



Christian Faith Enhances Meaning in Life

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Abstract. Meaning in life is vital in human life. From the literature, meaning in life is closely related to goal-reaching. Religion, the Christian faith, in particular, has been found to enhance meaning in life. Could the pursuit of religious goals reduce the conflict and thus increase the coherence between goals and between goals and self, resulting in such enhancement? We tested this hypothesis in an experiment. Four hundred eighty-eight participants, composed of Protestants, Catholics, and Non-religious, filled in a questionnaire. We used Purpose in Life (PIL) to measure meaning in life and the Matrix Technique to measure goal facilitation and conflict. Goal-self coherence was measured by the agreement between goals and self-identity, commitment, manageability, and value-satisfaction. Correlational analysis, ANOVA, and regression were used to analyze the data. Results showed that Protestants have a higher goal and goal-self coherence and thus have a higher meaning in life.

Keywords: Meaning in Life · Goal facilitation · Goal conflict · Goal-self coherence · Spirituality · Christian faith

1 Introduction

The importance of meaning in life could not be overstated. Meaning-making is particularly important in people with adversities. Without it, Frankl (1979/1995) observed in himself and others that all is lost. The feeling of meaninglessness can lead to illness and even death.

1.1 What is the Meaning in Life in this Study?

What is meaning? Definitions vary. We would adopt the concise description given by Haybron cited by Wong (2014): “appreciative engagement with the things and people that really matter.” It contains three elements: appreciation, engagement, and the value evaluation of what matters. Appreciation is an emotional and attitude element; engagement is a social and action element; and value evaluation is a cognitive element. This definition matches Frankl’s existential vacuum description of people when feeling no meaning. Maddi (1967) called it existential neurosis, a state close to apathy rather than depression. In the case of existential vacuum or apathy, people would have no appreciative engagement and things or people that really matter.

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To elucidate the meaning of the meaning in life, we may bring in a few more definitions. Wong (2012) discerns life meaning consists of two parts: situation and existential. Though Auhagen (2000) said that Frankl's use of meaning in life confines it to situational, Frankl's notion of existential vacuum should include the existential aspects. The idea of engagement with things that are appreciated and really matter matches Yalom's (1980) notion of personal or worldly meaning, which is based on life content and life goal. Also compatible with this, Reker and Wong (1988, p. 221) defined personal meaning 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." It is this personal meaning that this study explores.

1.2 Personal Meaning is Closely Related to Goals

Goal provides an anchorage point for this study. From the specifications of Yalom (1980) and Reker and Wong (1988) mentioned above, personal meaning is closely related to goals and goal achievements, and such a concept is rather a universal understanding. For example, Maddi (1998) specifies that personal meaning is created in making decisions with a mixture of engagement, control, and challenge of the individual in dealing with the world. For Adler (1931/1992) individual's concept of meaning develops with each attempt to find a solution. Similarly, Cottingham (2003, p.21) asserts that meaning must be achievement-oriented, requiring some focus on energy. Actually, PIL, one of the popular instruments for measuring life meaning, in its 20 items, has the word "goal" in three items (3, 8, 20). Chamberlain and Zika (1988, p.591) show that one of the four factors in PIL is "meaning in life as given through commitment and goal achievement." The meaning of "goal" is similar to that of "purpose." MLQ, another popular instrument, in its ten items, though without the word "goal," the word "purpose" appears five times.

1.3 The Effect of Spirituality on Life Meaning

Spirituality is the focus of our study. The meaning-centered model of Wong (2012) regards religion/spirituality as one of the sources of meaning in life. Steger (2012) also points out that meaning in life is positively correlated with intrinsic religiosity. As for why spirituality is necessary, Cottingham (2003) argues that meaning of life is about our relationship with the universe, who we are, and how we come to be here. This meaning is the same as the "cognizance of order, coherence and purpose in one's existence" of the personal meaning defined in Reker and Wong (1988). But starting from Descartes onwards, the universe has been considered only in terms of a few ultimate laws based on observable phenomena. As to why these principles exist, this would have to remain "totally shut up from human curiosity and inquiry" (p.7). Thus, humans could acquire their significance and value only outside the phenomenal world, beyond the limits of systematic knowledge, such as religion. He further argued that such value could only be gained on the "systematic cultivation of our human capacities for wonder and delight in the beauty of the world, and the development of our moral sensibilities for compassion, sympathy and rational dialogue with others." (p. 103). Yet, because of our human fragility, we could only achieve this through the disciplines of spirituality.

Indeed, the Christian faith gives followers a sense of mission in daily activities. Just name a few such biblical teachings: Christian life is to magnify Christ through daily activities (1P 3:15; Php 1:20); Christian virtue is a witness to God (Mt 5:14–16; 1P 2:9); Christians are ambassadors of the gospel to spread the gospel to the end of the world (Mt 28:18–20; Ac 1:8). These teachings would motivate believers to set up self-transcending goals to live for something much more significant than themselves. Such self-transcending efforts are known to generate life meaning (Wong, 2016, Seligman, 2011).

1.4 The Formulation of the Hypothesis

So far, we have revisited the definition of life meaning, it is closely related to goals, and the Christian faith has an augmentative effect on life meaning. Yet, we do not know how goals interact with the Christian faith leading to the augmentation of life meaning. This study attempts to bring an answer to this question. However, we know from previous studies that goal conflict would reduce well-being and the related life meaning (Sheldon & Emmons, 1995; Gray et al., 2017). The authentic goals of a person should be coherent to the self of the person (Kelly et al., 2015; Carver & Scheier, 1982). We hypothesize that if Christians regard religious goals as coherent to their identity and are important, these goals could integrate the various other goals set up in aspects of life, reducing goal conflicts. This integrating effect of religious goals may be lacking in people without religion. We want to put this hypothesis to the test in this study.

1.5 Previous Studies on Goal Conflict/Coherence and Meaning in Life

All people would have multiple goals, some are short-term daily strivings (Emmons, 1986), and some are long-term life goals (Kelly et al., 2015). Different goals could be facilitating or in conflict. There is facilitation when one goal makes it easier to accomplish another goal. If two goals have incompatible strategies such that one goal reverses the outcome of another goal, that is goal conflict. In addition, if one goal comes at the expense of another goal, either because of limited resources in time or material, it is also a goal conflict. Such goal conflicts would lead to increase rumination about goals, inhibit goal pursuit, decrease goal progress, and would increase psychological distress (Boudreaux & Ozer, 2013; Gray et al., 2017).

A look at the goal structure shows that there are different levels. Kelly et al. (2015) described a hierarchical system of goal structure with four levels. At the bottom level, it is the daily strivings. Above them are the long-term goals that may be a bit abstract. And above the goal level, there is the self. The conflict between goals could occur among strivings, among long term goals, among strivings and long term goals, and between self and all levels of goals. The self consists of the ideal-self and the ought-self. In line with ideal-self, goals must be related to self-actualization or self-transcendence (Wong, 2016). In line with ought-self, goals must also be compatible with the subjective moral standard as asserted by Cottingham (2003). Besides identity, goals should be coherent to other aspects of self. Antonovsky's (1979) self-coherence scale is more related to interpersonal relationships such as in a family or to a situation such as stressful situations. Yet, the three components he raised on coherence may be helpful to construct

items in measuring the goal-self coherence. Antonovsky's three components are comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness or usefulness. Comprehensibility is the making sense of internal and external experiences. Manageability is the belief in having the resource to handle. And meaningfulness is the sense of worth of commitment (Auhagen, 2000). Besides, in the Striving Assessment Scale (SAS), there are 14 components to assess the progress and success of strivings (Emmons, 1986). Among these are items related to self: value, commitment, effort, instrumentality, probability of success, and confidence. From the above three sources, we built the goal-self coherence measure with the following eight items: ideal-self, ought-self, commitment, confidence, progress, value, satisfaction, and achievement.

2 Methods

To measure the meaning in life, we considered two popular instruments, the PIL Test and MLQ. We picked PIL because it matches more with the meaning in life, as we understood it should consist. In the 2016 INPM, the Meaning of Meaning in life was discussed. It was concluded to be multidimensional and may consist of two concerns. The first is about the purpose in people's own life, and the second is a future-oriented and motivational concern (Vos et al., 2019). In addition, in this study, we want only to look at the factors that contribute to the acquired meaning in life, not the desire to acquire but fail to do so. Yet, on the other hand, among the 20 items in PIL, as criticized by Yalom (1980), PIL may contain inappropriate items that are highly related to social desirability. Also, as criticized by Steger (2012), the test may include items irrelevant to meaning in life. Together, out of the 20 items, we deleted six items (7, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 18, which deal with the plan after retirement, worldview and life, responsible personality, freedom to make choices, attitude to death, and controllability, respectively). Only 14 items are left. We translated them into Chinese and rewrote most of the questions such that all the answer tags are short with the same number of characters and are the opposite ends of a continuum. As we collect data through the internet with Qualtrics, it is impossible for participants to work on the questionnaire with their mobile phones in the original form of the questions. Two items are listed in Table 1 to show the improvement.

In addition, we used a scale with six levels to avoid the tendency of participants to place their answers at the middle marker when they feel uncertain or find it challenging

Table 1. Questions are Rewritten with Short Answer Tags that Could be the Opposite End of a Continuum.

The original items from Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964)			Revised and translated items in our modified scale		
Question	Beginning answer tag	Ending answer tag	Question	Beginning answer tag	Ending answer tag
My life is:	empty, filled only with despair;	running over with exciting things.	我的人生經歷是:	空虛絕望	令人興奮
If I could choose, I would:	prefer never to have been born;	want more lives just like this one.	如果可以選擇,我會希望:	從未出生	再渡今生

to make decisions. We used a slider for participants to locate their answers. If participants really have no preference, they could still place the slider between the two level-markers close to the middle.

We elicited long-term and short-term goals (strivings) from participants separately. This procedure matches the goal structure depicted by Kelly et al. (2015). We asked them to put down five life targets for long-term goals. We also asked them to put down five strivings that occupy them most of the time. This procedure of listing them separately would avoid participants neglecting either the more abstract long-term goals or the concrete daily strivings. Afterward, participants have to mark those goals related to religion, and this marking would yield the factor of the number of religious goals participants acquired.

We used the matrix method to evaluate goal facilitation or conflict (Emmons & King, 1988, Sheldon & Emmons, 1995). Participants picked three out of the five long-term and three out of the five short-term goals that are more important to them. The selected goals were then presented to the participants in pairs. Participants first rated three comparisons among long-term goals, three among short-term strivings, and 15 among long-term goals compared with strivings. In each of the three types of comparison, a matrix was presented with each goal compared with the other goals. Participants rated each pair in four aspects: goal facilitation, conflict in strategy, conflict in time, and conflict in material resources. Participants rated each comparison on a score of 1–5, with 1 being the lightest and 5 the greatest. The facilitation scores make up one factor, and the average of the three conflict scores constitutes another factor.

To evaluate goal coherence with self, participants rated each of the six important goals (three long-term goals and three strivings) under eight items: ideal-self, ought-self, commitment, confidence, progress, value, well-being, and achievement. Factor analysis of collected data grouped them into four factors. The items of Ideal-self and ought-self constitute the first factor of identity, the item of commitment makes up the second factor, the items of confidence and progress make up the third factor of manageability, and the items of feeling precious, well-being and achievement make up the fourth factor of value and satisfaction.

To measure faith, participants indicated whether they were Protestants, Catholics, or non-religious. Protestants and Catholics rated seven more items. Of the seven items, six measure spirituality (three for religiosity and three for intrinsic religious orientation, and factor analysis showed that they make up one factor). The 7th item measures religious age.

Demographic data were also collected, including chronological age, sex, education, marriage status, and family income. Questionnaire data were collected through internet with Qualtrics from the Psychology Department, the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Table 3).

3 Results

We recruited a total of 488 participants of 18–65 years of age, with 180 Protestants, 19 Catholics, and 289 Non-religious participants. For analysis, Protestant was coded 1, Catholic 2, and Non-Religious 3. Factor analysis showed that the modified PIL test with

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study Variables

	Variables	M	SD	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9
V1.	Purpose in Life	54.79	12.47									
V2.	No. of Religious Goal	1.74	2.85	.44**								
V3.	LT Goal Facilitation	8.86	3.50	.25**	.36**							
V4.	LT Goal Conflict	11.53	9.17	-.02	.07	.03						
V5.	ST Goal Facilitation	5.81	3.64	.18**	.31**	.33**	.20**					
V6.	ST Goal Conflict	18.24	9.56	-.09*	-.01	.06	.41**	-.05				
V7.	LT-ST Goal Facilitation	21.90	8.92	.24**	.33**	.50**	.22**	.55**	.10*			
V8.	LT-ST Goal Conflict	36.25	25.81	-.04	.09*	.14**	.73**	.23**	.61**	.30**		
V9.	Self-Goal Coherence	43.41	8.80	.24**	.23**	.28**	.00	.26**	-.07	.39**	.00	
V10.	Religion	2.82	1.44	-.39**	-.66**	-.25**	-.02	-.20**	.00	-.16**	-.08	-.12**

Note. N = 488. LT = long term, ST = short term, LT-ST = long term short term
 *p<0.05. **p<0.01

Table 3. Correlation table to show the relationship of Spirituality (Protestants only) with MIL and goal related variables

	Variables	M	SD	V1	V2	V3
V1.	Spirituality	26.52	5.83			
V2.	Purpose in Life	61.04	11.48	.46**		
V3.	No. of Religious Goal	4.22	3.27	.45**	.41**	
V4.	Self-Goal Coherence	44.86	8.84	.50**	.24**	.35**

Note. N = 180.
 *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

14 items has one factor with Cronbach alpha = .934. The self-formulated Goal-Self Coherence Scale has four factors, as shown above, and the Cronbach alpha = .851 for data with Long-Term Goals and = .871 for data with Short-Term Goals.

As shown in Table 1, the correlational analysis showed that PIL has a significant negative correlation with Religion (p < .001), indicating that meaning in life is highest in Protestants and then Catholics and Non-Believers. PIL had a positive correlation with

all forms of Facilitation, whether Long-Term or Short-Term. But for Conflicts, only the Short-Term Goal had a negative correlation ($p < .05$). PIL also had positive correlations with all Goal-Self Coherence ($p < .001$), showing that coherence between self and goals may enhance meaning in life. The correlation between Goal Facilitation and Goal Conflict was a bit puzzling. For Long-Term and Short-Term alone, the correlation was negative but not significant. But for Long-Term paired with Short-Term, the correlation was positive and significant ($p < .001$). Such correlation between Facilitation and Conflict suggested that they are not opposite poles of a single continuum but are different inter-goal relationships. In addition, for Protestant participants, Spirituality had significant positive correlations with PIL, Number of Spiritual Goals, and Goal-Self Coherence (Table 2). The above correlational results showed that the Protestant faith enhances meaning in life, and this enhancement probably comes from the number of religious goals, goal facilitation, and goal-self coherence. Similarly, Spirituality among Protestants had a positive effect on PIL. Conflicts between goals showed much milder effects on PIL than Goal facilitation. Consistent results were shown with other forms of analyses.

ANOVA showed that PIL was significantly different among Protestants, Catholics, and Non-religious, $F(2) = 44.310, p < .001$. Post hoc tests showed that only Protestants were greater than Catholics and Non-religious, $p < .001$. There was no difference between Catholics and Non-religious. Such difference was similarly shown by the difference in the number of religious goals between the three groups, and the difference was significant, $F(2) = 194.42, p < .001$. Goal Facilitation differed between Protestants and Non-Religious, and the difference was significant. For Long-Term Goals, $F(1) = 397.13, p < .001$, for Short-Term Goals, $F(1) = 250.52, p < .001$, and for Long-Term Goals paired with Short-Term Goal, $F(1) = 1024.21, p < .001$. Figure 1 shows all the mean differences between Protestants and Non-religious.

Goal conflict between Protestants and Non-religious was not significant whether it was long-term, short-term, or long-term compared with short-term. It is possible that constraints in time and resources are the same for all people, whether it is Christian or non-religious. But Short-Term Goal Conflict did show a negative effect on PIL across all participants. Regressing PIL on Short-Term Goal Conflict yielded a significant negative relationship ($R^2 = .008, F(1) = 3.90, p < .05$).

The difference in Goal-Self coherence between Protestants and Non-religious was partly significant. Difference in identity was significant, $F(1) = 7.5, p < .01$, Commitment was significant, $F(1) = 8.82, p < .01$, Manageability was significant, $F(1) = 22.28, p < .001$, and for value/satisfaction, it was not significant, $F(1) = 2.43, p > .05$.

To show the effect of Spirituality on PIL, we categorized protestants into low, mid, and high levels of Spirituality by their scores in the six items on religiosity and intrinsic religious orientation. As shown in Fig. 2, ANOVA showed that the high spirituality group has higher PIL than the lower group, $F(2) = 37.37, p < .001$. In addition, high spirituality group had lower Short-Term Goal Conflict, $F(2) = 3.89, p < .025$.

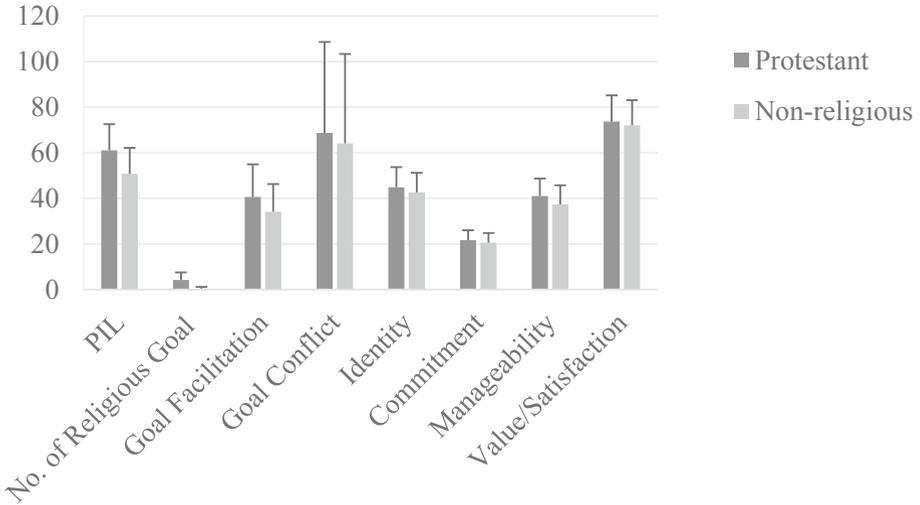


Fig. 1. Protestants have higher mean Value than Non-religious for all MIL related variables except overall Goal Conflict and Value/Satisfaction (no difference).

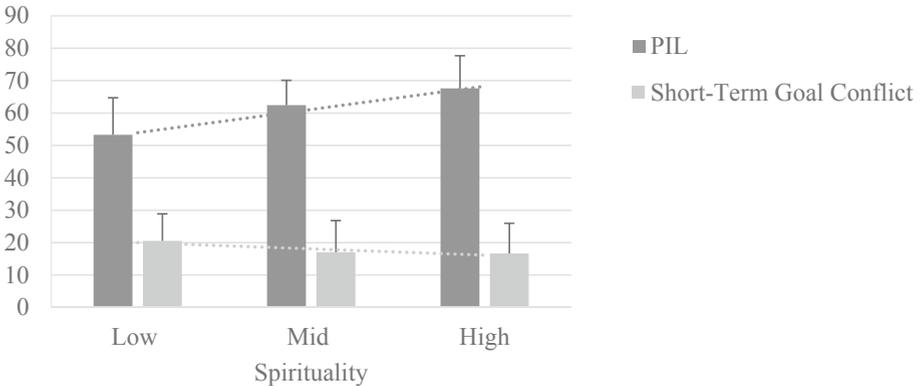


Fig. 2. Protestants with higher spirituality have higher MIL and lower Short-Term Goal Conflict, showing that spirituality is a significant factor in MIL.

4 Discussion

Results showed that, indeed, the Christian faith enhances meaning in life. The results match what Cottingham (2003) and Wong (2012) claim to a certain extent. There are many factors that could contribute to the increase of meaning in life. In this study, we have shown that the Christian faith is one of them though we have not demonstrated that it is a necessary factor.

Results also showed that goals contribute to this enhancement. Contrary to the previous findings that goal conflict plays a major role in affecting well-being and meaning in life (Boudreaux & Ozer, 2013; Gray et al., 2017), we found that goal facilitation has a

more significant effect on such enhancement. Such accentuation on facilitation may be unique for religious faith enhancement. This facilitation comes from all kinds of goals, whether long-term or short-term goals. The effect of goal conflict only shows up in short-term daily strivings. Christians with higher spirituality also have fewer conflicts in strivings. In addition, the Christian faith also contributes to the goal-self coherence in three aspects: Self-identity, commitment, and manageability. The Christian faith probably motivates followers to pick goals that match with their ideal-self and ought-self, be more committed to achieving their goals, and be more confident that their goals are achievable. Meaning in life could not be fixed arbitrarily. It has to match the nature of the person (Kelly et al., 2015; Carver & Scheier, 1982; Cottingham, 2003). Self-identity, commitment, and perceived manageability stated above are related to the nature of the person making the goals contributing to the authentic meaning in life. There is no difference in value. That is, for regarding goals as precious, bringing well-being, and bringing satisfactory achievement, there may not be any difference between Christians and Non-believers.

We conclude that the Christian faith, particularly for people with high spirituality, would enhance the meaning in life. Such enhancement may come from acquiring religious goals that promote goal facilitation and goal-self coherence. Further studies may need to ascertain the causal relation and whether religion is a necessary factor, as Cottingham (2003) claimed.

Apart from showing that Christian faith is a factor in the enhancement of meaning in life, the results of this study also suggest that goal facilitation and goal conflict are not the extremes of a single continuum. Similar to what Sheldon and Emmons (1995, p.45) suggest: “it may be profitable to maintain a conceptual distinction between differentiation and integration.” In addition, as meaning in life positively affects well-being, we could apply the four criteria of goal-self coherence in this study to help people set up desirable life goals and strivings that could promote well-being.

Though Christian faith enhances the meaning of life, it does not mode Christians into a stereotyped lifestyle. In this study, the long-term goals and strivings of the Christian participants are not the same, and even their spiritual goals are different. In Kelly et al. 's (2015) model of goals structure, all goals would interact and align with self-identity and personal needs. Different people may reach different motivation levels depicted in the need-hierarchical theory of Maslow (1970), and Murray (1938) listed 20 manifested needs. With different needs and self-identity, interacting with different levels of goals, Christians lead different ways of life.

Moreover, things people deem necessary, such as their needs, self-identity, and goals, are under constant revision, as shown in the personal construct theory of Kelly (1955) and his followers. As such, there is a need to have an overarching principle to work among them so they can be coherent even in the case of revisions. We have shown that the Christian faith should be one of these principles that increases goal facilitation, decreases striving conflict, and increases self-goal coherence. And as a result, it enhances meaning in life. To enjoy such enhancement, one has to be a Christian and spiritual.

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