Meaning in Life and Well-being in the Lives of College going Indian Youth

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There are a few studies from India that throw light on sources of meaning in life as well as presence and search for meaning and its links to indices of well-being in young adults. The differential association of well-being indices with meaning variables has also not been well documented in the Indian literature. The present study was an exploratory one, undertaken to address these issues. It utilized a sample of 93 college going urban youth pursuing varied postgraduate courses. Search for meaning and presence of meaning in life were assessed using a standard questionnaire, while a measure was developed to document sources of meaning in life and perceived level of fulfilment with respect to one's important sources of meaning. To be loved, accepted and trusted by significant persons in one's life emerged as the most important source of meaning in the overall sample, although the sources of meaning with relational themes were endorsed more frequently by women than by men. Presence of meaning was associated with current as well as general experience of affective well-being (positive and negative affect) and cognitive well-being (life satisfaction). On the other hand, the experience of search for meaning co-occurred with reports of higher negative affect in the short term as well as in general. Meaning variables were more strongly associated with affective as compared to the cognitive dimensions of well-being.

Keywords: Presence of Meaning; Search for meaning; Sources of meaning; meaning in life and well-being

Meaning has been considered one of the pathways to happiness apart from pleasure and engagement (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005). A positive relationship between meaning, life satisfaction and happiness has been reported in numerous studies. (e.g. Ho, Cheung, & Cheung, 2008; Scannell, Allen, & Burton, 2002). Baumeister (1991) proposed four different kinds of need for meaning in our lives: need for purpose (need to connect current events with the future); need for value (wish for our action to have some positive value); need for efficacy (wish to influence our environment) and, need for self-worth (wish for self to have a positive value).

Theoretical (Maddi, 1967, Battista, & Almond, 1973) and empirical literature (Debats, 1990) suggest that meaning in life has cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. Individuals with a strong sense of meaning in life have a 'framework' through which they view life/derive life goals (Cognitive component) and report a subjective of 'fulfilment' (affective component). Debats, Drost and Hansen (1995) observed that meaningfulness is strongly associated with contact with self, others and the world, whereas meaninglessness is associated with a state of alienation from self, others and the world. Zika and Chamberlain (1992) noted meaning in life to have a stronger association with positive rather than with negative well-being dimensions. Indian researchers too have examined different correlates of meaning in life in varied contexts. Dogra, Basu, Das and Chaudhuri (2008) examined the role of meaning in life along with other variables as predictors of state and trait hope in a sample of Indian college students. In another Indian study (Latha, Shahana, Mariella, Subannayya, & Asha, 2013) meaning in life was examined as a correlate of death anxiety and life satisfaction in students and faculty in higher education.

Despite the universal links between meaning in life and well-being, the nature of this relationship

as well as the sources of meaning are likely to vary depending on the developmental stage (e.g. Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987) and the socio-cultural context and culture (Alea & Bluck, 2013). There are very few studies from India that throw light on sources of meaning in life as well as presence /search for meaning and its links to indices of well-being in young adults. There is also a need to separately examine the affective and cognitive aspects of well-being in terms of their differential association with meaning in life. From the available literature, it is unclear as to the extent to which presence /search for meaning in life may be related to short term vs. long term affect states. An exploratory research, a preliminary study was undertaken to address the above mentioned issues.

Method

A cross-sectional survey method was utilized for the study.

Participants and procedure:

The participants were 93 students (M age = 21.88 years, S.D = 0.83, 42% males and 58% females) pursuing various postgraduate courses in two colleges in a metropolitan South Indian city. The study measures were ordered in a pre-determined fashion in a booklet form. After obtaining written informed consent, a group method of administration was used. The group sizes ranged from 15 to 25 and it required about an hour or so for the participants to complete various measures. Sufficient time was given for responding and clarifications were provided as and when necessary.

Measures:

Basic data sheet: This was used for obtaining basic information such as age, gender, education and any previous or current consultation with mental health professionals.

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ, Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006): It consists of 10 items with two subscales: Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning. Each sub scale consists of five items. The Presence of Meaning subscale measures the subjective sense that one's life is meaningful, whereas the Search for Meaning subscale measures the drive and orientation towards finding meaning in one's life. Both subscales have good internal consistency and construct validity, as described by the authors. The reliability coefficients (alpha) for the two subscales were 0.86 and 0.83 in the present study.

Sources of Meaning: In the present study, it refers to various sources/kind of things that people consider crucial for deriving a sense of meaning in life. Taking into consideration the cultural differences between western and Indian society, a need was felt to develop a simple method of eliciting sources of meaning and obtaining a ranking about the most relevant/ important sources of meaning as well as the perceived level of fulfilment with respect to such meanings. The 16-items "sources of personal meaning in life profile" (Reker & Wong, 1988) was used as a framework/base, to guide the development of this measure. The structure and the format of items were modified in the pilot phase. This was to arrive at a simple set of non-ambiguous items to elicit commonly endorsed sources of meaning, obtain information on perceived importance as well as on the extent of fulfilment of such meanings in one's current life. Some items were re-phrased/dropped and a few were added to the final version. In the present study, the measure consisted of 14 items and comprised of two tasks, namely, ranking and rating. An item namely "Your addition (if any)" was added at the end. This was done to avoid any kind of compulsion on the part of subjects to restrict to only those sources which were mentioned in the list.

Participants were asked to pick the three most important sources of meanings in their lives and assign them ranks from one to three. They were then required to rate these three most important sources, by selecting one of the four options to indicate the extent to which the top sources of meaning were available to them in their life at present.

Indices of wellbeing:

Positive and Negative Affect schedule (PANAS) (revised): Barrett and Russell (1988)

examined factors structure of affect in various studies and expanded the dimension underlying Watson, Clark and Tennegen's (1984) Positive and Negative Affect schedule by including the activation-deactivation dimension of affect. Affect states such as 'elated' or 'thrilled' characterize pleasant activation whereas those like 'serene' and 'calm' imply pleasant deactivation. Similarly, states such as 'irritated', imply activated unpleasant states whereas feeling of exhaustion and boredom fall under the rubric of unpleasant deactivation states. They developed measures of Positive and Negative Affect in various formats. The version used in the present study consisted of 13 pleasant and 13 unpleasant affect related statements. High scores on the unpleasant subscales indicate higher level of negative affect and similarly higher scores on pleasant subscales indicate high level of positive affect. This measure can be used with different time frames in the instructions. In the present study, two formats were used: one tapped positive and negative affect in the recent past (past few weeks) and the other tapped the experience of positive and negative affect in general. The measure has sound psychometric properties as reported in earlier studies (e.g. Rao & Mehrotra, 2006). In the present study, the reliability coefficients (alpha) of the subscales ranged between 0.84 and 0.87.

Satisfaction with Life scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985): The SWLS is a short 5- items instrument designed to measure global cognitive judgments about one's life. It is scored on 7 point rating scale, ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The total score is obtained by summing up item ratings to obtain a measure of the respondent's overall level of satisfaction with life, which may range from 'extremely dissatisfied' to 'extremely satisfied'. The internal consistency reliability, test retest reliability as well as construct validity data from various samples across nations, including India, are available and indicate adequate psychometric properties of this measure. This scale exhibited satisfactory reliability (alpha coefficient of 0.82) in the present study

Results

Sources of meaning in life

Table 1: Patterns of endorsement of sources of meaning

Sources of meaning in life	Frequency (participants assigning rank-1)	Percentage
Participating in activities that give pleasure / thrill	4	4.3
Meeting basic, everyday needs	2	2.1
Taking part in creative activities	3	3.2
Engaging in interaction with family members and / or friends.	12	12.9
Being acknowledged (recognized) for personal achievement.	1	1.07
Interest in social issues	0	0
Experiencing personal growth/ self-development	10	10.7
Being of service / help to others	8	8.6
Acquiring things (material) in order to enjoy the good life.	1	1.07
To be loved, trusted and accepted by significant persons in my life.	30	32.2
Sense of freedom to live my life in my way	5	5.3
To follow one's own values & principles/ code of conduct in my life	3	3.2
To have prestige and status in society	7	7.5
Miscellaneous	5	5.2

Table 2: Reported extent of fulfilment of meaning for the most important sources of meaning in life

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Source of meaning not available presently	Currently not doing anything to achieve it	1	1.1
	Currently doing something to achieve it	11	11.8
Source of meaning available presently	To some extent	42	45.16
	To a large extent	39	41.9

Table 1 lists the sources of meaning in life and the frequency and percentage of the participants who assigned a rank of one (to designate their most important source) to each of the sources of meaning in life. It was observed that the source 'to be loved, trusted and accepted by significant persons in life' was most frequently (32.2%) assigned rank 1. 'Engaging in interactions with family members and/or friends' and 'experiencing personal growth/ self-development', were the next most frequently ranked 1 items (13% and 11%, respectively). 'Being acknowledged (recognized) for personal achievement', 'Interest in social issues' and 'acquiring things (material) in order to enjoy the good life' were the sources of meaning given rank 1 by the least numbers of participants.

Extent of fulfilment of meaning in life

Table 2 depicts the extent of current fulfilment of that source of meaning in life which participants ranked as most important. Majority of the participants reported that the most important source of meaning was available to them either to some extent (45.16%) or to large extent (41.9%). A few participants (11.8%) reported that what they considered to be the most important source of meaning was not available to them currently, but they were in the process of achieving it and only one participant reported that the top source of meaning was not available and currently he or she was not doing anything to achieve it. A similar pattern was observed with reference to the second most important source of meaning, with 55% and 34% of the participants reporting that the source of meaning was available in their life to some extent or to a large extent respectively. As far as the third source of meaning is concerned, only about a quarter (26%) reported its availability to a large extent. Somewhat unlike the first two sources of meaning, a significant proportion (25%) of the participants reported that they were currently striving to achieve the source of meaning ranked as third in importance.

A supplementary gender-wise analysis of the topmost source of meaning revealed that 'to be loved and accepted by significant persons in life' was assigned the top rank by both men and women. However the percentage of women who endorsed this source of meaning as most important was higher (41%) as compared to men (21%). The next most frequently reported top source of meaning by men was "experiencing personal growth and development' (15%) while for women it was 'engaging in interactions with family and/or friends' (15%). For men, the next most endorsed top sources of meaning were 'to have prestige and status in society' (13%) 'engaging in interactions with family/ friends' (10%) and 'being of service/help to others'(10%). 'Experiencing personal growth/ self-development' (7%) and 'being of service to others' (7%) were the other important sources of meaning endorsed by women. Other sources of meanings were less frequently endorsed and rather equally spread across the two genders.

Presence/search for meaning and well-being:

Table 3: Pattern of correlations among meaning, affect & life satisfaction

Variables	Recent negative affect	Recent Positive affect	General negative affect	General positive affect	Life Satisfaction
Presence	- 0.23*	0.46**	- 0.30**	0.42**	0.20*
Search	0.23*	- 0.06 (NS)	0.27**	-0.23*	0.07 (NS)

*p< 0.05,   ** p< 0.01,

Table 3 presents the correlation between meaning sub scales and affect variables. Scores on the presence of meaning sub-scale were positively correlated to recent positive affect as well as to general positive affect, indicating that reports of presence of meaning in life are associated with high positive affect in the recent past as well as in general. Presence of meaning in life was negatively correlated with recent negative affect as well as general negative affect, though the magnitudes of correlations were smaller. Search for meaning in life scores were positively correlated with recent negative affect and general negative affect, indicating that high scores on search for meaning co-varied with high negative affect. High scores on search for meaning tended to generally go hand in hand with low scores on experience of positive affect in general. On the whole, it is observed that scores on presence of meaning in life explained 17% – 21% of variances in general and recent positive affect respectively and 9% to 5% of variances in general and recent negative affect. On the other hand, search for meaning explained only 5% of variance each in recent negative affect and general positive affect and 7% of variance in general negative affect. Presence of meaning scores had a modest though significant positive correlation with life satisfaction.

Discussion

The most important source of meaning in life in the present sample of youth emerged as "to be loved, accepted, and trusted by significant persons in my life". The next most frequently endorsed meaning category was "engaging in interaction with family members and/or friends". These patterns are in line with the finding of an earlier study by Debats (1999) which indicated 'relationships' to be the most important source of meaning in life in community as well as clinical samples of adults. In four methodologically diverse studies (correlational, longitudinal and experimental) evidence was generated that a sense of belonging predicts how meaningful life is perceived to be (Lambert & colleagues, 2013). Baumeister (1991) has spoken about four different needs for meaning in life as mentioned earlier. The sources of meaning reported by the participants seem to be associated with need for value and self-worth through connecting to others. The centrality of relationships as a source of meaning is expected to be stronger in East Asian collectivistic cultures such as India, that emphasize interdependence of self with others, and it is the self- in relationship with others which is seen as centre of thoughts, actions and motivations (Uchida, Norasakkunkit, & Kitayama, 2004). A high engagement with social networking sites in Indian youth (HT-MarS, 2013) perhaps reflects their need to make sense of their own life and the world in general through a wide circle of connections, although both negative positive implications of heavy involvement in web-based interactions are being discussed and debated.

Gender differences observed in the present study need to be treated as highly tentative in view of the fact that men were somewhat underrepresented in our sample. However, a few interesting patterns merit attention. Relationships, as sources of meaning, seemed to emerge as much more common and dominant in women as compared to men. A higher proportion of women endorsed relation-focused theme as their topmost source of meaning and their second top source of meaning also reflected the value of

relationships. On the other hand, experiencing personal growth and self-development as well as having prestige and status in society were more often endorsed as one of the top sources of meaning by men, perhaps reflecting societal expectations and norms that increase the salience and value of activities which are markers of social status from the perspectives of young adults. It is also interesting to note that 'acquiring materials/possessions in order to enjoy a good life' was not endorsed by most young participants as a source of meaning in life. This is despite the observations that India is witnessing a rising trend of spending and consumerism in Indian youth (HT-MaRS, 2013) . More in-depth studies are required to understand such apparent dichotomies. Career related concerns are often the most salient concerns during this developmental phase. According to the HT-MaRS youth survey (2013), almost 45% of the youth reported achieving success as their greatest worry. It is plausible that what underlies career related strivings and concerns is not the pursuit of material acquisitions per se but progress in career may be viewed as indirect routes to meeting the needs to be loved and accepted by significant others. A low endorsement of this meaning may also be a reflection of what tends to be de-valued in traditional Indian culture. Individuals are likely to internalize the values prevalent in a given culture although the extent of internalization may vary from person to person. These issues require further exploration. Majority of the participants (87%) in the present study reported that they were experiencing fulfilment of their most important sources of meaning to at least some extent in their current lives. Going down the ranks, for the third most important source of meaning, a significant minority (about a quarter) reported currently striving to achieve that source of meaning in their lives. Individuals' goal strivings and engagements are likely to be shaped by the need for experiencing a higher sense of meaningfulness in life through attaining those sources of meaning which are valued.

The Presence of Meaning subscale scores had stronger correlation (positive) with both general and recent positive affect than with negative affect. This suggests that experiencing life as meaningful goes hand in hand with high positive affect much more than with low negative affect at least in community samples of postgraduate students. A few other studies (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992; Scannell et al., 2002) have also reported that meaning in life has stronger association with positive than with negative well-being dimension. On the whole the findings are consistent with earlier studies that have indicated a positive relationship between meaning in life and well-being (Rathi & Rastogi, 2007; Reker et al., 1987). In the present study, higher engagement in search for meaning seemed to co-occur with heightened experience of negative affect and those who reported frequent experience of positive affect in general reported less preoccupation with search for meaning in life. It has been suggested that there may be individual differences in the propensity to search for meanings in life events (Steger et al., 2006). The study observations are in keeping with other studies which have shown that search for meaning is often associated with higher levels of rumination and negative affect as well as neuroticism (e.g. Nicholson & colleagues, 1994; Steger et al., 2006; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008). As search scores were uncorrelated to recent positive affect, it suggests that a mere absence of engagement in search for meaning does not go hand in hand with current experience of positive affect, but other variables including presence of meaning, may play a role in experience of positive affect at any given point of time. Also, the presence of meaning- scores were positively correlated with life satisfaction, but search for meaning scores were not. In general, compared to affect variable, life satisfaction (considered as cognitive component of well-being) had a lower magnitude of correlation with meaning in life. One of the potential reasons could be that the Presence of Meaning subscale used in the current study has items that appear to be conceptually linked to the fulfilment /affective dimension of meaning proposed by Battista and Almond (1973). This dimension refers to the subjective experience that one's life is

meaningful rather than the cognitive dimension of meaning, known as 'Framework' which is about having a structure or frame/perspective within which to view one's life. On the other hand, life satisfaction is conceptually seen as global cognitive evaluations that people make to judge the extent to which they have a satisfying life. Correlations between meaning in life and life satisfaction vary widely across studies and have ranged between 0.41 (Steger, et al., 2006) to 0.71 (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988). In fact, methodologies of the studies reporting very high correlations have been questioned on theoretical grounds that suggest a conceptual distinction between these two constructs. Theoretically, it is expected that over long periods, meaning and life satisfaction ratings may converge more strongly (Steger & Kashdan, 2006). Peterson et al. (2005) reported modest correlations (0.17 to 0.30) of life satisfaction with the three orientations to happiness, namely, pleasure, meaning and engagement. In the present study significant, but modest negative correlation observed between presence of meaning and life satisfaction raises the hypothesis that life satisfaction ratings in young college going Indian adults may be influenced by other variables which were not part of the study. It is further speculated that some of these variables could be related to individuals' standards of examining life, including social indicators of success etc. For example, HT-MaRS survey (2013) indicated that about 30% of the Indian youth endorse being rich as the most important goal in life. In a slightly different context, Adler and Fagley (2005) have observed that appreciation ('noticing and acknowledging what one has') is related to well-being and life satisfaction. It may be interesting to examine in future studies as to what extent young adults may be focusing on appreciation of what they have in their life vs. on what remains to be achieved.

On the whole, the present study's findings indicate that presence of meaning in life is closely linked to affect, especially positive affect but has only modest association with life satisfaction. This affirms the theoretical notions and empirical findings that cognitive

and affective components of well-being have somewhat different external correlates (Diener & Emmons, 1984). Though meaning variables were conceptualized as predictors of well-being in the present study which was cross sectional in nature, a bidirectional relationship between these two sets of variables is theoretically tenable and need to be explored in depth.

The study has certain limitations. Representation of males and females in the study was unequal & the sample was restricted to urban young adults pursuing higher education. This limits the generalizability of findings to youth in other settings as well as to individuals in other developmental phases. Rigorous data analyses could not be carried out due to insufficient sample size. Further studies using longitudinal designs are required to understand the complex nature of linkages between meaning in life, sources of meaning endorsed and well-being variables and to unravel moderators and mediators of such linkages. The nature of relationship between search for meaning and well-being may be different at different developmental phases and life contexts (e.g. major life events) and further studies may help in throwing light on this.

The alignment between what one deeply values and one's goal pursuits is theorized to lead to high well-being (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). It may be worthwhile to explore the extent of alignments between one's top sources of meaning and the nature of activities one engages in one's day to day life as well as the nature of goals one chooses to pursue. A low alignment between these variables could arise due to multiple factors (e.g. extrinsic motives for choice of goals including perceived societal pressures, difficulties in prioritizing one's goal pursuits). and contribute to low well-being. Approaches that motivate individuals to shift / strengthen their focus on meaningful pursuits may form useful components of wellbeing interventions and this again seems to be a fruitful area of inquiry for researchers.

Conclusion

To be loved and accepted by significant persons in one's life emerged as the most

important source of meaning in life in a sample of college going young Indian adults. Presence of meaning in life was correlated with current as well as well as general experience of both affective and cognitive dimensions of subjective well-being. On the other hand, experience of elevated levels of search for meaning in life co-occurred with reports of high negative affect in the short term as well as in general. Meaning variables were more strongly correlated with indices of affective well-being than with cognitive well-being, in the young adults sampled in the present study.

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