

# Exploring Everyday Notions of Meaning in life and Purpose in Life

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# Introduction

- ▶ This study provides valuable insight to the field of psychology by being the first to compare lay perceptions of meaning in life and purpose in life side by side
- ▶ Understanding if and how everyday people differentiate how meaning and purpose can have important implications on the validity of current and future measures of meaning and purpose

# Are Meaning and Purpose The Same?

- ▶ ....life is meaningful when it has significance, coherence and purpose (King, Hicks, Krull, and Del Gaiso, 2006)
- ▶ ....having goals, a sense of direction and feeling that there is meaning to present and past life (Ryff, 1989)
- ▶ ....purpose in life is a way to find meaning in life (Baumeister, 1991; Reker & Wong, 1988).

# Or Are Meaning and Purpose Different?

## Meaning in life....

- ▶ ...is feeling that one's life is coherent, significant, and makes sense (Battista & Almond, 1973; Reker & Wong, 1988; Schnell, 2009).
- ▶ ...is having the ability to explain to one's self why events in life happen the way they do (Steger, Oishi, Kashdan, 2009).
- ▶ ...is a spiritual calling that deals with transcendent or spiritual concerns (Allport, 1961; Emmons, 2003; Mascarro, Rosen, & Morey, 2004; Reker, 2000).

# Purpose in life...

- ▶ ...is “a central, self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviours, and provides a sense of meaning.” (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009).
- ▶ ... are general objectives that direct people’s lives (Damon et al., 2003).

# How Do Lay Perceptions Compare to Researcher Perceptions?

- ▶ Hill, Burrow, O'Dell, and Thornton (2010) found that adolescents define purpose in life very similarly to researchers

# Present Study

- ▶ How do everyday people conceptualize meaning in life and purpose in life?
- ▶ Do people see a difference between the two?
- ▶ Do they define meaning and purpose the same way researchers do?

# Methods

- ▶ Participants: n = 196; 77.7 % female; mean age = 19.7 years
- ▶ Quantitative Measures
  - ▶ Life Engagement Test (Scheier et al., 2006)
  - ▶ Perceived Personal Meaning Scale (PPMS; Wong, 1998)
- ▶ Qualitative Measures
  - ▶ "In the space below please describe your meaning in life"
  - ▶ "In the space below please describe your purpose in life."

# Coding

1. Searched for reoccurring words and phrases in the data
2. Searched for key words and phrases in researcher definitions
3. Searched for presences of key words and phrases in the data

# Results

# How were *Meaning* and *Purpose* Defined?

- ▶ Descriptions for both meaning and purpose were very multifaceted.
- ▶ Many responses mentioned the pursuit of happiness, having an impact on others, loved ones and helping others.

Theme	Percent of Responses	
	Meaning	Purpose
Meaning	66.33	9.18
Pursuit of Happiness	32.65	20.41
Have an Impact	11.73	19.90
Uncertain	11.22	4.08
Personal Growth	9.18	4.08
Success	9.18	10.20
Help Others	9.18	22.96

Theme	Percent of Responses	
	Meaning	Purpose
Purpose	6.63	63.27
Loved Ones	7.65	27.04
Help Others	9.18	22.96
Pursuit of Happiness	32.65	20.41
Have an Impact	11.73	19.90
Career	7.14	17.35
Make Others Happy	3.57	11.22

# Did Participants View Meaning as the Same or Different?

- ▶ 57.7% of participants had no shared themes when describing their meaning in life and purpose in life
- ▶ 90.3% of participants mentioned at least one theme they felt was unique to meaning
- ▶ 92.9% of participants mentioned at least one theme they felt was unique to purpose.

# Keywords that Appeared in One Construct but not the Other

## Meaning

- ▶ Past
- ▶ Gaining Understanding

## Purpose

- ▶ Specific Occupation
- ▶ University
- ▶ Wanting to “Be Remembered”

# Did Participants Definitions Match Those Proposed by Researchers?

Themes found in Research Definitions	Percent of Responses	
	Meaning	Purpose
<b>Goals</b>	8.67	9.18
Career	<b>7.14</b>	<b>17.35</b>
Education	<b>6.63</b>	<b>10.71</b>
<b>Future</b>	5.10	2.55
<b>Religion</b>	<b>7.65</b>	<b>5.10</b>
<b>Experiences</b>	<b>6.63</b>	<b>2.04</b>
<b>Significance</b>	<b>6.12</b>	<b>4.59</b>
<b>Gaining Understanding</b>	<b>1.02</b>	<b>0.00</b>
<b>Past</b>	<b>2.55</b>	<b>0.00</b>

# Were There Any Gender Differences?

- ▶ Chi-Square analyses revealed that women significantly ( $p = .01$ ) were more likely than men to report “helping others” as their purpose in life

# Discussion

- ▶ Meaning and purpose were defined by the pursuit of happiness, having an impact on others, being about loved ones and helping others.
- ▶ Meaning and purpose overlap
- ▶ People defined meaning and purpose similarly to researchers.

# Limitations

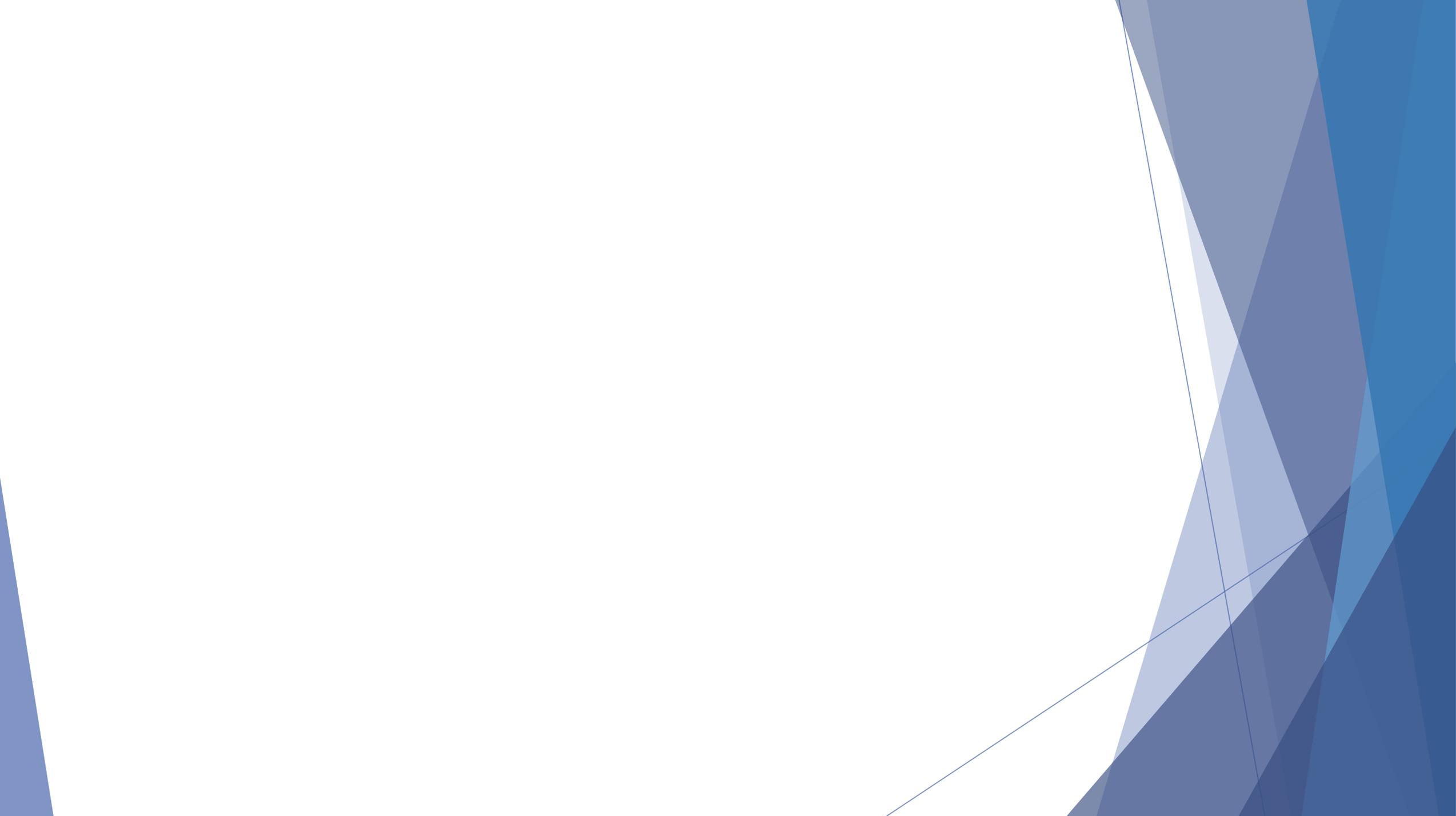
- ▶ Sample composing of mostly young, female, undergraduate psychology and neuroscience students from a Canadian university
- ▶ Coding was based solely on keyword usage

# Implications and Future Directions

- ▶ Are meaning and purpose scales measuring what they are supposed to be measuring?
- ▶ Are meaning and purpose the same or different?
- ▶ Test if everyday people and researchers conceptualize meaning and purpose similarly using more objective methods

The background features abstract, overlapping geometric shapes in various shades of blue, ranging from light to dark, creating a modern and dynamic visual effect.

Questions?



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**Extras**

# Were Certain Responses Linked to Differences in Levels Of Meaning and Purpose?

- ▶ When describing meaning in life...
  - ▶ People who mentioned hedonistic pursuits (being happy) had significantly ( $p=.04$ ) higher levels of meaning than those who did not mention wanting to be happy
  - ▶ People who said they had no meaning in life had significantly lower levels of meaning ( $p=.00$ ) and purpose ( $p=.02$ ) than those who did not say they had no meaning in life
- ▶ When describing purpose in life...
  - ▶ People who mentioned wanting to be the best they can be had significantly ( $p=.04$ ) higher levels of purpose than those who did not mention wanting to be the best they can be
  - ▶ People who mentioned being here for a reason had significantly ( $p=.05$ ) higher levels of purpose than those who did not mention being here for a reason

Theme	Frequency of Responses		Percent of Responses	
	Meaning	Purpose	Meaning	Purpose
Be Remembered	0	4	0.00	2.04
Career	14	34	7.14	17.35
Connection with Others	3	3	1.53	1.53
Education	13	21	6.63	10.71
Experiences	13	4	6.63	2.04
Fulfilment	2	3	1.02	1.53
Future	10	5	5.10	2.55
Gaining Understanding	2	0	1.02	0.00
Goals	17	18	8.67	9.18
Have an Impact	23	39	11.73	19.90
Pursuit of Happiness	64	40	32.65	20.41
Help Others	18	45	9.18	22.96
Here for a Reason	2	2	1.02	1.02
Loved Ones	15	53	7.65	27.04
Make Others Happy	7	22	3.57	11.22
Meaning	130	18	66.33	9.18
None	7	5	3.57	2.55
Past	5	0	2.55	0.00
Personal Growth	18	8	9.18	4.08
Purpose	13	124	6.63	63.27
Religion	15	10	7.65	5.10
Self Optimization	14	7	7.14	3.57
Significance	12	9	6.12	4.59
Specific Occupation	0	8	0.00	4.08
Success	18	20	9.18	10.20
Uncertain	22	8	11.22	4.08
Unclassified	9	7	4.59	3.57