamental aims and goals in life and (2) developing and understanding of the self and sense in life (Steger, 2013; Martela & Steger, 2016). Heintzelman and King (2015) proposed a third component they found common to many

conceptualizations of meaning in life, which is the sense of value and significance to one's life. Consequently, Martela and Steger (2016) distinguish between three themes of meaning in life and named them (1) purpose, (2) coherence, and (3) significance. However, it is unclear whether this academic conceptualization applies to the way ordinary people think about meaning and the lay concept of meaning in life is not sufficiently understood (Prinzing, Freitas, & Fredrickson, 2020).

In the folk concept of the 'good life' meaning takes a key role (Scollon & King, 2004) and in previous quantitative and qualitative studies with lay people meaning in life was found among multiple sources of their happiness (see Furnham & Cheng, 2000; Lu & Shih, 1997). People commonly experience meaning in life through beliefs, actions, and the resulting feelings. Although the difference between sources and structural elements of meaning is not entirely clear (Schnell, 2011), Reker and Wong (1988) have proposed the distinction that structural components relate to the way people experience meaning and the sources represent the content of the experience. The specific sources of meaning are areas of life, which an individual derives personal meaning from (O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996) and they are considered stable orientations, basic needs, and they correspond to goals and directions in life (Schnell, 2010). Yalom (1980) proposed altruism, dedication to a higher cause, creativity, self-actualization, hedonism, and self-transcendence as the most important sources of meaning in life. Other researchers used different descriptions and found varying numbers of sources of meaning (Schnell, 2011).

There are only few qualitative studies on meaning in life conducted with students (Hill et al., 2015). For young adults in transitional phases of their life, meaning in life is often a vital topic (Hill et al., 2013) and it was found to be pivotal for finding happiness and psychological well-being in their lives (Bhattacharya, 2011; Zika & Chamberlain, 1987). In their interview study with ten first- to fourth-year students from psychology classes Hill and colleagues (2013) did not discover any prevalence of a typical structural definition or concept of meaning in life.

Participants rather reported meaning in life to be individually constructed, fluid and changeable through life stages. Their beliefs about meaning included having various goals and meaning was sometimes defined as finding fulfilment or purpose. In the same study and in a follow-up study with female psychology students from a doctoral program in counselling, Hill and colleagues (2013; 2015) found relationships, being happy, personal growth, altruism, and career as the most important sources of meaning in life. The importance of religion and spirituality differed strongly between individual students. Bhullar (2019) found loving, helping, and serving others to be the most consistent themes for meaning in life among Indian and American college students, along with enjoying or experiencing life as other much agreed-on sources. In a similar vein, Orrange's (2003) interview study with advanced law and MBA students found a strong emphasis on the family and other forms of community as sources for long-term meaning. Family, social relationships, and personal growth are well established as important sources of meaning across different age groups and cultures (Delle Fave, Brdar, Wissing, & Vella-Brodrick, 2013). While helping others appeared consistently in recent findings, Debats (1999) found almost no attitudes of altruism among his sample of young adult patients and non-patients. In conclusion, it seems that for both undergraduates in early stages of their studies and much more advanced students regardless of their specific study programme, family and other social relationships are the most consistent source of meaning in their lives. This is closely followed by altruism, although past and present findings are inconclusive, and personal growth.

In general, there is currently little research available on students' concepts of meaning. The generalizability of previous findings sources of meaning in students' lives may be limited by the small number of samples and low gender diversity. Especially when considering the Western samples, it is unclear whether altruism as a source of meaning in life is generalizable to other populations than female students in general, female students in psychology classes, or prospective female counsellors. Evidence suggests that altruistic behaviour and attitudes are more common for women (Xi, Lee, Carter, & Delgado, 2018), thus, altruism may only be a

common source of meaning in life for females. Moreover, finding altruism as such a prominent source of meaning in recent studies (see Hill et al., 2013; 2015; Bhullar, 2019) is inconsistent with older findings (see Debats, 1999) and needs further exploration (Hill et al., 2013).

Given the potential influence of meaning in life on mental health, it is not surprising that Delle Fave and colleagues (2011) pointed out the need to further examine the concept of meaning as a tool for individuals to achieve well-being. Some scholars already use meaning in positive psychological therapy, such as Meaning Therapy (Wong, 2010). In order to improve the effectiveness of positive psychological interventions in general and to contribute to the necessary development of measurements for meaning and validation of the concept (VanderWeele, 2017), it is of great importance to better understand the basic question: What do we mean when we talk about meaning? Meaning in life is generally a salient topic for university students (Zika & Chamberlain, 1987; Hill et al., 2013). Therefore, the aim of the current interview study is to examine the concept and sources of meaning in life of undergraduate university students.

## **Method**

### **Study Design**

This qualitative study was designed as a cross-sectional interview study. A sample of four undergraduate university students was recruited through purposive sampling. Interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions and students were asked to explain how, where and when they find meaning in life. The data was analysed through content and thematic analysis. The ethics committee of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social sciences at the University of Twente in The Netherlands approved the study (request number 200337).

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited through the social network of the researcher by asking friends for potential participants in their social and family network. No compensation was offered for participation. Potential participants were then personally approached by the

researcher. For eligibility they had to be enrolled in university at the time of the interview and had to be in their final year of their bachelor studies, as these students are usually personally concerned with meaning in life (Wilt, Bleidorn, & Revelle, 2016). Inclusion criteria were an equal proportion of males and females, psychology students and non-psychology students, fluency in either English or German language, and an age between 18-25 years. This particular age-frame roughly describes people in the transitional phase of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007), thus, the participants can be regarded 'young adults' for whom meaning in life is potentially a salient topic (Hill et al., 2013). The final sample consisted of four participants (2 females, 2 males; 22-24 years old,  $M = 22.75$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ) who were undergraduate students in their final year of their bachelor's programme at different universities in Germany ( $n=2$ ), The Netherlands ( $n=1$ ), and Austria ( $n=1$ ). One participant was majoring in psychology, one in international human resource management, one in primary school teaching, and one studied a double degree in law and Middle Eastern studies.

### **Data Collection**

Limitations of a previous study indicated that being prepared to talk about meaning in life may benefit the ability to articulate thoughts more clearly (Hill et al., 2013). Therefore, participants were asked to select a photo from their phone or computer that exemplified meaning in life for them, and to keep it available for the interview. They were informed that they would be asked to present the photo to the interviewer during the interview. Due to contact restrictions in the ongoing COVID-19 (World Health Organisation, 2020) pandemic at the time this study was conducted, all interviews were conducted via Skype or Zoom instead of in person. The respective platform was chosen based on availability for the participant. All interviews were audio recorded using Zoom or Audacity (2020). At the start of the interview, the purpose and procedure of the study were explained. Interviewees were clearly informed about their right to withdraw from this study at any time and were then asked to orally confirm their informed consent on tape.



Each interview started with the photo exercise to stimulate thoughts about personal meaning in life. The interviewees presented their photo and were then asked to explain their choice and how this photo exemplified meaning in life for them. Then the interview proceeded according to the semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix) which included 19 open-ended questions about general concepts of meaning in life and covered potential specific sources of meaning in life (fun and enjoyment, university studies and career, altruism, social relationships, self-actualization, and spirituality and religion) identified in previous research. Helping others as one particular source of meaning in life was addressed with additional questions. Questions in the beginning of the interview protocol were formulated so that participants could speak freely about their beliefs regarding concepts and sources of meaning. Afterwards, all participants were also asked about the same specific sources of meaning in life. The interview protocol for this study was based on the interview protocols created by Hill and colleagues (2013; 2015). Their protocols were combined into one and additions were made to the original questions pertaining helping others. The interview protocol was also translated to German. The interviews had an average duration of 49 minutes ( $SD = 8.22$ ) and were all conducted in German, the native language of all participants. In the transcriptions of the interviews all names, dates, places, etc. were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. After transcriptions were finished, the audio and video recordings of the interviews and the photos were deleted.

### **Data Analysis**

One interview was manually transcribed and three were automatically transcribed using Trint (2019). Any chatter and filler words unrelated to the topic were removed. Transcripts remained in the original interview language German but were coded in English language using Atlas.ti. Codes were grouped into themes following an inductive approach. Codes were assigned to text fragments in which participants indicated relevance of the respective source of meaning in life in one particular context. Fragments consisted of singular words or sentences

and multiple codes per text fragment were possible. Thus, the number of codes represented the frequency with that individual topics were mentioned. In general, codes that were only assigned to one interview were not included in generating themes. The total number of codes in the initial coding scheme was significantly reduced by merging codes and re-coding several fragments. The entire data analysis was conducted by one person. The final coding scheme can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

*Overview and Frequencies of Themes and Codes*

Themes	Definition	Example quote	Total fragments ( <i>n</i> =210)
Concept of meaning			
Definition of meaning	Beliefs about the structure and the components of meaning	“Meaning of life is not something static. I’m not sure whether I only have one meaning in life or if there are multiple. [...] But meaning in life is also something that gives me a purpose.”	36
Development of meaning	Beliefs about the development of personal meaning over time	“I believe that I become more aware of what is actually important in life [...]”	20
Sources of meaning			
Social relationships	Having family or friends, and/or spending time with and helping other people gives meaning	“[...] spending a lot of time with others. Like friendships, my family [...]”	43
Self-actualization	Self-actualizations and personal growth gives meaning	“I think regarding achievement and goals I surely want self-actualization [...]”	34
Altruism	Making positive contributions to society and having positive influence on other people give meaning	“[...] to do something that makes a good impact to the world, or to bring something positive to others’ lives.”	26

Achievement	Working in a fulfilling job and studying in university gives meaning	“Profession- and study-wise is the meaning that I can work in a field that I really want, and where I am happy with my work.”	24
Positive emotions	Emotions of happiness, life satisfaction, fun, enjoyment, and pleasure gives meaning	“So that the positive emotions simply prevail. [...] to have a good feeling with what you do [...]”	22
Religion and spirituality	Religious and/or spiritual beliefs and/or practices gives meaning	“I believe there is something, that’s there and that surely looks after what you do and ensures that things happen as they should or not.”	5

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## **Results**

### **General impression**

All interviews proceeded as intended and without major interruptions. The participants were generally eager to talk and seemed comfortable despite the unusual setting of being asked relatively private questions by a stranger or loosely acquainted person in an online call. All participants apparently possessed certain ideas about meaning in life in terms of a broader concept and more distinct sources, but clearly articulating these thoughts and creating detailed and coherent descriptions of their views was notably difficult.

Most participants had multiple ideas on how to change their circumstances for the better if there were absolutely no limitations for them and thought about spending more time being creative, living close to nature, or fantasized about moving to a remote island with all friends and family. Remarkably, only one female participant was apparently almost completely satisfied with her present life situation and explained that she would not make any changes to her current life.

It became also clear that some participants had spent more time previously in their lives reflecting on abstract concepts of the meaning of life, or on the concrete things that made their life meaningful, than others. However, regardless of their previous experiences with the topic, most participants stated that meaning in life was something they discussed rarely with close others, and almost never with strangers. Most participants enjoyed the opportunity to converse about meaning in life in an informal atmosphere and expressed their interest in reflecting on their own views more thoroughly. Some stated that the interview prompted them to rethink and evaluate the clarity of their thoughts about meaning in life. Although personal, the questions were not perceived as intruding in any way.

### **Photo exercise**

The photo exercise at the start of each interview was generally well-received. Most participants stated that selecting a suitable and representative photo for their personal concept

of meaning in life was challenging and prompted them to think about their meaning in life before the interview. They reported that the exercise encouraged them to consciously reflect both the task itself as well as their concrete personal sources of meaning in life, as this statement by one male participant illustrated:

*“And I also very much liked the exercise with the photo, on the one hand to even having to select one. And then to also consciously look at the photo and to think about it: Why am I somehow having some kind of emotion every time I am looking at this?”*

Two participants chose a photo that depicted them with either friends or family members, while the other two chose more abstract representations. Apart from social relationships as the major theme for both female participants, other topics in the photos mostly revolved around an independent life, being free of worry, fun and enjoyment, or other positive emotions.

### **Themes**

The results from the interviews were categorized in two themes and eight different codes (see Table 1). One theme with two different codes was related to the concept of meaning in life, which included the students' general or abstract beliefs about the definition, structure, and development of meaning in life. The other theme with six different codes covered specific sources, which describe the areas in the students' lives that provided meaning to them. All themes appeared in all interviews, however, there were individual and gender-specific differences for the frequencies of single codes. Table 1 shows that the most common source of meaning in life was social relationships, followed by self-actualization, altruism, achievement, positive emotions, and lastly, religion and spirituality. Although these results are displayed as distinct themes and codes, there were considerable overlaps and several interconnections among the sources. Most importantly, aspects of altruism were involved in the perception of social relationships as meaningful and was also a factor in career choices. Similarly, positive emotions were closely bound to the experience of meaning in social relationships and to several facets of all other themes

### *Concept of meaning*

**Definition of meaning.** The individual beliefs about the general concept of meaning in life had structural commonalities, but the participants did not have a clear or uniform definition of meaning in life. The structure of meaning was typically thought to consist of multiple sources at once, instead of relying on a single source to fuel existence. Several aspects of their definitions were congruent with the academic concept of meaning (see Martela & Steger, 2016). All participants thought that meaning in life meant to have purpose in form of goals, aims, or direction, and mentioned coherence, that is in this case, to possess a comprehensible idea of life. For most participants meaning in life was also characterized as the experience of significance, that means living a valuable and generally fulfilling life. All participants explained they would not usually be prompted to think about meaning in life as in an abstract philosophical sense, or question the meaning of their existence itself. Instead, one female participant said:

*"[...] I studied in [a major French city] for a while and there I often thought with the things one had to do, what is the meaning? Does that move me forward in my life, does that move me forward, but like fundamentally, that you are having doubts about what am I actually doing here, is that meaningful? But not like, well these are more concrete things that you are just spending you time with, if that is meaningful or if you would rather like to spend your time differently. But like fundamentally about the meaning of life, what am I doing here fundamentally, I don't think much about that."*

The example shows that the participants more often questioned and evaluated the meaning of concrete actions, decisions, situations, or tasks, such as assignments in university. Here the participants would sometimes evaluate the relevance of particular tasks for their overall idea of life or its benefits to reach their goals in life.

**Development of meaning.** All participants thought of meaning in life as individually and consciously constructed. Specific sources of meaning were regarded as exchangeable and malleable throughout life and as naturally changing with age. They reported an increase in their awareness for or importance of meaning in life in recent years. Reasons for this development

were, for example, past experiences linked to their university studies, an increase in perceived family responsibility, or conscious efforts to clarify one's own meaning in life. Most participants regarded their parents and childhood as positive role-models for their present concept and sources of meaning in life. The participants desired a similar standard of living, or noticed the influence of parents and childhood on their own values or preferences for certain activities, for example.

### *Sources of meaning*

**Social relationships.** For all participants close and harmonic relationships with family and friends provided meaning in their lives and for most participants, social relationships were the single most important source of meaning. Romantic relationships were emphasized less and most participants were not currently in a relationship. Some participants valued spending time with others more than others and, in general, this appeared to be slightly more important to both female participants. One important way of creating meaning through social relationships was by helping both close and stranger people in various everyday situations. The meaning of social relationships was also often connected to positive emotions like fun or feelings of security:

*“Other people definitely give me this sense of meaning. If you are connected with other people or somehow, well, if you somehow share something, that you somehow have things in common. I would also say that this is related to meaning for me.”*

Another way of finding meaning in social relationships for most participants was when their own contributions were recognized and met with certain esteem. This contributed to the feeling that their existence was an indispensable or significant part of their social environment.

**Self-actualization.** The experience of self-actualization as meaningful was common among all participants, but characterized by individual differences more than other themes. There was no generalizable pattern, apart from that all participants found personal growth an important source of meaning. Most participants stressed having a distinct work-life balance with multiple sources of meaning. They usually characterised a satisfactory work-life balance



as regularly incorporating creative activities, doing sports, and enjoyment of nature and arts, into daily life, and distributing time equally between work and leisure activities. Another common aspect of self-actualization for most participants was to act from intrinsic motivation.

There were two outstanding and perhaps surprising findings. Firstly, autonomy provided meaning for the male participants only. They defined autonomy as living life with as little limitations as possible, and in terms being able to independently manage and satisfy their own concerns. In connection with the feeling of being free of worry, which was also only mentioned by the male participants (see positive emotions below), these findings marked the most obvious gender-differences in sources of meaning. Secondly, although self-actualization was important, most participants had a critical view on this topic as well. One female participant explained:

*“Well, yes, I think that everyone should do this and get to their full-, live up to their full potential. But just be careful what happens around you, not just narrow-mindedly being like ‘I have to achieve this and I want to achieve this’ and go, put bluntly, go over dead bodies, but rather, I want this as it is possible for me to a certain degree.”*

The example underlines the finding that most participants associated self-actualization with a negative or egocentric connotation. They stressed the need for being cautious not to interpret individual fulfilment as purely economic success or as overly self-centred.

**Altruism.** All participants had the distinct desire to have a positive impact to the world, to achieve improvements and change for others, or to contribute their share to some form of a greater good. Altruistic behaviours and being in service of others was often motivated by the desire to give something back in gratitude for one's own privileged situation and sometimes by duty. The most common motivation to help others or benefit society at large was the personal experience of positive emotions, such as happiness, which was then often connected to making and seeing other people happy through their help. One female participant illustrated this:

*“[...] it's just knowing that you somehow improved someone else's day, or that someone else was pleased or something. That is actually what gives meaning to me, or a positive feeling, or when you think ‘today was a good day, today I somehow, well, maybe I gave something back’ [...]”*

Fostering the development of others and inspiring them was named by most participants. One male participant, who also offered coaching services for others in his job besides university, strongly emphasized this. But also for the other two participants who mentioned fostering the development of others, this was connected to their most likely future profession (teaching and psychotherapy). All participants agreed that their awareness and personal importance of helping others had increased over their lifetime.

**Achievement.** Pursuing a career and university studies generally provided meaning in life for most participants. To experience fulfilment, all participants wanted to work in their profession of choice. Interestingly, a fulfilling career was also linked to professions that contributed to society and had a positive influence in the world. All participants said that their professional or academic choices were influenced by the desire to improve the situations of other people, however, to varying degrees. While the prospective teacher and the psychologist considered their future professions as intrinsically determined to help others, the other two students in law and in human resource management felt the need to negotiate altruism with financial advantages within their likely profession. The participants had differing views on their university studies. The importance of their studies for their meaning in life ranged from being an integral for the two females, to minor significance or even sometimes questioning personal meaning for the two males. One female participant strongly emphasized curiosity and learning and understanding new things in university as meaningful, and one male had a somewhat contrasting preference of applying knowledge over acquiring it.

**Positive emotions.** Several forms of positive emotions as a source of meaning in life were a frequently raised topic for all participants. Common forms for all or most participants were happiness and life satisfaction, and having fun or enjoyment. In general, all positive emotions were broadly interconnected with most other themes. The various emotions usually appeared as outcomes of other actions, but were ultimately what made the participants perceive these actions as meaningful. The value of positive emotions that most participants referred to

can probably most aptly be described as being an end in itself. Having fun and enjoyment were experienced as part of social relationships and were associated with self-actualization and leisure activities. One female participant explained the framing of happiness and life satisfaction and fun:

*“[...] what would be most important to me, would actually be to spend the time that you have with people that you like, who you have fun with, where it is jolly. Exactly, that simply somehow positive feelings predominate. That would also be my goal, that you somehow as much as possible within a certain frame, somehow have a good feeling with what you do, with the ones you surround yourself with.”*

It is noteworthy that while most participants emphasized fun or enjoyment, one male participant expressed his attitude not to focus on purely hedonistic meaning as much. The feeling of being free of worry that only the male participants introduced was associated with the absence of stress, the desire of a carefree life and linked to peaceful and simple child-like states.

**Religion and spirituality.** All participants had thoughts about religion and spirituality, but this was of minor importance for their meaning in life. Spiritual beliefs were slightly more prevalent than religion and most participants expressed their faith in some form of higher order influence in the world. Practicing a distinct religion regularly was not important, only punctual and selective references were meaningful to half of the participants. Instead, fate-like concepts, rules of Karma, or Eastern philosophies were more prominent for most participants.

### **Discussion**

This interview study examined the concept and sources of meaning in the lives of undergraduate university students. Within the concept of meaning the students in this sample typically defined meaning in life as having multiple sources of purpose, feeling coherence, and experiencing significance, and they usually derived meaning from concrete events. They commonly thought of meaning as individually constructed and changing. The important sources of meaning in life were social relationships, self-actualization, altruism, achievement, and positive emotions. Social relationships and self-actualization were the most relevant sources,

and also showed some gender-differences. Altruism and positive emotions were strongly connected to most other sources of meaning.

The students in this sample had several beliefs about the general concept of meaning and most findings are consistent with previous research (see Hill et al., 2013). It is still unclear how lay people think about meaning (Prinzing, Freitas, & Fredrickson, 2020), but the findings in this study indicate that the concept of meaning in life for these students is similar to aspects of the academic conceptualizations of meaning. In all, we see that three academic ideas of meaning capture the concept of meaning in life that these students believe in. First, parts of their definition of meaning match the three facets of meaning proposed by Martela and Steger (2016). Having goals in life (purpose), feeling that life is comprehensible (coherence), and to lead a life worth living (significance) represented a major proportion of the students' definition of meaning in life. The finding that all three facets seem to matter to similar extent somewhat contradicts recent findings of a longitudinal study by Costin and Vignoles (2020), who found significance as considerably more important for perceived meaning judgements than purpose and coherence. At present, the reasons for this difference remain unclear, as both the findings from the present study and from this very first evaluation of purpose, coherence, and significance (Costin & Vignoles, 2020) need further validation. The second finding that is captured by previous research is that these students thought of their meaning in life as originating from multiple and changeable sources. This supports the concept of fluid compensation, whereby a sense of meaning in life can be maintained by turning to alternative sources of meaning when one source is threatened (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006). And third, these students believed that meaning is individually constructed. This is supported by evidence of the importance of creating meaning in both academic and lay concepts of meaning (King & Hicks, 2009). But it became clear that the participants thought about meaning in life more commonly in the context of concrete events or decisions, and were usually not inclined to think about and construct meaning in the broad, abstract, or existential sense. At first sight, this most

common experience of meaning in life for these students seems contradictory to the academic definitions of meaning, which locate the meaningful life beyond the momentary and in the larger sense (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006). However, King and Hicks (2009) have previously referred to the extraction of meaning from positive and negative life experiences as detected meaning. Detected meaning was suggested to complement the construction of meaning in a synergetic process. The findings in this study indicate that both the construction and detection of meaning are relevant for students, but detected meaning in everyday situations appears to be the more important and common way of making meaning. In sum, it seems that for the university students in this sample the concept of meaning in life commonly means to detect and draw on multiple fluid sources of purpose, coherence, and significance.

The sources of meaning in life found in the present study are largely consistent with previous research. The findings underscore the role of social relationships as the single most important source of meaning across multiple studies (Delle Fave et al., 2013). Among the many categorisations of sources of meaning in life (for an overview see Schnell, 2011) the most comprehensive list with 26 different sources by Schnell (2009) appears to be exhaustive of all sources of meaning found in the present study. The students' sources of meaning in life in this study also correspond to the main sources proposed by Yalom (1980), although there was little emphasis on hedonism and self-transcendence. Hill and colleagues (2013) also found a lack of emphasis on these two sources and explained this with the fact that Yalom based his sources on philosophical ideas and the work with adults in psychotherapy, which are likely very different from university student samples. With general regard to the similarly designed study by Hill and colleagues (2013) the most salient sources (social relationships, altruism, self-actualization, achievement, and positive emotions) showed a great amount of overlap between both samples. These findings are not surprising considering that the interview protocol in the present study was adapted from the protocols derived by Hill and colleagues (2013; 2015). Furthermore, although their sample was slightly younger and they were able to show that it was representative

for the student population at this university, the participants in both studies had similar Western cultural background. The fact that only main findings correspond to the previous ones and several typical sources of meaning within the themes were not found in the present study (see Hill et al., 2013) may be accounted for by the small sample size of this study. A potentially new finding from the present study was the negative connotation of self-actualization. Participants commonly associated self-actualization with tendencies towards egocentric behaviour. Possible explanations for this unexpected finding are higher maturity of the slightly older participants that might imply more reflective or critical thoughts (see Friend & Zubek, 1958), or factors related to country-specific cultural ideas (see Pflug, 2009) about self-actualization and personal growth, for example.

Present findings were consistent with the study by Hill and colleagues (2013) for altruistic behaviour as one important source of meaning in life. In both samples, altruism was motivated by positive contributions to society, giving something back, choosing a profession to help others and helping others entailed creating positive emotions for oneself and others and affecting others positively. It is widely accepted that emotions of happiness are involved in helping behaviour as part of classical feedback loops. Helping others increases giving and this in turn promotes happiness (Post, 2011). And emotions of happiness were found as an important source of meaning in this study. The relatively high importance of helping others for meaning in life can also be understood in light of other previous studies that found a consistently stronger relation of helping others than hedonic behaviours to well-being (Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008). Present findings also support Bhullar's (2019) recent suggestion that devoting life to the service of others creates meaning in life. In past research, inconsistent findings emerged about gender differences in the importance of helping behaviours (Crossley & Langdridge, 2005), but the present findings do not indicate such differences. However, the current study interviewed only four participants, thus, the findings are not representative and individual differences may have influenced the results.

A surprising finding were gender differences self-actualization, precisely, in autonomy, which was only perceived by the male participants as an important source of meaning in their lives. First of all, they described their autonomy in terms of central aspects of the concept and mentioned having separate needs that they could independently pursue. Also, the power to make own choices that autonomy implies was important. Traditionally, autonomous behaviour has been regarded a specifically male characteristic (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1986). However, previous research on actual gender differences in the importance and prevalence of autonomy yielded mixed results (see Matud, Bethencourth, Ibáñez, & Fortes, 2020; McBride, Bacchiochi, & Bagby, 2005). The ambiguous findings on gender differences might partially be explained by different measures of autonomy, but also by cultural differences in the samples (Bekker & van Assen, 2008). Autonomy appears to be strongly influenced by social and cultural norms (Pilishvili, Danilova, & Yamaltdinova, 2019), which possibly affect the gender differences as well. Another point to consider is that autonomy is conceptually associated with connectedness (Bekker & van Assen, 2008). In other words, autonomy is a way of relating to others and, in this sense, autonomy is not fundamentally different from attachment (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1986). This supports the suggestion that women seem to use different expressions of connectedness or attachment and this has been mistakenly interpreted as lower autonomy (Bekker & van Assen, 2008). Moreover, this might also explain that for the female participants in this study social relationships seemed slightly more important. In sum, however, the gender differences found in this study remain inconclusive.

### **Strengths and limitations**

One strength of this study was that the present study featured a sample with an equal proportion of male and female participants. This allowed for the occurrence of a few gender-specific differences in the importance of individual sources of meaning in life. The sample also consisted of students from a diverse range of study programmes at different universities. Another unique element of this study was to include the photo exercise into the participants'

preparation of the interview and using it as an introduction at the start of each interview. One possible benefit from using Skype and Zoom to conduct the interviews online was that it allowed participants to talk for longer than they would under normal circumstances, as they were already at home (see Lo Iacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016), had more time available, and possibly felt more comfortable talking in a familiar environment.

The first of several limitations of the present study is, however, that the online interviewing possibly had a negative influence on the general quality of participants' responses. Building trust to talk about personal meaning in life between the interviewer and the participant may be more difficult than in face to face interviews. Second, the sample in this study was small compared to other interview studies and it was not representative of any European undergraduate university student population. The findings about gender differences in this study may not persist in larger samples. Third, the basic indicator for the importance of sources of meaning was the frequency of codes and this only provides a rough estimate. In other words, this study was not designed to investigate the relative importance of different sources of meaning in life and, therefore, these findings may not be accurate and sources may in fact be more or less important than they are presented in this study. Fourth, developing the interview protocol, the interviews, and the coding process were all conducted by one person only. This possibly affected the quality and suitability of the interview questions, and the reliability of the coding. Fifth, although the interviewer had some previous experience in conducting interviews, there was no formal training. It is possible that the lack of experience and training influenced how each individual participant was approached, resulting in a certain degree of inconsistency in the data collection. Sixth, the translation of the interview protocol from English to German language and that all interviews were also conducted in German are possible limitations to the generalizability of the findings. The influence of language on lay concepts of meaning has not been explored in great detail yet, but in the case of German, previous research suggested culture-specific factors that shape the meanings of happiness (Pflug, 2009). Thus, the German language



and German culture of the present student sample potentially influenced their beliefs about meaning in life. And lastly, findings must generally be considered within the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (World Health Organisation, 2020). For example, participants said that spending time in social isolation affected their views on social relationships and helping behaviours.

### **Implications and future research**

Particularly the findings about the students' concept of meaning in life require validation as there are almost no studies on lay concepts of meaning to compare. This means that the consistency of the three academic facets of meaning, purpose, coherence, and significance (Martela & Steger, 2016), with students' concepts of meaning must be further examined with qualitative methods. For the students in this sample detected meaning (King & Hicks, 2009) in concrete events seemed more important than the abstract construction of meaning in life. Detected meaning has received little consideration in research but King and Hicks (2009) proposed it may play an important role in maintaining and reinforcing individual sources of meaning. Therefore, future studies may interview students about in what types of events they detect meaning, or simply ask how they make meaning in their lives, in order examine the relative importance of detected and constructed meaning.

Sources of meaning seem to be much better understood than the lay concepts, but there are few qualitative studies on meaning in life with university students in general, and there are even fewer with samples from the European student population. The findings in present study need to be validated with larger samples with equal proportions of males and females, and further research is needed on gender differences in autonomy and helping behaviours as sources of meaning in life. Findings of the studies so far remain inconclusive.

Moreover, following the suggestion by Pflug (2009), the roles of language and culture in the concept and sources of meaning in life need to be examined further. Thus, future studies may compare samples from different but close cultural backgrounds, or examine whether

meaning in life depends on language with participants from the same country where different languages are spoken.

Students usually seem to have difficulties with clearly articulating their thoughts about meaning in life (see Hill et al., 2013), therefore, photo exercises, and possibly more extensive variations of it, may be promising options to improve the quality of participants' answers. Also, in non-research settings young people in general may benefit from exercises that stimulate their thoughts about personal meaning in life. Future research might investigate whether presenting participants with an incentive to think about meaning in life influences the clarity, complexity or amount of thought they articulate during an interview.

Conducting the data collection online had several advantages and disadvantages. Future qualitative study designs may consider online interviewing an interesting option to improve the efficiency of qualitative research. It will be important to weigh the possibility to easily interview more participants in a comfortable environment than in face to face interviewing, up against the lack of non-verbal cues and possible lack of trust disclosing to a stranger interviewer on screen, for example. Therefore, further exploration is needed to determine whether online interviewing augments or impedes the assets of qualitative interview studies.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from the present study suggest that for undergraduate university students meaning in life means to have multiple sources of purpose, coherence, and significance (see Martela & Steger, 2016). Students think of meaning as individually constructed, but commonly use detected meaning (see King & Hicks, 2009) in everyday events to make meaning in life. The findings support evidence that undergraduates particularly draw on social relationships, self-actualization and growth, altruism, achievement, and positive emotions as fluid and interconnected sources of meaning in their lives. The relatively high importance of helping others was surprising in previous research (Hill et al., 2013), but the present findings strongly support the salience and commonness of altruistic behaviour as one particular source of

meaning. The gender differences in this study remain inconclusive and need further research. As meaning in life plays a key role for happiness and flourishing (Ryff, 1989; Steger, 2013; King, 2014), understanding how university students experience and think of meaning will help enabling more individuals to find meaning and happiness in life. Seeing that young educated people find meaning in altruistic behaviour in many areas of life is an encouraging sign for the future. The present study made some small steps towards a better understanding of lay concepts of meaning in life, contributed validation to an existing body of knowledge about specific sources of meaning, and advocates for further examination of the concept and promotion of the sources of meaning in life among university students. For university students, meaning in life is a compelling topic and they possess complex beliefs and networks of sources of meaning which are worth investigating.

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## Appendix

### Interview protocol English version

1. Generally, what comes to mind when you think about “meaning in life”?
2. How would you define meaning of life?
3. How much do you think about meaning in life (MIL)? If so, when do you think about MIL or what makes you do so? If not, why not?
4. What gives you a sense of purpose or meaning in your life? (If you have no meaning of life, how do you fit into the world/what sense do you make of life/what significance does the term have/what do you think about meaning in life/can you talk more about your personal philosophy?)
5. What are your goals in life? (How does that give you meaning?)
6. What are your professional/academic goals?
7. If there were no limitations for you (e.g. money, gender, physical or mental abilities), what would you do for the rest of your life? (Ask about limitations.)
8. How does the pursuit of enjoyment, pleasure, or fun contribute to your MIL?
9. How do your studies contribute to your MIL?
10. How does a focus on others (e.g. altruism) contribute to your MIL?
  - a. What makes helping someone else meaningful (e.g. personal benefits, positive emotions, reciprocity)?
  - b. When is helping others the most meaningful?
  - c. What do you feel when you can help others? (Ask for a specific situation.)
  - d. Are you able to fully enact your desire to help others? If not, why not? (Ask about limitations.)
  - e. How has the importance of the focus on others changed throughout your life?
  - f. How is your focus on others represented in your career/professional choices?

11. How do relationships (e.g. family, romantic relationships, friendships) contribute to your MIL?
12. How does self-actualization (e.g. achieving your potential, working towards goals, achievements, creativity) contribute to your MIL?
13. How do your beliefs about spirituality/religion contribute to your MIL?
14. In what ways have your childhood experiences and family background contributed to your MIL?
15. Tell me about a specific incident, event, or time that caused you to question your MIL.
16. How have your thoughts about MIL changed throughout the course of your life?
17. Have your thoughts about MIL changed since the beginning of your studies?
18. What are your additional thoughts about meaning in life?
19. What was it like to participate in this interview?

#### **Interview protocol German version**

1. Was fällt dir allgemein zum Thema Sinn im Leben ein?
2. Wie definierst du den Sinn des Lebens? (Wenn du keinen Sinn des Lebens hast, wie beschreibst du deine Philosophie?)
3. Wie viel denkst du über Sinn im Leben nach? Wann denkst du darüber nach oder was bringt dich dazu, darüber nachzudenken? Falls nicht, warum nicht?
4. Was gibt dir ein Gefühl von Sinn, Bedeutung oder Zweck im Leben?
5. Was sind deine Ziele im Leben? (Wie bringt dir das Sinn?)
6. Was sind deine beruflichen/akademischen Ziele?
7. Wenn du keine Beschränkungen hättest (z.B. Geld, Geschlecht, physische oder mentale Fähigkeiten), was würdest du für den Rest deines Lebens tun?
8. Wie tragen das Streben nach Freude, Lust, oder Spaß zu deinem Sinn im Leben bei?
9. Wie trägt dein Studium zu deinem Sinn im Leben bei?

10. Wie trägt ein Fokus auf andere Menschen (z.B. Altruismus) zu deinem Sinn im Leben bei?
- Was macht anderen zu helfen für dich bedeutsam? (e.g. persönliche Vorteile, positive Emotionen, Reziprozität)
  - Wann ist Anderen zu helfen am bedeutsamsten?
  - Was fühlst du, wenn du Anderen helfen kannst?
  - Kannst du dein Bedürfnis anderen zu helfen voll ausleben? Falls nicht, warum nicht?
  - Wie hat sich die Wichtigkeit eines Fokus auf Andere im Laufe deines Lebens verändert?
  - Wie ist ein Fokus auf Andere in deiner beruflichen/akademischen Wahl repräsentiert?
11. Wie tragen Beziehungen (z.B. Familie, Freunde, romantische Beziehungen) zu deinem Sinn im Leben bei?
12. Wie trägt Selbstverwirklichung (z.B. Erreichen deines Potentials, auf Ziele hinarbeiten, Leistungen oder persönliche Errungenschaften, Kreativität) zu deinem Sinn im Leben bei?
13. Wie trägt Religion/Spiritualität zu deinem Sinn im Leben bei?
14. Wie haben deine Kindheitserfahrungen und dein familiärer Hintergrund zu deinem Sinn im Leben beigetragen?
15. Bitte erzähle mir von einem bestimmten Ereignis, Vorfall, oder einer Zeit wo du an deinem Sinn im Leben gezweifelt hast.
16. Wie haben sich deine Gedanken zu Sinn im Leben im Laufe deines Lebens verändert?
17. Wie haben sich deine Gedanken zu Sinn im Leben im Laufe deines Studiums verändert?
18. Welche zusätzlichen Gedanken hast du zu Sinn im Leben?
19. Wie war es an diesem Interview teilzunehmen?