



PERCEPTION OF MEANING IN LIFE AMONG
MUSLIM STUDENTS AT THE INTERNATIONAL
ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

BY

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ABSTRACT

Meaning in life as a psychological phenomenon is only understood based on the Western perspective. However, looking at the comprehensive nature of human existence, Islam upholds a complete and meaningful platform as to what makes life meaningful to an individual. Exploring Muslims' perception about meaning in life which is the aim and objective of this study does not only add to existential psychological literature, but also assist therapists and researchers in their services and research respectively. 15 Muslim postgraduate students from the International Islamic University Malaysia IIUM participated in the study. They comprised of ten males and five females, and their age ranged from 21 to 40 years. With the use of a semi-structured interview that lasted for 12-25 minutes for each participant, six themes emerged from the transcribed data. Findings reveal that Muslim students perceive that having a close relationship with God and serving His purpose helps them to perceive life to be meaningful. Besides, it was observed that both spiritual and material values and goals in life are what make life meaningful to Muslim students. Moreover, findings were found to be related to previous existential psychological literatures. Implications for the study based on cultural and existential factors and religion were also discussed.

خلاصة البحث

إنّ استشعار الهدف من الحياة ظاهرة نفسية تُفهم غالباً من وجهة نظر غربية فقط، لكنّ بالنظر إلى الطبيعة الشمولية للوجود الإنساني نجد أنّ الإسلام يحتوي على قاعدة متكاملة وذات مغزى مما يجعل الفرد له هدف لحياته. والعرض من هذا البحث محاولة استكشاف تصوّر المسلمين حول الهدف من الحياة، وهذا سيُفيد ليس في إغناء الدراسات المتعلقة بعلم النفس فحسب، بل سيُساعد الأطباء النفسيين والباحثين في معالجاتهم وأبحاثهم، ويتناول البحث دراسة 15 عينة من طلبة الدراسات العليا المسلمين بالجامعة الإسلامية العالمية بماليزيا، وتضمّ العينة 10 طلاب و5 طالبات، ويتراوح أعمارهم ما بين 21 إلى 40 سنة. وباستخدام مقابلة منظمة جريئاً، دامت مدة 12 دقيقة إلى 25 دقيقة لكل عينة أُسْتُكشفت ستة محاور من خلال البيانات المدوّنة. وكشفت النتائج أنّ الطلبة المسلمين يرون أنّ وجود علاقة وثيقة مع الله والقيام بأوامره سيساعدهم على معرفة الهدف من الحياة، بجانب ذلك فقد لوحظ أنّ القيم الروحية والمادية والأهداف الواضحة في الحياة كلّ هذه الأمور هي التي جعلت الطالب يستشعر الهدف من الحياة، إضافة إلى ذلك فإنّ نتائج البحث تتماشى مع ما سبق من الدراسات المتعلقة بمجال علم النفس، كما نوقشت كذلك الجوانب المتعلقة بالدراسة بناءً على العوامل الدينية والثقافية والظروف المحيطة.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences in Psychology.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Salami Mutiu Olagoke

Signature.....

Date.....

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Meaning in life is a subjective concept defined by philosophers and mostly humanistic psychologists and existentialists. Frankl (1984), a renowned existential psychologist, asserts that every individual has an innate desire to develop a meaning in life, which he calls will to meaning. Frankl emphasizes the natural need for humans to find conscious meaning in their lives in order to live a healthy and well-adapted life. Moreover, Reker and Wong (1988) define meaning in life as “the cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment” (p. 221). Besides, Steger (2009) sees meaning in life as the manner in which people feel their lives have purpose, and how they comprehend their experiences.

From the above definitions, there is a relationship between meaning and purpose in life. Purpose in life is termed as a feeling that there is meaning to present and past life, having goals in life with a sense of directedness, and upholding a belief that gives life purpose (Ryff, 1989). So, as people tend to derive purpose from daily events and experiences, they often create meaningful lives when they define a purpose for their living (King, 2008). Thus, when individuals struggle for meaningful goals, life becomes more fulfilling and enjoyable. Hence, it can be deduced that the motivation to acquire these goals replicates a certainty that a meaningful life is worth struggling for.

Reker and Wong (1988) also describe the components of existential meaning as cognitive, emotional, and inspirational. To them, people interpret their experiences in life and develop understanding and beliefs which can be referred to as the cognitive component, while the emotional element comprises of feelings of fulfillment and satisfaction individuals derive from the achievement of their goals. The inspirational component involves values, goals, and behaviours. However, due to one's culture, the goals people often choose to attain in life tend to depend on their value orientation.

Furthermore, searching for meaning in life is referred to as the strength and activity of a person's desire and endeavour to find and enhance his understanding of the meaning, significance, and purpose of life (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008). So, reflecting on the reality of our existence, the phenomenon of life, the complexity of human and physical nature, coupled with the universal colossal creation, can serve as a stimulant towards understanding the purpose of human existence. While one may be able to develop purpose from daily events and experiences, one may also describe a purpose for his life, which involves more rational and resourceful forms of meaning production (King, 2008).

Due to the indistinct and infinite nature of the concept of meaning in life, theorists like Frankl (1978), Yalom (1980), Baumister (1991), and Maslow (1971) have concentrated on life meaningfulness from the clinical and phenomenological aspects. Frankl sees meaning in life as a real phenomenon (that possesses an objective reality) which originates from people's external experiences. He opines that individuals are guided by their conscience to naturally discover true meaning in life which can be attained through resourceful, attitudinal and experiential values. In Frankl's theory, individuals who do not pursue meaning in life may experience an existential vacuum or meaninglessness, in which if left unattended to, can lead to

“noögenic neurosis”, a condition that is closely related to boredom and apathy (Frankl, 1984).

Similarly, Yalom (1980) postulates that linking meaning and purpose in life to external events provides a significant amount of protection and strength to human life. In his words, “The human being seems to require meaning. To live without meaning, goals, values or ideals seems to provoke considerable distress. In severe form, it may lead to the decision to end one’s life ”(Yalom 1980, p. 422). He argues that there are four crucial elements in human existence which includes freedom, isolation, death anxiety and personal meaning. However, anxiety about death and concerns about personal meaning have attracted some research attention, and received further interests (Lewis, 2007).

So, Frankl (1978) and Yalom (1980) uphold that a human life without existential meaning can be very unsatisfactory and may result in a devastating sense of responsibility and dejection. In contrast, Maslow (1971) postulates that people tend to devote their strength towards a particular cause as a result of their values and meaning only when the lower needs are satisfied. He views that every individual is free to choose meaning, and one’s health is a function of choosing meaning that helps in the fulfillment of the inner life. Besides, attaining total fulfillment of one’s meaning or purpose in life is unlikely due to the fact that existential meaning is found in peaceful and existential ideals that cannot be perfected (Maslow, 1971).

In the same vein, Baumeister (1991) sees meaning as a psychological account of associations among experiences, events, and relationships. He emphasizes the significance of the self in the cause of acquiring meaning in life. He assumes that man has four forms of need that serve as motivation to gain certain things like satisfaction and meaning in one’s life. This ‘self’ perspective tends to offer an individual to look

to their individuality for answers as to what makes life meaningful. So, to this existential school of thought, human aspiration is a function of what makes the inner self experience satisfactory. As Baumeister (1991) puts it, “the self exports a considerable amount of value, for personal relationships, work and other activities depend on the self for their justification, thus, the self provides legitimacy and justification to other things without itself needing a higher source of value” (p. 107).

Possibly, every daily experience an individual encounters may attract a sense of meaning which tends to be determined by the value and judgment ascribed to such experiences. Besides, with the occurrence of a worrying or stressful event, people tend to assign meaning to events which often result to meaning making on one hand, and adjustment to the event on the other. An instance is a case of an individual who experiences terminal illness for the first time but eventually overcomes it and survives. Hence, valuing a healthy living can be the most meaningful for this person.

Consequently, there tends to be a relationship between meaning in life and spirituality. Frankl (1988) posits that there is ultimate meaning in life, a meaning that is not dependent on others, on our projects, or even on our dignity, but a reference to God and spiritual meaning. Besides, meaning is the belief in a purposeful pattern of the universe, which, in turn, can be derived from religion (Yalom, 1980; Hill, Pargament, Hood, McCullough, Swyers, Larson, & Zinnbauer, 2000). This spiritual paradigm and influential God-based account of meaning in life is that fulfilling a purpose God has assigned makes one's existence more significant and meaningful.

In contrast, secular existentialists lay great importance on the self as a fundamental theme which accounts for a person's subjective experiences like meaning in life (Badri, 1979). The position of this school of thought is that existence precedes essence, which means that the actual life of the individual is what constitutes his

fundamental nature. Hence, man often creates his own values and determines a meaning to his life. Moreover, Kernohan (2008), an atheistic existentialist, views that the goal of self-actualization gives room for various aspirations that center around this ephemeral world like freedom, self-development, pleasure, fulfilled desire, absence of suffering, contemplative bliss, etc. and what makes life meaningful.

In this sense, searching for meaning could be a desire for a deeper or more acceptable understanding of what makes life meaningful, and it could also be viewed that the events and life goals that give meaning to human life tend to fluctuate eventually (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). An example is the case of a person who could derive meaning from intensive preparations for final year exams who is eventually rewarded with a Bachelor's degree. Upon graduation however, another desire forms in order for that individual to find something else to make his life meaningful, without any meaninglessness experience.

So, it could be deduced that there are varying views with regard to the conceptual definition of meaning in life between the cosmic existentialists that see meaning in life as a purpose in one's existence, a sense of fulfillment, and a reference to God on one hand, and the atheistic secular existentialists that see the self as a fundamental theme that accounts for a person's meaning on the other. Going by the former, Yalom (1980) views that cosmic meaning is related to a form of design existing superficially and higher to the person that can be referred to as a spiritual ordering of the universe.

Additionally, Frankl (1988) posits that meaning can be discovered by self-transcendence, by living beyond focusing on the self, and centering it on other people, including social and spiritual values. Besides, the holocaust survivor believed that self-transcendence leads to fulfillment, while direct focusing on happiness and

pleasure leads to an existential vacuum. Here, the link between spiritual or religious dimension to existential meaning and fulfilling God's purpose intentionally can be related to meaning in life. Accordingly, those who serve God's purpose tend to inherently possess a source of meaning that gives coherence to life, and makes some sense of his existence (Michell, 2009). Thus, this study aims to explore and describe Muslims' perception of meaning in life in order to contribute to the spiritual or religious perspective of existential psychology.

1.1 MEANING IN LIFE AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

In general, there are three religious beliefs that can be identified with cosmic meaningfulness as a result of their belief in a supernatural Creator, God. These three monotheistic religions include Islam, Christianity and Judaism. However, despite their differences on some issues, they all share some basic ideas about the world, human existence, and share a common belief that having a relationship with God remains the cornerstone to living a meaningful life (Runzo & Martin, 2000). For instance, most believers of the aforementioned religious beliefs tend to be more personally fulfilled when a part of their lives is spent serving others. As Yalom (1980) puts it, "The belief that it is good to give, to be useful to others, to make the world better for others, is a powerful source of meaning" (p. 434).

Consequently, humanitarian activities such as donating to the needs of the poor and the less privileged, volunteering for local charities, engaging in various humanitarian services or other meaningful causes can be linked to Islamic teachings and the Judeo-Christian religious traditions. Besides, these belief systems tend to provide people with the wherewithal through which they can experience purpose in their lives (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003).

Out of these belief systems, the meaning of life in Islam tends to promote the development of a link between human existence and the divine world. In Runzo and Martin's (2000) writings, they mention that "to be a Muslim is to submit to God, affirming God's singular, All-Powerful, All-Knowing, Compassionate nature and embodying in acts of prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, almsgiving, and ethical and compassionate behavior" (p. 49). So, a Muslim's perception of meaning in life will be the focus of this study because Muhammad's (peace be upon him) teachings, being the Prophet of Islam, remain a continuous message to humanity with those of Judaism and Christianity. More so, the divine scripture, the Quran, is like the 'new edition' of the Jewish Torah and the Christian Bible.

As a result, Islamic monotheism reflects God's purpose for human existence to be the ultimate goal in life. Islam upholds that faith in Allah (Mighty and Exalted is He) gives the believer the purpose of life he needs. In Islam, the purpose of life is to worship Allah, which covers all acts of obedience to Allah. In Surah 51: 56 translated by Yusuf Ali: "I have only created Jinns and men that they may serve Me."

In other words, a Muslim's continuous purpose is to know and obey Allah (Mighty and Exalted is He), to follow His commands and to fulfill His purpose. So, without God, humans have no purpose and hence, life is meaningless. Worshipping Allah (Mighty and Exalted is He) makes life purposeful and meaningful, especially within the framework of Islam which counts every act as an act of worship. Besides, obeying Allah and following His commands are often accompanied with countless blessings that a true Muslim can rely on. In Surah 8: 29 translated by Yusuf Ali:

O ye who believe! If ye fear Allah, He will grant you a criterion (to judge between right and wrong), remove from you (all) evil (that may afflict) you, and forgive you: for Allah is the Lord of grace unbounded.

According to Islam, this worldly life is just a brief stage of human existence. With inevitable death, there is the other life, the hereafter, in which the position of the person in the hereafter depends on his deeds in this first stage of life. This is in contrast with the positions of secular-oriented existentialism which upholds that life terminates at death with no more prospect, consciousness, and only utter non-existence (Kernohan, 2008).

In support of afterlife existence, Bourne (1997) opines that life stands as a training ground for something else that cannot be fully understood or acquired in this earthly existence. This belief in the afterlife can be referred to as life's crucial meaning which stands as a major article of a Muslim's faith, as it enables him to connect his aspirations in this world to that of the next. Moreover, Al-Ghazali (1954) points out that those who seriously reflect on the past eternity during which the world does not exist, and the future perpetuity during which it will not be in existence, will see clearly that the world in essence, is like a crossing point.

Confirming this life as a transitory stage, Bourne (1997) posits that this life is like an 'earthly school' where lessons (tasks and challenges) are learnt for growth in consciousness, thus, it is not the ultimate place of abode. Seeing this life as a learning point can be said to be an abode of evaluation in which actions will be evaluated and rewarded. In Surah 67: 2 translated by Yusuf Ali, Allah mentioned that "He Who created Death and Life, that He may try which of you is best in deed: and He is the Exalted in Might, Oft-Forgiving." Naturally, what terminates this life's 'school' is death, the awareness of death's inevitability is also thought to be difficultly associated with the psychological strength that people employ to inspire their lives with meaning (Becker, 1973). In addition, this mortality-related thought also shifts one away from insignificant preoccupations and provides life with strength (Yalom 1980).

In essence, it can be deduced that death-related beliefs do influence how a person views existence as meaningful, however, they occur by bringing underlying philosophical drives and religious beliefs to the surface (Vess, Routledge, Landau, & Arndt, 2009). For instance, at the moment of thinking about the inevitability of death, a Muslim can attach the belief that dying as a Muslim with his sincere actions will be rewarded with a better and blissful life in the next world. Hence, consciousness of death helps Muslims to see clearly and to properly assess what is important and valuable, in which being aware of this inevitable event can portray the picture of what is truly meaningful in life.

In general, Vess et. al. (2009) found that the underlying influence of death on perceptions of existential meaning is a function of the extent to which people deal with these concerns by looking out for simple and explicit explanations of reality. After death, there are other events that reflect what may constitute meaningful experience in a Muslim's life as a result of the unseen belief in post-death existence and the hereafter. Even if we are able to experience a life of meaning and fulfillment in the virtues of this world, what will be waiting for us in the afterlife remains awe-inspiring. Allah (Mighty and Exalted is He) makes the conscious Muslim to always reflect about this verse in Surah 8: 29 translated by Yusuf Ali:

O ye who believe! What is the matter with you, that, when ye are asked to go forth in the cause of Allah, ye cling heavily to the earth? Do ye prefer the life of this world to the Hereafter? But little is the comfort of this life, as compared with the Hereafter.

Invariably, higher meaningful experiences such as self-actualization, pleasure, fulfilled desire, absence of suffering, or development of human potential are enjoyed, the bitter we feel of parting from them at the hands of death. For the soul which prefers the material and avaricious side of life, the next life will be plagued by

unsatisfied desire. Besides, those fulfilling events that absorb the human mind, causing it to become attached to this world and to be casual of the next are purely malevolence in nature (Al-Ghazali, 1954).

Islam posits a continuation of eternal life that portrays some other life events, which could make life more meaningful. With this belief in the Hereafter and the Day of Judgment, a believing Muslim's life becomes as purposeful and meaningful as possible in which the long-standing purpose is to go to paradise by pleasing his Creator. Ibn Miskawayh (1968) claims that this divine bliss can be attained with virtues like the love of wisdom, the dedication to intellectual conception, and the use of divine ideas, in which when a person transcends from his first to the second life, he gains eternal bliss and everlasting divine pleasure. Thus, these virtues can make life meaningful to a Muslim who fully submits to his Lord.

In addition, Aristotle maintains that complete happiness is related to the divine. He asserts that “complete and pure happiness belongs to God and after Him to the angels and those who are like Him” (as cited in Ibn Miskawayh, 1968. p 151). Thus, for a Muslim to attain this divine happiness, the quality of his submission in worship of his Lord needs to be sound. A Muslim tries to seek Allah’s favour, and sincerely strives to please Him, as he not only aims to attain a meaningful life, but also a meaningful hereafter. In return, he who is capable of showing such interest in seeking Allah’s favour, coupled with being obedient to Him will be loved, favoured and gratified by God, and will become worthy of His friendship (Ibn Miskawayh, 1968).

Consequently, this is why wonderful pleasures and extra-ordinary kinds of bliss are attributed to the sincere Muslim as he finds it extremely enjoyable that he may not turn to or pay attention to anything else. However, others see a meaningful

life as being able to acquire happiness from worldly pleasures alone. Kernohan (2008) views that a life of affluence and mindless pleasure is termed to be full of meaning, and one of the paths to meaningfulness is the fulfillment of desire. As he puts it, “if we want something, then it matters to us” (p. 35).

Meaning in life to a Muslim tends to be different from that of a non-Muslim, while the latter is often based on the premise of secular and materialistic thoughts, the former is entrenched with not only worldly pursuits, but also afterlife goals with eternal virtues. As Runzo and Martin (2000) put it, “this life is only an interval on the way to the return to God, for the purpose of life is ultimately fulfilled in death and resurrection” (p. 50). Furthermore, it is apparent that a Muslim may continue to search and derive meaning from everyday activities until death since there is recompense in the afterlife, compared to an atheist whose life’s purpose is tied to a worldly pursuit after which once attained, is left to meaninglessness.

Obviously, this pursuit often requires the possession of knowledge and good behavioural dispositions. Besides, the knowledge a man possesses is carried with him into the next world, and with his virtuous dispositions in this world, especially works of devotion that lead to the continuous remembrance and love of God, the blissful end result is well assured (Al-Ghazali, 1954). Worldly needs like food, clothing, marital life, academic triumph, etc. may help in attaining eternal bliss in the next world. As a result, being able to utilize worldly gains to achieve eternal bliss under the platform of fulfilling human purpose of existence by serving Allah (Mighty and Exalted is He), may put a Muslim in a better position of acquiring an absolute meaning in life.

In essence, it can be deduced that the kind of cultural and religious values an individual upholds may serve as determinant factors in the understanding of existential meaning, and what makes his life meaningful, as both meaning in life and

optimism appear to be significant predictors of well-being (Halama & Dedova, 2007). Besides, it is often apparent that religious beliefs tend to stimulate people to be optimistic because of its certainty. As such, Muslims believe in living a life that is religiously inclined towards attaining the mercy and blessings of Allah (SWT). Thus, there may be some marked differences as to what makes life meaningful to a Muslim compared to a non-Muslim. Hence, this study aims to explore and describe the perception of Muslim students on the meaning in life.

1.2 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The concept of existential meaning is considered to be one of the greatest challenges in humanistic psychology. With Increased wealth, technological advances, and developments in medicine and natural sciences have not substantially improve human happiness and sense of meaning (Diener & Seligman, 2004). Moreover, the dominance of secular existentialists and humanistic psychologists' concepts and theories is evident in the field of psychological literature. Consequently, the exclusion of the spiritual and divine dimensions of a subjective concept like meaning in life becomes apparent. Moreover, this concept of life's meaningfulness has been widely ignored by empirically oriented psychologists because of their inclination to objective data rather than for feelings and subjective experiences (Debats, Drost, & Hansen, 1995).

Furthermore, it is often apparent that man will continue to search for meaning as long as he remains with this secular and empirical worldview because the existential nature of man lies in both earthly and celestial spheres as posited in Islam. This comprehensive nature in which a Muslim sees life continues to be excluded from secular psychological literatures, thereby, remain inaccurate and unsuitable for

Muslim students and clients. Thus, using psychological scales developed and adopted by non-Muslims to assess Muslims' subjective experiences on existential meaning may not truly and accurately measure a Muslim's perception of meaning in life. In line with the above, it is expected that Muslim counselors and psychologists need to understand a great deal of what actually makes life meaningful to a Muslim. Moreover, as most researches on meaning in life are conducted by non-Muslims, it is worth noting that research with Muslims in these particular fields of study is scarce, and the little that is available, is inconclusive (Tiliouine, & Belgoumidi, 2009).

This marked difference between Islamic views of life meaningfulness compared to the secularists remains a major issue. As the latter propose a domination and concentration on the self and worldly factors for meaning, the former presents a holistic dimension. However, the overwhelming influence of Western conception of meaning in life may influence the way Muslims perceive what makes life meaningful to them. In the context of this study, it is not known whether Muslim students perceive meaning in life in accordance with the Islamic values or Western values. Hence, the current study aims to explore more into this subjective concept and unravel the nature of what makes life meaningful to a Muslim.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

With the aim of discovering the inner dimension of meaning in life from a Muslim perspective, this study stands a profitable venture in which not only Muslims will gainfully understand the true definition of meaning in life but likewise the non-Muslims. Consequently, to restructure the deficient and Western conception of meaning in life, this study seeks to explore more into this subjective concept and unravel the nature in what makes life meaningful to a Muslim student.

Besides, the study will add to the knowledge of psychology in that, unraveling new themes of meaning will further pave way for further research in respect to developing new scales that will suitably measure meaning in life among Muslims in general. In addition, the qualitative method which this study seeks to adopt will provide information about the ‘natural’ side of meaning in life due to the belief system of Islam inherent in Muslims. So, the use of open-ended questions and probing, which will give participants the opportunity to respond in their own terms, will evoke responses that are meaningful, rich and explanatory in nature.

Furthermore, Muslim counselors, psychologists and psychotherapists and their non-Muslim counterparts can benefit from this research. The pool of ideas and subjective opinions and experiences related to meaning in life that may emerge, will provide these experts with new knowledge in their profession as therapists and researchers.

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Mouton (1996) states research aim and objective as that which give broad indication of what researchers wish to achieve in their research. Based on this definition, the aim of the study is to explore and describe the nature of meaning in life perceived by Muslim students at the International Islamic University Malaysia.

1.5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by Frankl’s (1984) theory. Frankl posits that meaning can be attained through self-transcendence, and living a life with a focus on improving other people’s lives including social and spiritual values. With life having potential meaning, Frankl views that experiential, creative, and attitudinal values are merely