Meaning and Spirituality: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

This study explored how adults think about the concepts of meaning and spirituality, how they describe their own meaningful and spiritual experiences, and whether they believe meaning and spirituality are connected. A diverse sample of 128 participants between the ages of 18 and 93 years responded to seven open-ended questions either in a face-to-face or telephone interview, or an online survey. Participants who identified themselves as either spiritual or non-spiritual responded to the questionnaire. Through qualitative thematic analysis, we identified five themes for each concept: ultimate concerns, integrity, service and care for others, health and wellbeing, generativity (meaning), and death and afterlife (spirituality). There was considerable commonality in how respondents described meaningful and spiritual experiences. Self-transcendence was identified as an overarching category that linked these two constructs. Regardless of the language used to express meaningful and/or spiritual experiences, the themes were consistent, encompassing personal, communal, and transcendent realities.

Keywords: meaning, spirituality, qualitative thematic analysis, online survey

Introduction

Attempting to understand meaning in life is a lofty proposition for sure and may conjure images of treks to a Tibetan mountaintop to encounter a sense of Truth. For some people, life itself, that is, existence, is inherently meaningful; for others, significant accomplishments give life meaning. In psychological literature, meaning is often conceptualized in relation to motivational needs such as goals, values, purpose, self-worth, and self-efficacy (Baumeister, 1991; Morgan & Farsides, 2009; Slattery & Park, 2011). Park and her colleagues (Park, 2013; Slattery & Park, 2011) propose that every individual has a global meaning-making system that helps interpret the events in his or her life and thus creates situational or daily meaning. Religion and spirituality are one dimension of this global meaning-making system (Park, 2013). Viktor Frankl posited that the natural, primary motivation of all human beings is to pursue and determine for themselves the meaning of their lives—thus called the will to meaning (Frankl, 1985). In line with Frankl’s thought, Wong (2014) has championed the systematic and comprehensive study of meaning as a construct and its demonstrated relevance to wellbeing, healing, and resilience. Additionally, he has dedicated specific attention to theory development on how human beings seek, make, and reconstruct meaning throughout the process of life (Wong, 2014). From the perspective of both Frankl and Wong, spirituality is a crucial foundation of a meaningful life.

Spirituality and religion are topics of frequent discussion and debate in psychological literature with much effort dedicated to defining and differentiating the two concepts. There is now sufficient agreement in the literature on the definitions of spirituality and religion and the relationship between the two. Religion is broadly understood as a defined cultural system of
beliefs, values, and practices that involve interpreting the significance of life. According to Wong (1998a) religion offers “a sense of coherence, hope, and significance to people’s existence, and enables them to transcend the banality of everyday living. As a shared system of rituals and symbols, religion also provides a sense of community” (p. 363). According to Wong, spirituality is a more encompassing concept than religion. Spirituality is thought to be a deep and natural potential inherent in all humans, a disposition toward encountering the transcendent and holding onto certain values or deep truths about existence and the world. Spirituality is expressed within religion and its practices but nonetheless transcends religious institutions or behaviors (see Wong, 1998a). Wong (1998a) aptly states that religion is a natural socio-cultural phenomenon expressed by those bestowed with the capacity for spirituality. In agreement, Pargament and colleagues tentatively define spirituality as the “search for the sacred” and religion as “the search for significance that occurs in the context of established institutions that are designed to facilitate spirituality” (Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones, & Shafranske, 2013, p. 15).

We are in agreement with Wong (1998a) in stating that although spirituality and religion are conceptually distinct, they are phenomenologically similar. Notably, most people who identify themselves as religious would also identify as spiritual, but there are those who identify themselves as spiritual but not religious (Hood, 2005). We define spirituality as a broader term that includes religiosity. We used the term spirituality in this study with the intent of capturing people’s subjective perceptions and experiences regardless of whether they considered themselves religious, spiritual, or both.

Spirituality has recently become a flourishing area of psychological research and a significant aspect of understanding human nature (see Miller, 2013; Pargament, 2013). Pargament, Magyar-Russell, and Murray-Swank (2005) reviewed a number of studies that show spirituality is a unique form of motivation and is strongly correlated with various measures of wellbeing, such as higher life satisfaction, increased marital satisfaction, lower depression, and even lower risk of mortality. More recently, Piedmont (2013) reported a number of psychosocial constructs that correlated with the Assessment of Spirituality and Religious Sentiments (ASPIRES) scale, including hope, life satisfaction, purpose in life, and self-actualization. Indeed, the connection between religiosity and health continues to be well-explored and documented (Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012).

Among other conceptualizations, meaningful life has been associated with achieving one’s goals. Emmons (1999) proposes that personal goals give meaning, value, and worth to life. Emmons (2000) suggests that spiritual strivings are personal goals related to ultimate concerns and “[u]ltimate concerns are bridges linking motivation [and] spirituality” (p. 4). If meaningful life is linked to personal goals, and one of these goals is spiritual growth, then it follows that spirituality may be inherently connected to meaningful life. It is less clear whether spirituality is necessary for a meaningful life, especially for those who are not motivated to pursue spiritual goals. To be sure, meaning has been conceptualized in broader terms than goal achievement. For example, Frankl (1985) conceptualized meaning as a primary human motivation that transcends successes and achievements in life. In line with Frankl’s conjecture and extending his ideas further, Wong (2014) posited that the spiritual process of self-transcendence is intricately connected to meaning in life, thus moving beyond personal strivings and pursuing more ultimate concerns emphasize “meaningfulness as a terminal value” (p. 171). Although there has been considerable discussion in the literature on the connection between meaning and spirituality, few studies have explicitly explored these two constructs simultaneously or systematically explored
their connection (Hill & Edwards, 2013; Park, 2013). Furthermore, most of the research on meaning and spirituality has been done in relation to coping with negative life events, such as illness, death, or loss. People often make sense of negative life events within a religious or spiritual context (Park, 2013; Sommer, Baumeister, & Stillman, 2012), but spirituality is more than a coping resource (Coyle, 2008; Golsworthy & Coyle, 1999). Park highlights the need for research to investigate the connection between meaning-making and having a religious framework to understand life events. We were interested in how people understand meaning and spirituality as general concepts, and whether they connect these two constructs in ordinary life experiences; thus, our research investigates the subjective sense of meaning and spirituality. The authors found one similar exploratory study conducted by Wong (1998b), in which the author reported laypeople’s understandings or implicit theories about meaning as a construct. In Wong’s (1998b) study, the authors asked 60 participants about meaning in life. In this study, religion and spirituality were identified as components of meaning (Wong, 1998b). In the current study, we aimed to further uncover both the nature and connection of these concepts.

Most research on meaning and spirituality is quantitative. This research is limited in scope by the validity of the instrument that the investigator uses to measure these constructs and has been criticized for utilizing reductionist research methodologies to study concepts that may be better approached from a holistic, qualitative paradigm (Coyle, 2008; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). Given the complex, idiosyncratic, and implicit nature of concepts such as meaning and spirituality, there is a need to compliment quantitative research with qualitative methodologies (Hood & Belzen, 2013; Marks & Dollahite, 2011), especially since positivist attempts to understand these phenomena may fall short of what is required to develop an in-depth understanding of these fundamental existential concepts.

Current Study

The goal of our study was to answer the following research questions: (1) What do people think about the broad concepts of meaning and spirituality? (2) How do individuals describe their own meaningful experiences and spiritual experiences? (3) Do individuals believe meaning and spirituality are connected? The research presented in this paper is part of a larger data corpus on the same topic that included both quantitative and qualitative methods. The data set used for the current analysis includes responses to seven open-ended questions posed at the end of a quantitative survey (see Braun & Clarke, 2012 for the distinction between data corpus and data set). The open-ended questions allowed participants to expand on their own personal views and experiences of meaningful life and spirituality beyond the Likert-style survey responses in the quantitative portion of the data collection. We used thematic analysis to understand our data as it best suits short responses to questions outside of dialogue situation (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Thematic analysis provided flexibility and form to understand diverse responses to our open-ended survey questions.

Method

Sampling Procedures

Prior to data collection, the methodology, including sampling procedures and interview questions, was approved by the university’s Research Ethics Board. A diverse sample of adults (n = 128) was recruited through community businesses, seniors’ residences, a university
students’ newsletter, and online via Facebook and bulk emails. Envelopes containing an introductory letter, consent form, and survey questionnaire were left in public locations at interested community businesses. Employees of these businesses were invited to participate in the research if they so desired. Participation was entirely optional, and confidentiality was ensured; participants were instructed to return their surveys in the sealed envelope provided. Researchers revisited the businesses to retrieve completed research questionnaires approximately 2-3 weeks later. Any participant who indicated on the consent form that he or she was interested in the follow-up research project was then contacted either by telephone or email to discuss the open-ended questions used for the current study. A similar procedure was used for participants who responded to the student newsletters. Program coordinators of seniors’ residences were contacted by telephone to invite participation of their residents. Researchers went to the interested seniors’ residences and collected the data in one-on-one conversations with the participants. The researchers read the open-ended questions to the participants in the seniors’ residences and recorded their responses verbatim. The online data were collected via social networking websites and bulk email invitations which included a link to an online survey form. At the end of the online survey participants had the option to immediately proceed to the open-ended questions. The personal interview questions were identical to the online interview questions.

Participants and Interview Questions

Our interview questions were developed using Park’s (2013) model of global and situational meaning-making, which addresses both the global concept of meaningful life and spirituality and the personal experience of the individual. The following open-ended questions were presented to each participant:

1. When you hear the concept meaningful life, what do you think of?
2. What gives greatest meaning to your life now?
3. What is most important in your life?
4. Please describe an event or time in your life that seemed to be particularly meaningful.
5. When you hear the concept spirituality what do you think of?
6. Please describe an event or time in your life that seemed to heighten your experience of spirituality.
7. Please describe how spirituality and meaningful life are connected, or not connected, in your experience of life.

The participants of this study were 128 adults between the ages of 18 and 93 years. We received 111 responses to the online survey and 17 responses via email, telephone, or face-to-face interviews. One of the online responses, a 15-year-old female, was omitted because she was under 18 years of age. Data were analyzed for 127 respondents, 80 females and 47 males (63% and 27%, respectively), with a mean age of 37 years (SD = 18). Sixty-six percent of our respondents identified themselves as Christian, 13% as Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu, and 21% had no religious affiliation.

Theoretical Framework

As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), it is important to explicitly note the researchers’ theoretical framework and epistemological assumptions when reporting thematic research results. Our theoretical framework is existentialist and constructionist. From an existential
perspective, our approach was informed by Frankl and Wong’s meaning-seeking model (Frankl, 1985; Wong, 2014). Our epistemological assumptions are in line with constructionism. A constructionist orientation stipulates that truth is not objective but instead constructed through interaction of research participants and the researchers (see Braun & Clarke, 2012; Crotty, 1998). Thus, our findings are one representation of many possible truths and meanings that can be articulated by participants. From the researchers’ perspective, knowledge and reality are socially constructed and research results are one of many possible interpretations of how participants make sense of the phenomena of interest.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis was conducted based on the six phases described in Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012). In following Braun and Clarke’s (2012) approach, it is important to note that the process of data analysis did not occur in a linear fashion. Two researchers independently coded the interview responses for themes. The researchers continually went back and forth from the data to the codes and themes in order to be certain that the intention of the participants’ responses was not lost in the coding procedure. The first phase of Braun and Clarke’s approach is becoming familiarized with the data. All responses to the open-ended questions were re-read verbatim from both the face-to-face interviews and the online responses. The second phase is to generate initial codes. Two researchers coded all responses to each of the 7 questions independently. As many codes as possible were generated for each question, resulting in 34 to 57 codes per question. We constructed 295 codes across all 7 questions. The researchers agreed on 89.6% of the initial coding instances. The researchers then met and reviewed, discussed, and agreed on any additions and/or changes to the coding. The third phase is to search for themes. We used cue cards to generate descriptions for each code by question, creating themes, by collating like-codes. The two researchers worked collaboratively during this phase of data analysis. As recommended by Braun and Clarke, during the process of creating the themes for each question, we frequently revisited the codes from the second phase and the original data from the first phase. An example of how codes were translated into themes is illustrated in Table 1.

The fourth phase of Braun and Clarke’s (2012) approach is reviewing themes. During this phase we looked for potential sub-themes by construct: the meaning questions (questions 1, 2, 3, and 4); the spirituality questions (questions 5 and 6); combination of meaning and spirituality (question 7). We were looking for potential overlaps, similarities, and differences in how people responded to each question. In order to ensure saturation of the data, we continually reviewed our sub-themes, defined and refined them, to identify the essence of what each sub-theme was about, relative to the codes and the verbatim data. The fifth phase is to define and name the themes. During this phase, we used the cue cards to create a concept map for the meaning and spirituality constructs. In the process of creating the concept map, we were able to see the commonalities within and across our question codes and develop categories that linked the themes, which helped us in the analysis of how meaning and spirituality are connected (question 7). Even at this phase, we continually went back and forth between the themes, codes, and participant responses to ensure that the themes were true to the independently coded participant responses. Examples of participant responses are noted under each theme and sub-theme. Phase six is to create the report, which in our case involved two steps: describing the themes and sub-themes for each construct and presenting a tentative framework for how meaning and spirituality
are connected and how this connection is supported in the current literature. For further details on the thematic analysis method, see Braun and Clarke (2006).

Results

Participants were asked to respond to the given questions, regardless of whether the questions were presented in the online questionnaire, through an email, or in the context of a telephone or face-to-face interview. The main goal of this study was to explore how people described meaning and spirituality and the connection between these two constructs. We will be discussing both our meaning and spirituality themes and sub-themes as well as the overarching category of self-transcendence. Self-transcendence was the strongest connection between meaning and

Table 1. Examples of sub-themes identified from the question codes and participant responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Examples of participant responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>God</td>
<td>“Serving God [is most important for me] and doing His will for my life that I might live up to my highest potential.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>“[When I hear the concept meaningful life, I think of] having deep authentic relationships with friends &amp; family.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectedness</td>
<td>Benevolence</td>
<td>“Being able to help those around me, specifically my girlfriend, friends, and family. Being able to make their lives easier [gives greatest meaning to my life now].”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiding principles</td>
<td>Values</td>
<td>“[When I hear the concept meaningful life, I think of] being content with oneself, having guiding principles that help take you through life with satisfaction, hope for the future and thankfulness for the past and present.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stewardship</td>
<td>Improving conditions of earth</td>
<td>“Being honest and stewards of the earth.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Exercise</td>
<td>“Aerobic exercise is the closest to spirituality when you get the endorphin rush.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Overcoming hardship</td>
<td>“Being diagnosed with terminal illness.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next generation</td>
<td>Leaving a legacy</td>
<td>“A life that will leave behind a legacy or touch other people’s lives.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
spirituality and was evident in all themes except for integrity and health and wellbeing. Our conception of self-transcendence is evident in themes and sub-themes relating to acknowledging a higher power, giving of oneself, and letting go of ego in service of others. Self-transcendence weaves together the concepts of meaning and spirituality in our findings and was described by our participants in various ways. We used an inductive thematic analysis to identify the following themes:

**Meaning Themes (Summarized in Table 2)**

There were four questions related to meaningful life, ranging from broad to specific: When you hear the concept “meaningful life” what do you think of? What gives meaning in your life now? What is most important in your life? Please describe an event or time in your life that seemed to be particularly meaningful. We identified five themes with one or two sub-themes in each theme.

**Ultimate concern.** We identified this theme when participants expressed meaning in the form of beliefs, experiences, or concerns related to God or a higher power. Participants described experiences of relationship with a higher power, spiritual experiences in nature, and the importance of their religion and faith to meaning in life. We identified sub-themes of *faith, spirituality, and religion.* Some examples of participant responses include:

- “A moment at the top of a mountain in Hawaii, watching the sun set in the clouds and reflecting the glorious sunset. In this moment, I felt closest to God.”
- “My relationship with God.”
- “The greatest meaning in my life at this time is my active and growing relationship with Jesus Christ through prayer, meditation, and following His calling.”
- “My spiritual beliefs and my family give me the greatest meaning to my life. It’s too hard to pick between these two as to which would be greater. They are equal in meaning—one is directly tied to the other.”

We coded these types of responses as, “relationship with God,” “faith,” “religious beliefs,” “God’s will,” “church or spiritual/religious involvement,” “higher power.”

**Integrity.** The theme of integrity referred to instances in which participants stated that living a life in a particular way was important to their sense of meaning. Not only did participants discuss living in alignment with religious or spiritual values but also identified that certain principles, frameworks of philosophy, or valued traits/states of being guided their behavior. We identified this theme when participants expressed meaning in relation to personal *principles* or values adhered to. Some examples of such experiences include:

- “Humility, being humble.”
- “A meaningful life is one in which I am able to live out my deepest values and beliefs that make up my worldview.”
- “Self-actualization.”
- “Being a good Christian, living a good Christian life.”
- “Not being afraid to express your social, political views.”
- “Living your life according to your own principles, absolute freedom.”
- “My job is working with high risk youth… My purpose is for these youth.”

We coded these types of responses as, “acting within values/beliefs/principles,” “living within one’s philosophical framework.”
Service and care for others. We identified this theme when participants expressed meaning as experienced through serving the world and being socially connected to those in one’s life. Included in this theme are the sub-themes of stewardship and connectedness and belonging. Stewardship referred to participants expressing a sense of responsibility and concern for the world and an intention to nurture society in some way. The sub-theme connectedness and belonging was constructed to represent instances in which participants described being part of a social group, connected to loved ones, and helpful to and needed by those around them. Some examples of participant responses include:

- “Making the world a better place.”
- “Understanding that what we do has a ripple effect [on] those who know us.”
- “More prosperous global community.”
- “Overcoming anxiety or uncertainty so that I can serve others because I want to, not because I have to.”
- “I might in some small way be able to make a difference and help people.”
- “People in my workplace show me in some way how I’ve been a help to them, or how they need my guidance to better their health and wellbeing.”
- “The most meaning in my life would be the thought that some other people depend on me for something, directly and indirectly. My family, or friends mostly.”
- “People, teaching, supporting.”
- “Teaching others music theory, playing music with others and playing live in front of an audience.”
- “Guiding people, helping them through their times of trouble, finding resources for them, or just being someone they can talk to or get a hug from.”
- “Love! Of family, friends, my work, the world around me and trying hard to show love to everyone.”

We coded these types of responses as “understanding how we affect the world,” “serving others, benevolence, caring for others,” “feeling a sense of connection or union with family or friends,” “care for animals,” “teaching,” “serving people in need in other countries,” “being a role model or someone’s personal mentor.”

Health and wellbeing. This theme was constructed to represent participants’ experience of a meaningful life manifesting through positive psychological and physical functioning. Psychological health and wellbeing including feelings of personal development, mastery, achievement, hope, and coping with difficulty. Physical health referred to general physical vitality, overcoming great physical challenges, and engaging in thrilling or exciting activities. Some examples include:

- “My career, I’m excited to see where I can go in this world. I am in control.”
- “Now that I am retired doing fun things for myself (learning new skills, languages, etc.).”
- “I enjoy playing the bass guitar… playing music with others and playing live in front of an audience.”
- “I am still young and still have a lot of experiences and new things to learn, as long as I have an open mind about things.”
- “Hope for the future.”
- “Great pain and suffering after a car accident that changed my life in many ways. It led to greater spiritual depth.”
- “Recently, buying my own house.”
“[In the] last semester of the last academic year, [I had the] best marks I’ve ever had in my life.”

“Obtaining physical fitness.”

“When I climbed a very tall mountain and came back down, 23 kilometers in all… I wanted to prove that I wouldn’t give up on something. And I didn’t.”

“Anytime I do something completely rash and adrenaline filled, I find I perceive the whole world with new eyes.”

We coded these types of responses as, “drive to succeed,” “vocation, job satisfaction, career,” “physical fitness,” “adventure,” “good health.”

Table 2. Summary of themes constructed for meaning questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
<th>Examples of Codes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ultimate concern</td>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>God</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>Spiritual activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Church, worship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>Guiding principles</td>
<td>Humility, being humble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acting within values, beliefs, principles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service and care for others</td>
<td>Stewardship</td>
<td>Caring for the earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Impact on society, how we affect the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Connectedness and</td>
<td>Relationships: love, family, romantic, friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>belonging</td>
<td>Community and culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health and wellbeing</td>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Educational development</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pursuit of happiness, joy, peace, hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Accomplishments in work and career</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive coping with hardships</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A struggle that brought about personal growth</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Being diagnosed with terminal illness</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coping with the loss of a loved one</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Recreation: exploring new experiences, exercise, thrill-seeking</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generativity</td>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>Teaching, guiding, role model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Contributing to the next generation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leaving a legacy</td>
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</table>
Generativity: Participants expressed that mentoring and reflecting on what they have given to the next generation were both important aspects of a meaningful life. The experience of mentorship and contributing to the next generation included both concern for one’s own children as well as younger people in general. Participants shared experiences of leaving something behind, seeing their children succeeding in life, and teaching or influencing younger people. Some examples of participant responses included:

- “Leaving a legacy.”
- “Accomplishments of [my] children.”
- “Right now, my kids are at a stage that they are actively looking to define themselves. Watching this gives my life meaning.”
- “Getting an education to be a teacher and help to better the lives of children and make them the best people they can be.”
- “I have children and I love to teach and see them grow.”

We coded such responses as “emphasizing generative reflection,” “leaving a legacy,” “guiding or teaching children,” “accomplishments of children.”

Spirituality Themes (Summarized in Table 3)

There were two questions related to spirituality: When you hear the concept “spirituality” what do you think of? Please describe an event that seemed to heighten your experience of spirituality. Six of the seven themes constructed from the meaning questions were similarly constructed from the spirituality questions, with one or two sub-themes in each category. One different theme for spirituality questions was the Death and Afterlife theme that replaced the Generativity theme for meaning.

Ultimate concern. The spiritual theme of ultimate concern refers to spiritual belief and actions with specific reference to faith and belief in a higher power or beyond the physical world. Participants referred to specific belief or relationship with a higher power or actions in their life in which this higher power was involved. The sub-theme of beliefs involved subjective beliefs about the metaphysical world or belief in a higher power, whereas the sub-theme of action referred to actions that nurtured a sense of something beyond physical and observable reality. Some examples of participant responses include:

- “A relationship with a power or energy beyond what can be known through our physical senses.”
- “Faith, but often a vague faith without much in the way of orthodoxy.”
- “Belief in something or someone that is bigger and more powerful than you. Something or someone that will protect you and guide you and look out for you.”
- “Relationship with God.”
- “Spirituality makes me think of one’s perception of a meta-physical being that they hold great respect and love for.”
- “The birth of my first child was like a miracle to me. I wanted to pray and thank God for this wonderful creation which I knew I alone could not accomplish.”
- “Daily contemplative prayer.”

We coded these types of responses as “explicit expressions of traditional religious beliefs,” and expressions of spirituality apart from traditional religions, such as belief in “new age spirituality, auras, homeopathy, spirits,” “higher power,” “subjective existential beliefs,” “exploration beyond the physical—different for everyone.”
Integrity. We identified this theme when participants expressed spirituality in relation to principles and the process of forging a sense of purpose in life. Participants described the certain principles, beliefs, and values which guided their lives but also shared experiences searching for a sense of purpose and living in alignment with this sense of purpose. Some examples from participants include:

“A person finding their own meaning and values in life.”
“God… removed years of destructive behaviors from me, creating [the]… realization of my… purpose.”
“Looking for purpose.”
“Reflecting on my innermost values and beliefs.”
“Guiding principles (doesn’t have to be religious)”
“A deep and faithful spirituality is one that adheres to Church doctrine.”
“The core beliefs and values that make up my meaning-making system.”

We coded these types of responses as “higher purpose,” “seeking purpose,” “core values,” or “guiding principles.”

Service and care for others. This theme was constructed from the sub-themes stewardship and connectedness and belonging. The sub-theme stewardship involved participants describing a sense of connection to, involvement with, and responsibility for the earth and even the broader cosmos and universe. The sub-theme of connectedness and belonging involved participants’ description of being connected within a community or family as well as helping those around them. Some examples of participants’ responses include:

“Being honest and stewards of the earth are in most religious texts… Without a healthy planet earth we will not exist for much longer.”
“Tree planting for two months… I was immersed in the deep wilderness for two months, living out of a tent. Whilst I didn’t become a prudent environmentalist, I felt a physical sense of belonging in the natural world.”
“Personal connection with the universe and all life.”
“Taking care of others around me and of myself. A constant striving to know oneself and to use this knowledge to treat… others better.”
“My parents.”
“Closeness, comfort, a listening ear.”
“Improving life for others.”
“Relationships with others.”
“Sharing spiritual perspectives and discoveries with others, spiritual teachings.”
“The feeling of community among believers, interacting with believers.”

We coded these examples as “seeking to improve the condition of the world and our earth,” “connection with the universe,” “being connected to others,” “relationship with others,” “belonging, helping others,” and “sharing spiritual discoveries with others.”

Health and wellbeing. Participants expressed that spirituality was related to psychological and physical wellness. Spirituality contributed to psychological health by contributing to healing in difficult times as well as feelings of peace, equanimity, and strength/resilience. Physical health involved spirituality as experienced through a sense of bodily and mental vitality experienced through exercise or other means like being in nature. Some examples of spirituality related to psychological and physical wellness include:
“God… removed years of destructive behaviors from me, creating the space for healing and growth and realization of my worth.”

“Any time that has been difficult, that has involved suffering, has allowed me to offer up that suffering to God… I emerge with a clearer sense of who I am, how God sees me, and what I should do to live a good life.”

“Overcoming a very tough time when I was alone in another country.”

“When I’m in crisis I often pray to God for his support and love to help me through things. It’s amazing how much hoping there is; something else out there that you can pray to, can affect your mental state, even if God doesn’t exist—it’s the power of thought/belief that there is something with that power, can help change the outcome. I mentally feel better after such events.”

“Peace, strength, serenity.”

“In tune with your inner self.”

“Clarity of my mind body and soul. Happiness in everything.”

“Experiences in nature.”

“I had taken a battery of classes to help exercise and hone my abilities.”

“Aerobic exercise is the closest to spirituality when you get the endorphin rush.”

“Physical exercise.”

We coded these types of responses as “wellbeing and living well,” “balance and harmony,” “difficult time/time of suffering,” “nature,” “self-awareness,” “physical exercise.”

The participants provided these responses to the spiritual questions; that is, they identified such experiences as spiritual, whether or not they explicitly identified beliefs in any transcendent reality.

**Death and afterlife.** Participants discussed the death of loved ones and near-death as experiences that heightened their sense of spirituality. Some explicitly stated they believed their loved ones were in heaven, others that there was some form of continued existence after death, and still others that they had close encounters with death that impacted their sense of spirituality. We identified this theme when participants shared experiences with death or reflections on afterlife. Some examples include:

“Death, near-death experiences of family or friends.”

“A near-death experience. I am most certain I was saved by a higher power because it was not my time.”

“In two different accidents I was in perfect serenity, during which I asked if I would die and received the answer no.”

“Heaven, hell, salvation.”

“The death of my father.”

“My grandpa passing away and him sending a sign to my mom when he got to heaven.”

We coded these responses as “near-death experiences” or “connection with the afterlife.”

Although many of our participants answered the questions related to spirituality, notably there were a few participants who expressly stated that they did not believe in the existence of spirituality, or negated a previous belief in spirituality, for example,

[Religion is] “a sense of exaggerated importance by human beings.”

[Religion is] “silliness.”

[Religion is] “well-meaning yet misguided.”

“Conversion to atheism or non-belief.”
“I’m not spiritual at all now, but I used to be. I thought that God had cured me of my depression, I felt so special and loved.”

Table 3. Summary of themes constructed for spirituality questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
<th>Examples of Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ultimate concern</td>
<td>Beliefs</td>
<td>Faith, God, Supernatural, Being cared for by a higher power, Universal oneness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Actions</td>
<td>Prayer, Ritual, Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>Guiding principles</td>
<td>Principles, Values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service and care for others</td>
<td>Stewardship</td>
<td>Improving our world and the conditions of the earth, Connection with the universe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Connectedness</td>
<td>Connection with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>Helping others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and wellbeing</td>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Balance, harmony, Self-awareness, Happiness, hope, Inner strength in times of suffering, trauma, illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Endorphin rush of intense exercise, Nature, Travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death and afterlife</td>
<td>Experiences with death</td>
<td>Death or near-death experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflections on afterlife</td>
<td>Heaven, hell, salvation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Connection Between Meaning and Spirituality (Summarized in Table 4)**

We coded participants’ responses to the one question related to the connection between meaning and spirituality to address our interest in whether people believed there was a connection.
between these two constructs. We asked, “Please describe how spirituality and meaningful life are connected, or not connected, in your experience of life.” No new themes were identified in the coding procedure as all responses to this question were categorized within the previous themes mentioned for either meaning or spirituality. However, we identified self-transcendence as an overarching category that linked many themes and sub-themes for both meaning and spirituality. Indeed, the concept of self-transcendence was the strongest link between meaning and spirituality. As illustrated in Table 4, this overarching category is particularly evident in the themes ultimate concern, service and care for others, and generativity, one of the meaning themes. We also identified self-transcendence in the spirituality theme death and afterlife because responses indicated a sense of wonder or curiosity about either death itself, near-death, or beliefs about what occurs after death. Only in response to the spirituality questions did people speak of death as an experience that heightened their sense of spirituality, regardless of beliefs. Experiencing the death of a loved one or a near-death experience seems to expand one’s awareness of self in various ways (Reed, 1991).

Participants more commonly expressed a connection between meaning and spirituality than no connection. Ninety-two participants (72%) said there was a connection between meaning and spirituality. Examples include:

“Meaning and spirituality are the same.”
“Spirituality gives life ultimate meaning, deepens it [life].”
“Meditating deepens my connection to daily life and small things become more meaningful.”
“Both [meaningful life and spirituality] need to coexist necessarily for the other. They are inherent in each other.”
“Spirituality helps us to understand nature of life, the world, existence.”
“They are connected because spirituality helps us understand and cope with hardships.”
“Understanding the connection between the two is an ongoing complex process.”

Thirteen participants (10%) stated that spirituality and meaning are not connected. This percentage in our sample is comparable to a recent Gallup poll that reported 9% of Americans say they do not believe in God or a universal spirit (Newport, 2016). Examples of participants’ responses to the disconnect include:

“They are not. I believe religion is a weak temporary cure to distract from our hopelessness in the events of our lives. We ultimately have no control so why ask for help from empty skies?”

“Meaningful life is what you deem it to be. I have found my place and meaning in life on my own. I don’t believe that spirituality has anything to do with who I am, what I’ve done, or what happens. I pride myself with my own successes and failures.”

“No connection between the two. My life is meaningful because I believe it is, and because of the people and activities in my life. Not because of some belief in the imaginary.”

Six participants (5%) said it varies based on the person. Examples include:

“Spirituality does create meaning for some people’s life. While others not so much. It all depends on the person and their goals and what is important to them. To make a world a better place? To make the most money? To take care of family? I believe it varies.”

“They can be connected, but don’t need to be. I live to express my soul, and strive to help others do the same.”

Seventeen participants (13%) did not answer this question.
Table 4. Overarching category linking meaning and spirituality: Self-transcendence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes related to self-transcendence</th>
<th>Examples of Participant Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Meaning</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ultimate concern</td>
<td>My relationship with God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spiritual beliefs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service and care of others</td>
<td>Making the world a better</td>
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<td>place</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Serving others</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benefit society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caring for well-being of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>everyone around</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Generativity (Meaning)</em></td>
<td>Watching my children define</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>themselves and guiding them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leaving a legacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being a teacher to better the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lives of children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Death and afterlife</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Spirituality)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These were the only themes that differed for the two constructs.

Our thematic analysis resulted in themes that were constructed very similarly. Indeed, for approximately three-quarters of our participants, there was a clear explicit connection between meaning and spirituality. The only themes that differed for both meaning and spirituality were *Generativity* and concern with the *Death and Afterlife*. We identified *Generativity* as a theme when people expressed meaning in their lives when they impacted the next generation in a positive manner. We identified *Death and Afterlife* as a theme when people expressed spirituality in relation to an experience of death, near-death, or salvation after death.

The overlap of meaning and spirituality themes is explicit when people stated they derived meaning in life from their faith, their relationship with God, their beliefs, religion, and belonging to a community, being connected to others, relationships. One participant said, “One cannot have a truly meaningful life without having faith. Once you have discovered who you are and what you believe, your life has the opportunity to become meaningful.” And another said, “God, friends, and family are most important to me.” The overlap is less clear, that is, implicit, when people referred to their principles, values, and purpose as part of their experiences of spirituality and meaning. For example, one participant said, “I believe that my lack of spirituality gives my life more meaning because I try to be a good person simply because I don’t want to hurt people and I am the only person I need to answer to in the end for what I’ve done with my
life.” This individual expressed a value in goodness and not hurting people, but did not identify with the concept spirituality. In such instances, we considered the participant demonstrated implicit evidence of themes relating to both meaning and spirituality. Thus, for people who stated they had no belief in God, faith, or spirituality, we saw evidence of implicit spirituality that overlapped with explicit meaning-making. For example, they still mentioned principles, values, purpose, and caring of others, but they did not explicitly connect these to ultimate concerns, nor to spirituality. For those respondents who reported ultimate concerns, experiences of faith, or belief in a higher power, meaning and spirituality was explicitly connected.

Discussion

This investigation of how people describe meaningful life and spirituality related to their own experiences shows there is considerable overlap between these two constructs. Although there are numerous studies investigating meaning and spirituality, there are few studies that investigate these two constructs simultaneously.

Our findings demonstrate a holistic perspective on meaningful life that includes self-transcendence as experienced through ultimate concerns, service and care for others, and generativity. Similarly, spirituality includes self-transcendence through ultimate concerns, service and care for others, and death and afterlife. The only themes for both meaning and spirituality that did not explicitly involve self-transcendence were integrity and health and wellbeing, although there is evidence that self-transcendence is related to wellbeing (see Wong, 2014) and could also be related to integrity depending on an individual’s values and principles. The following discussion will explore our most salient findings and their relevance to research on meaning and spirituality.

Self-transcendence is an overarching category that encompassed several of our themes and served as a strong connection between the concepts of meaning and spirituality. Self-transcendence involves letting go of egoistic motivations or moving beyond the self in service of or connection with something larger or more powerful (Harris, Howell, & Spurgeon, 2018; Wong, 2016). Self-transcendence represents the strongest connection between experiences and understandings of spirituality and meaning as discussed by our participants. The category of self-transcendence in the concepts meaning and spirituality included the experience of ultimate concern, service and care for others, generativity (for meaning), and death and afterlife (for spirituality). In general, self-transcendence is a fundamentally spiritual experience and is understood as a basis for a meaningful life as conceptualized by Wong (2016), the apex of human development and growth according to Maslow (1971), and a central motivation of the human being according to Frankl (1985). Wong (2016) posits that self-transcendence is a natural process that occurs once we become aware of our interconnectedness with others and a higher power.

With regard to ultimate concerns, self-transcendence was evident in the way individuals expressed faith, religion, belief, and actions dedicated toward nurturing, understanding, and connecting with something beyond the self. In another theme, service and care for others, self-transcendence was represented through giving oneself to service for and connection to the broader global community and a connection with the broader universe and/or a dedication and intimate relationship with close others. This has been confirmed in prior theorizing on self-transcendence (see Wong, 2016 for review). The category of self-transcendence also encompassed the themes generativity and death/afterlife, and these are discussed below.

Another salient finding was that of generativity in relation to meaning in life and
death/afterlife in relation to spirituality. These were the only themes that were different between meaning and spirituality in this sample. First, when participants described meaning in life they described experiences of mentorship of younger people as well as general reflections on their experience contributing to future generations. Erikson (1963) considered generativity to be an essential stage of development in later life. At this stage, Erikson describes that the chief concern is a contribution to the next generation. Generativity has been considered an aspect of a proposed taxonomy of a meaningful life triangulated by three prominent authors in meaning research (see Ebersole, 1998; Emmons, 1999, 2003; Wong, 1998b). Within this taxonomy, generativity and self-transcendence appear to be a common factor in prominent models of meaning. Generativity and self-transcendence are connected in the sense that generativity involves moving beyond selfish interests and goals and considering an impact on further generations beyond one’s personal existence. This is confirmed by Emmons (2003), who posits that generativity is a form of self-transcendence. In other research, generative concern is related to a sense of purpose in life (Busch & Hofer, 2012; Hofer et al., 2014). Thus, our results are consistent with prior research and theory indicating that generativity is a form of self-transcendence and is an important component of meaning in life.

In contrast, when describing spirituality, individuals shared experiences about death and the afterlife rather than generative concerns. Perhaps, in regard to the end of life, spirituality is experienced in events related to death while meaning refers to reflection on events during one’s life. Arguably, some of the main concerns of spiritual belief are transcendent in nature, that is, beyond the immediate physical realm and beyond life itself, so reflection on death, the ultimate unknown and the transition out of life as we know it, makes intuitive sense as a spiritual process. Moreover, how we view death may have significant impact on how well we live (Wong & Tomer, 2011). The connection between thoughts on the afterlife and self-transcendence are clear—that is, the idea of an afterlife itself is a transcendent dimension in which continued life could occur. Thinking about death may be an opportunity for self-transcendence in which individuals encounter the mystery of death, ponder thoughts of the end of life as we know it, and then experience a broadening of consciousness beyond the self (Budin, 2001; Reed, 1991). Although our study highlights the importance of self-transcendence in connecting meaning and spirituality, we support Wong’s (2016) conclusion that more research is needed to investigate the value of self-transcendence to human flourishing.

One crucial finding in our study, and an implicit connection between meaning and spirituality, was the importance of living a life of integrity, based on guiding principles, purpose, and values. Even those who did not identify as being spiritual expressed the importance of living with integrity, which led us to explore the notion of implicit spirituality. Integrity involves adopting a sense of responsibility for one’s life and choices by living explicitly in alignment and congruence with important values. Frankl (1985) famously wrote, “Man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible” (p. 131). Those who do not express a connection to the spiritual are nonetheless questioned in the same way by life and answer with their life as lived through (Frankl, 1986). Regardless of our spiritual beliefs, taking responsibility for life involves living true to deeply held values and truths—these personal truths are the answer we give to life about what our life means and our place in the universe. Wong (2014, 2016) emphasizes that responsible action is essential for meaningful life.

Park and Paloutzian (2013) propose that atheists have a meaning-system “whether
explicit or implicit, on who we are, how we got here, and what our responsibilities in this life are, if any” (p. 652). For example, one participant who did not see the connection between meaning and spirituality indicated, “Listening to the works of scientists such as Hawking, Feynman, and Sagan have spurred my interest in how the universe works, and if there is a guiding hand to it.” This individual expressly rejected the idea of spirituality and yet wondered about some transcendent reality. Our data suggests that the expression of meaning involves a spiritual component, whether this is expressed explicitly or implicitly, or both. Implicit spirituality, perhaps not a comfortable or popular topic depending on one’s beliefs, requires more investigation. We posit that the question of what gives life meaning, in itself is, at least in part, a spiritual question that requires, or perhaps elicits, a spiritual answer, whether one is aware of it or not. We are not alone on this position; citing Abraham Maslow (1962), prominent thinkers in humanistic psychology have highlighted spirituality as a crucial and universal human experience; a vital need for sustaining human life and wellbeing (Elkins, 2015).

The cognitive psychology literature on implicit and explicit knowledge suggests that in order for knowledge to become fully accessible, flexible, and useful, we need to make the implicit explicit (Karmiloff-Smith, 1991). Perhaps when people make the explicit connection between the worldly and the transcendent, their phenomenal world changes, regardless of belief system. Prominent existential psychotherapist Emmy van Deurzen (2010) lends support for the implicit yet profoundly significant spiritual dimension of human existence:

On this [spiritual] dimension of our existence we really come into the true complexity of being human… we experience this dimension as at the core of ourselves and as the most profound of our experience. The beliefs we hold are implicit in everything we say, do, think, and feel. Often, we have not even explicitly formulated them. It is an intrinsic aspect of our being in the world, but it is rarely articulated, or accounted for, and often remains unknown or unsaid. (p. 168)

Discussing spirituality as an implicit phenomenon at the core of the human experience suggests that it may have roots in the natural development of the human person. Pargament (2013) presents “a theoretical framework for understanding spirituality as a ‘search for the sacred’… and a natural and normal part of life” (p. 257). He also highlights the value, in theoretical and clinical approaches, of viewing spirituality as more than human motivation to satisfy socio-cultural and psychological needs (see Pargament, 2013 for review). He argued that flexibility and interconnectedness are indicative of spirituality “at its best” (Pargament, 2007, p. 136). Miller (2011) also comments on the “powerful transformation” (p. 341) her psychotherapy students experience as they are trained in spiritual awareness. Newberg and Newberg (2005) present a neurophysiological model of spiritual experience demonstrating that spiritual experiences are biologically rooted and developmentally normative. The authors suggest spiritual development can be an important part of “psychosocial as well as neuropsychological development” (p. 210). Newberg (2012) reinforces the importance of spiritual experiences by highlighting the positive neurophysiological correlates of spiritual practices.

Continued research is crucial to better understand the influences of spirituality on meaningful life, in particular, and the human person, in general. Although our study was broad in scope in that it focused on a diverse, predominantly theistic sample of respondents from ages 18 to 93, there are some limitations to our study worth mentioning. Our open-ended questions were presented as a follow-up of a survey investigating meaning and spirituality. Respondents may have been unintentionally primed to answer the questions in a particular fashion that emphasized the connection of these constructs. There is some evidence in the literature, however, that the
sequence of presenting such questionnaires does not bias participants’ responses (Covell, Sidani, & Ritchie, 2012). Although we had a wide breadth of data from many participants, we did not have the opportunity to interview our participants or ask follow-up questions which may have added more depth and nuance to the findings. Further research could also include a larger sample of those who reject spirituality or any belief in the transcendent. This research contributes to our understanding of meaning and spirituality and how these concepts are connected.

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