

Purpose and Meaning in Life Among Young Adults: A Review of Theoretical Foundations, Psychosocial Correlates, and Cultural Considerations

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Abstract – Purpose and meaning in life have emerged as central constructs within positive psychology, with particular relevance to young adulthood, a developmental period marked by identity consolidation, educational and career transitions, and the negotiation of long-term life direction. This paper reviews the theoretical foundations of meaning and purpose, beginning with Frankl's existential account of the will to meaning and extending to Steger's dual-dimension model distinguishing the presence of and search for meaning, Damon's developmental conception of purpose as a self-transcendent and stable intention, and integrative frameworks such as Martela and Steger's tripartite model of coherence, purpose, and significance. The review synthesizes empirical evidence linking meaning and purpose to psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and reduced depressive and anxious symptomatology among young adults and college populations, while also considering how the presence of and search for meaning relate differently to adjustment. Particular attention is given to cultural and contextual influences on meaning-making among young adults in India, including the role of religiosity, spirituality, and indigenous philosophical frameworks such as the purushartha (dharma, artha, kama, moksha), alongside emerging qualitative evidence on how urban Indian young adults construct meaning amid globalization and shifting cultural expectations. The review concludes by identifying gaps in the literature, particularly the relative scarcity of culturally grounded and longitudinal research on meaning and purpose among South Asian young adults, and proposes directions for future research.

Keywords – meaning in life, purpose, young adults, emerging adulthood, well-being, culture, spirituality

I. INTRODUCTION

The question of what makes life meaningful has long occupied philosophers and, more recently, psychologists studying human well-being and flourishing. Within psychology, meaning in life is generally understood as the extent to which individuals comprehend, make sense of, and perceive significance in their existence, while purpose refers more specifically to a stable, forward-looking intention that organizes goals and behavior around something that is both personally significant and consequential beyond the self. Young adulthood, spanning roughly the late teens through the twenties, represents a developmentally significant window for the emergence of purpose and meaning, as individuals navigate educational choices, career entry, romantic commitments, and the broader task of constructing an adult life narrative.

This review synthesizes the theoretical and empirical literature on purpose and meaning in life among young adults. It begins with foundational theoretical accounts, including Frankl's existential psychology of the will to meaning, Steger's empirically grounded distinction between the presence of and search for meaning, and Damon's developmental model of youth purpose. It then considers integrative contemporary frameworks that decompose meaning into multiple components. The review subsequently examines empirical evidence linking meaning and purpose to psychological well-being and mental health outcomes among young adults, before turning to cultural and contextual influences, with particular attention to religiosity, spirituality, and indigenous philosophical frameworks relevant to young adults in India. The review concludes by identifying gaps in the literature and proposing directions for future research.

II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MEANING AND PURPOSE

Frankl's Existential Account: The Will to Meaning

Contemporary psychological interest in meaning in life owes much to Frankl's existential framework, developed in the aftermath of his experiences in Nazi concentration camps and articulated most fully in *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl proposed that the primary motivational force in human beings is not the pursuit of pleasure, as classical psychoanalytic theory suggested, but a will to meaning: an innate drive to find significance and purpose even amid suffering. This existential perspective gave rise to logotherapy, a therapeutic approach oriented around helping individuals discover meaning through creative engagement with the world, meaningful experiences and relationships, and the attitude one adopts toward unavoidable suffering. Frankl's framework laid the conceptual groundwork for subsequent empirical efforts to operationalize and measure meaning in life.

III. STEGER'S PRESENCE-SEARCH DISTINCTION

A major advance in the empirical study of meaning came with the development of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) by Steger and colleagues, which distinguishes two independent dimensions: the presence of meaning, reflecting the degree to which individuals currently experience their lives as meaningful, and the search for meaning, reflecting the degree to which individuals are actively seeking to establish or deepen a sense of meaning. This distinction proved conceptually and empirically important, as the two dimensions relate differently to

psychological adjustment. Presence of meaning is consistently associated with higher well-being, life satisfaction, and lower depression and anxiety, whereas search for meaning shows a more complex and sometimes negative association with well-being, particularly when it co-occurs with low presence, suggesting an unresolved or distressing quest for significance. Notably, when both presence and search are high, some research suggests this pattern may reflect healthy, ongoing engagement with meaning-making rather than distress.

Damon's Developmental Model of Youth Purpose

Complementing existential and presence-search approaches, Damon and colleagues developed a specifically developmental account of purpose oriented toward adolescents and young adults. Damon, Menon, and Bronk defined purpose as a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is simultaneously meaningful to the self and productively consequential for the world beyond the self. This definition emphasizes two components: an aim, referring to a long-term goal orientation, and engagement, referring to the active and sustained motivation to pursue that aim. Damon's subsequent work found that only a minority of young people demonstrate a fully formed sense of purpose during adolescence and early adulthood, with many remaining in states of purposeless drifting, purposeless dreaming, or disengaged dabbling rather than committed engagement, underscoring purpose as a developmental achievement rather than a default condition.

IV. INTEGRATIVE AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL MODELS

More recent theoretical work has sought to integrate existing perspectives into unified frameworks. McKnight and Kashdan proposed purpose as a central self-organizing life aim that guides behavior, generates and organizes goals, and provides a sense of personal significance, framing purpose as a system that supports both psychological and physical health across the lifespan. Building on this integrative tradition, Martela and Steger proposed that meaning in life itself comprises three distinguishable facets: coherence (a sense that one's life makes sense and is comprehensible), purpose (a sense of core goals and direction), and significance (a sense that one's life and existence matter). This tripartite decomposition has proven useful for reconciling earlier, sometimes conflicting definitions of meaning in the literature and for examining how each facet may relate differently to developmental stage, culture, and well-being outcomes. Age-comparative research employing this framework suggests that younger adults tend to report a stronger sense of purpose relative to older adults, whereas older adults report a stronger sense of coherence and cosmic significance, indicating that the relative weighting of meaning's components may shift across the lifespan.

Meaning, Purpose, and Psychosocial Well-Being in Young Adults

A substantial and rapidly growing body of empirical research links meaning and purpose in life to indices of psychological well-being and mental health among young adults and college populations. Large-scale meta-analytic evidence indicates a consistent, moderate negative association between meaning in life and depression, an association that has proven robust across diverse measurement tools, cultural settings, and health statuses. Similarly, individual-participant meta-analyses spanning several hundred thousand participants across multiple world regions have documented a consistent negative association between purpose in life and depressive symptoms, suggesting that this relationship generalizes across sociodemographic and geographic contexts rather than being confined to particular cultural settings.

Beyond depression, presence of meaning has been linked to lower anxiety, greater resilience, higher self-esteem, improved emotional regulation, and higher overall life satisfaction among university and young adult populations. Systematic reviews of European university student samples have similarly concluded that higher meaning in life is associated with lower anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, and with greater resilience and emotional self-regulation, positioning meaning as a protective psychological resource during the demanding transitional period of higher education. Longitudinal research further suggests that increases in purpose predict subsequent increases in life satisfaction and decreases in depressive symptoms among adolescents and young adults, lending support to a directional, protective role for purpose rather than a purely correlational one. Mechanistically, purpose in life has been theorized to buffer against psychological distress by orienting individuals toward a future-focused perspective, supporting sustained motivation and resilience in the face of setbacks, and providing a stable frame of reference around which goals and daily behavior can be organized.

V. CULTURAL AND CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS: MEANING AND PURPOSE AMONG INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

The empirical study of meaning in life has historically drawn heavily on Western, and particularly North American, samples, raising important questions about the cultural generalizability of existing theoretical models. In the Indian context, meaning-making among young adults is shaped substantially by religiosity, spirituality, and indigenous philosophical frameworks that differ in important respects from the individually oriented conceptions of meaning prevalent in Western psychology. Classical Hindu philosophy articulates a fourfold framework of human aims, the purushartha, comprising dharma (righteous duty), artha (material prosperity), kama (pleasure and desire), and moksha (spiritual liberation or self-transcendence), offering an indigenous conceptual

vocabulary for meaning and purpose that differs from, yet is not incompatible with, contemporary psychological constructs such as presence of meaning and purpose in life. Empirical research with Indian university students has found that spirituality, more so than formal religious practice, is positively associated with happiness, life satisfaction, and overall meaning in life, with students reporting spirituality as an important source of psychological well-being. Comparative research contrasting emerging adults in India and Israel similarly found that spiritual intelligence, rather than emotional intelligence, was the variable most strongly associated with life satisfaction among Indian participants, a pattern the authors interpreted as reflecting the greater emphasis on collectivist and spiritually oriented values within Indian cultural contexts relative to more individualist societies. Complementing these quantitative findings, recent qualitative research with young adults in Delhi has found that participants construct meaning in life through a felt need to leave a lasting, self-transcendent contribution through work, a tendency to frame personal struggles as heroic and identity-affirming, and an ongoing negotiation between individual freedom and family or cultural expectations, reflecting the layered influence of globalization on meaning-making among urban Indian youth. Early Indian empirical work on meaning in life among pre-adolescents and adolescents similarly established positive associations between meaning in life and psychological well-being within Indian school-based samples, suggesting that the well-being-protective role of meaning observed in Western literature extends to Indian developmental populations as well, while the specific cultural pathways through which meaning is constructed and sustained may differ.

Together, this literature suggests that while the broad association between meaning and well-being appears to generalize across cultural contexts, the substantive content and sources of meaning, whether rooted in family duty, spiritual transcendence, career achievement, or collective belonging, are likely to vary meaningfully between individualist and collectivist cultural settings, underscoring the importance of culturally grounded research and measurement when studying meaning and purpose among Indian and other non-Western young adult populations.

Gaps in the Literature and Directions for Future Research
Despite considerable theoretical and empirical progress, several gaps remain in the literature on purpose and meaning among young adults. First, as with much of positive psychology, the empirical base remains disproportionately drawn from Western, educated, and individualist populations, and culturally grounded research examining how meaning and purpose are constructed, expressed, and measured among South Asian young adults, including in semi-urban and rural Indian settings, remains comparatively limited. Second, much of the existing evidence is cross-sectional, limiting causal inference regarding whether meaning and purpose protect against psychological distress or whether well-being facilitates the development of meaning; longitudinal and experimental

designs are needed to clarify directionality. Third, relatively few studies have examined how meaning and purpose interact with other markers of psychosocial functioning relevant to young adults, such as identity development, resilience, and academic or career adjustment, within a single integrated framework. Finally, qualitative and mixed-methods research capturing the lived, culturally specific texture of meaning-making, of the kind recently conducted with young adults in Delhi, remains scarce relative to quantitative survey-based work and merits further development, particularly across diverse Indian regional, linguistic, and socioeconomic contexts.

VI. CONCLUSION

Purpose and meaning in life represent theoretically rich and empirically robust constructs with clear relevance to the psychological well-being of young adults. From Frankl's existential will to meaning, through Steger's empirically validated presence-search distinction and Damon's developmental account of youth purpose, to integrative multidimensional models, the literature converges on the conclusion that a stable, self-transcendent sense of meaning and purpose is closely tied to lower depression and anxiety and to greater life satisfaction and resilience during young adulthood. Evidence from Indian samples further suggests that while this protective association holds across cultural contexts, the sources and cultural framing of meaning, including spirituality, religiosity, family duty, and indigenous philosophical frameworks such as the purushartha, differ meaningfully from Western individualist models. Continued attention to culturally grounded, longitudinal, and mixed-methods research will be essential for building a more comprehensive and globally representative understanding of how young adults come to find purpose and meaning in their lives.

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