

# Personal Meaning Orientations and Psychosocial Adaptation in Older Adults

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## Abstract

This study examined how different patterns of sources of meaning in life impact the psychosocial adaptation of older adults. A total of 120 (62 women and 58 men) community-residing older adults completed self-report measures of sources of meaning in life, physical health, life satisfaction, depression, personality, existential regrets, attitudes toward aging, and attitudes toward life. Cluster analysis of sources of meaning revealed four distinct meaning orientations: self-transcendent ( $n = 32$ ), collectivistic ( $n = 24$ ), individualistic ( $n = 34$ ), and self-preoccupied ( $n = 30$ ). MANCOVA analysis of the four groups, controlling for age, marital status, education, and financial satisfaction, revealed a strong multivariate main effect for meaning orientation. No statistically significant gender and Gender  $\times$  Meaning orientation interaction effects were found. Older adults, who derive meaning from self-transcendent sources, are more extraverted, open to experience, agreeable, and conscientious; perceive greater purpose and coherence in life; feel more in control in directing their lives; express a stronger desire to get more out of life; and are less depressed compared with those who derive meaning through pursuing self-serving interests without any real commitment to personal, interpersonal, or societal development. The implications of the findings for positive aging are discussed.

## Keywords

personal meaning orientation, psychosocial adaptation, older adults

In recent years, there has been increasing research activity in the study of personal meaning across the life span (e.g., Reker & Chamberlain, 2000; Wong & Fry, 1998). *Personal meaning* is defined as the cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one's existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and the accompanying sense of fulfillment (Reker & Wong, 1988). A person high on personal meaning has a clear life purpose and a sense of direction, strives for goals consistent with life purpose, feels satisfied with past achievements, and is determined to make the future meaningful. A relatively large number of empirical studies have clearly demonstrated that meaning in life is an important variable in the buffering of stress and the enhancement of physical, psychological, and mental well-being (e.g., Fry, 2000, 2001; Newcomb & Harlow, 1986; Reker, 1994; Reker, Peacock & Wong, 1987; Vickberg, Bovbjerg, DuHamel, Currie, & Redd, 2000; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992).

The main focus of prior studies has been on personal meaning as a “global” construct, defined as the existential belief that life has purpose and coherence. Reker and Wong (1988) postulate that a full understanding of personal meaning requires both a top-down (holistic) and a bottom-up (elemental) view of life. It is not meaningful to talk about life as a whole as having meaning; life only contains meanings that are actualized

through specific activities, quests, and goals. However, to achieve an enduring type of personal meaning, specific sources need to be integrated into a larger and higher purpose.

Several researchers have observed that individuals extract meaning from a variety of sources, including leisure activities, meeting basic needs, creative activities, personal relationships, personal achievements, personal growth, religious activities, social and political causes, altruism, enduring values and ideals, traditions and culture, and leaving a legacy (DeVogler-Ebersole & Ebersole, 1985; Kaufman, 1987; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996; Prager, Savaya, & Bar-Tur, 2000; Reker, 1988, 1996; Reker & Wong, 1988). The meaningfulness of these sources can be assessed by the Sources of Meaning Profile (SOMP) developed by Reker (1991). Studies using the SOMP measure have shown that the sources from which individuals derive a sense of meaning varies with age group, gender, and ethnic identity (Bar-Tur, Savaya, & Prager, 2001; Prager, 1996; Prager et al., 2000; Reker, 1988).

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Even within a specified group, there are many different pathways to experience life as meaningful. Several of these individual sources of meaning are associated with global meaning and with psychological and physical well-being (Reker, 1988, 1994). Indeed, Reker (1994) found that having a large network of meaningful sources (high breadth vs. low breadth) culminated in a heightened sense of meaning fulfillment and greater subjective well-being in older adults. These findings suggest that individuals develop personal meaning orientations that individually and collectively contribute to positive psychosocial functioning. Relatively little is known about the content and the function of sources of meaning and the meaning system that older individuals create for themselves. Furthermore, the literature has not addressed the differential impact that meaning orientations may have on both positive and negative indicators of psychosocial adaptation.

### Conceptual Framework for the Current Study

Based on Frankl's (1959) conviction that the full meaning of life can only be achieved by transcending self-interests and on Rokeach's (1973) hierarchy of values in which certain values hold greater significance than others, Reker and Wong (1988) proposed a model of sources of personal meaning consisting of four levels: self-preoccupation with hedonistic pleasure and comfort (self-preoccupation), devotion of time and energy to the realization of personal potential (individualism), service to others and commitment to a larger societal or political cause (collectivism), and entertaining values that transcend individuals and encompass cosmic meaning and ultimate purpose (self-transcendence). The levels describe *qualitatively* different personal meaning orientations that are postulated to differ in terms of depth of meaning that is obtained. Individuals who find meaning through self-interests are at the shallow end, whereas those who find meaning through helping others, preserving values and ideals, and spirituality are at the deep end. The implication of such a hierarchical structure is that individuals will be able to integrate the contradictions, conflicts, and absurdities of life by rising above them and viewing them in the context of more comprehensive horizons.

The ability of aging individuals to transcend life experiences is postulated to impact positively on psychosocial outcomes. Psychosocial adaptation is defined as the process of putting oneself in harmony with the changing circumstances of life so as to enhance one's sense of well-being and long-term survivorship. Psychosocial adaptation is achieved through the processes of assimilation (incorporating new information into existing structures) and accommodation (changing existing structures to accommodate new information), involving the psychological (e.g., changes in perception, attitude, behavior, and motivation) and social (e.g., change in one's social environment) domains. Outcome indicators of effective psychosocial adaptation include, but are not limited to, the

maintenance of good physical health, life satisfaction, good mental health, positive life-and-death attitudes, high meaning and purpose in life, and a stable personality.

Underrepresented in prior research with older adults are psychosocial variables that focus on existential needs and "ultimate concerns" with the givens of existence such as one's mortality, feelings of isolation, and meaninglessness. Unmet needs can lead to "existential distress." Existential distress refers to negative thoughts and feelings of "angst" or anxiety that arise from facing uncertain experiences such as fear of aging, fear of death, and regrets in life. To the author's knowledge, no study has been conducted that examines the relationship between personal meaning orientations and existential distress.

The conceptual framework for the current study is premised on the conviction that, from a psychological perspective, the aging process is marked by continuous growth and development. The aging individual plays an active, vital role in this process by taking advantage of personal resources to actualize the human potential. Moreover, the positive psychology movement in psychology (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005) and the strengths perspective (Lewis, 1996; Saleebey, 1992) in gerontological social work emphasizes, recognizes, respects, and appreciates the client's voice, experiences, and personal knowledge about their own situations. By focusing on the skills, knowledge, and residual strengths of older persons, much can be learned about how individuals successfully cope with adversity and the ever-changing circumstances in their lives.

### The Current Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the personal meaning orientations of older adults and to assess the association of meaning orientations to measures of life attitudes, physical health, subjective well-being, personality, and existential distress. Based on Frankl's (1959) and Tornstam's (1997) theoretical position that self-transcendence is the key to the discovery of deeper meaning and increased life satisfaction, the following general hypotheses were formulated:

*Hypothesis 1:* The personal meaning system of older adults will be characterized by four distinct patterns that primarily reflect the transcendent, collectivistic, individualistic, and self-preoccupied orientations. This hypothesis is based on the theoretical speculation proposed by Reker and Wong (1988) and subsequently supported by empirical investigations of sources of meaning in life among young, middle-aged, and older Canadian elderly (Reker, 1991), the Dutch elderly (Van Ranst & Marcoen, 2000), older Arabs and Jews (Prager et al., 2000), adolescents living in Slovakia (Halama, 2000), and middle-aged adults living in New Zealand (O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996).

*Hypothesis 2:* Older individuals, who derive meaning from sources that transcend the self, will show significantly better psychosocial adaptation in terms of greater physical health, increased life satisfaction, higher meaning and purpose in life, lower depression, greater perception of choice and control in directing one's life, a stronger desire to get more out of life, and higher scores on the global personality traits of extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness compared with older individuals who find meaning through self-serving ideals and values. This hypothesis is predicated on a number of research findings showing that a belief system based on transcendent meaning is positively correlated with greater purpose in life (Bolt, 1975; Crandall & Rasmussen, 1975; Reker, 1992), lower depression (Reker, 1991), the use of constructive coping strategies (Halama, 2000), and better adaptive coping with the problems of aging (Van Ranst & Marcoen, 2000). In addition, based on the theoretical formulations of Erikson (1963), Maslow (1968), and Tornstam (1997), it seems reasonable to expect that self-transcendent older adults will be characterized by positive, stable, and adaptive personality characteristics.

*Hypothesis 3:* Older individuals, who derive meaning from sources that transcend the self, will show significantly reduced existential distress in terms of less fear of aging, fewer existential regrets, lower existential vacuum, and less fear of death (i.e., greater death acceptance) compared with those who are preoccupied with the maintenance and achievement of self-serving values. This hypothesis is predicated on the assumption that self-transcendent older adults are better able to put negative thoughts and feelings about existential issues into perspective more easily and therefore, will not be as distressed by them.

In sum, prior research on the link between personal meaning orientations and psychosocial adaptation has been limited to a fairly narrow range of outcome variables. The evidence to date suggests that individuals of all ages who derive meaning from sources that go beyond meeting self-serving and individual needs also experience more meaningful lives, hold more positive attitudes, are more satisfied, and use more adaptive coping strategies.

## Method

### Participants

Participants in this study were 120 community-residing older adults (62 women and 58 men) aged 52 to 93 years ( $M = 73.6$  years). The majority of the participants were married (62%),

26% were widowed, 10% were divorced or separated, and 2% were never married. In terms of educational level, 5% had achieved only the eighth grade, 62% had high school and community-college education, 27% achieved a university-level education, and 6% had postuniversity education. Regarding satisfaction with financial status, 33% reported being very to extremely satisfied, 58% were satisfied, and only 9% were dissatisfied.

The participants were recruited through various civic and social organizations, word of mouth, churches, retirement residences, and agencies serving older adults in central Ontario. Packets containing a consent form and a counterbalanced set of questionnaires were distributed to the participants who completed them at home and returned them in prepaid envelopes (for a small number of participants, a research assistant retrieved the completed forms). Average time for completion of each packet was about 1.5 hr. A \$100.00 draw prize was offered as an incentive to take part in the study. Of the 136 surveys distributed, 122 were returned (89.7% response rate); incomplete questionnaires for two cases resulted in usable data from 120 adults. Approximately 10 months following data collection, participants, who had requested feedback on the study, were mailed a summary report of the findings.

### Measures

Personal meaning orientations were assessed using the 17-item SOMP-Revised (SOMP-R; Reker, 1996). Sources of meaning include meeting basic needs, participating in leisure activities, taking part in creative activities, engaging in personal relationships with family and/or friends, being acknowledged for personal achievements, experiencing personal growth, taking part in religious activities, interest in social causes, being of service to others, preserving human values and ideals, preservation of culture and tradition, leaving a legacy for the next generation, feeling financially secure, interest in human rights, participation in hedonistic activities, acquiring material possessions, and relationship with nature. Respondents rate how meaningful each source is at the present time in their life on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all meaningful*, 7 = *extremely meaningful*). The alpha coefficients reported in several studies conducted in Canada, Australia, and Israel range from .71 to .80, with a median of .77. The alpha coefficient for the current sample of older adults was found to be .84.

Physical health status was measured by a single-item 5-point scale with ratings of 1 (*poor*), 2 (*fair*), 3 (*good*), 4 (*very good*), or 5 (*excellent*).

Life satisfaction was measured by the 13-item Life Satisfaction Index-Z (LSI-Z), a modified version of the original LSI developed by Neugarten, Havighurst, and Tobin (1961). Ratings are on a 3-point scale (*agree*, *disagree*, ?). Scores can range from 13 to 39. High scorers take pleasure from activity in everyday life, feel satisfied with life, have a positive self-image, and maintain happy and optimistic moods and

attitudes. For the current sample of older adults, the alpha coefficient was found to be .69.

Depression was assessed by the Zung Self-Rating Depression Scale (SDS; Zung, 1965). The Zung SDS is a 20-item measure of somatic, psychological, psychomotor, and mood areas. Ratings are on a 4-point scale (1 = *none or little of the time*, 4 = *most or all of the time*). Scores can range from 20 to 80; a high score reveals greater depression. Alpha coefficients of .77 and .81 have been reported for community and institutionalized elderly, respectively (Reker, 1997). For the current sample, the alpha coefficient was found to be .75. In terms of validity, the Zung SDS correlates well with other measures of depression.

Personality was assessed by the extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness dimensions of the NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) developed by Costa and McCrae (1985). Respondents rate each of the 60 items on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). A high score on each dimension reflects greater neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Costa and McCrae (1989) report internal consistency reliability ranging from .68 (agreeableness) to .86 (neuroticism). The NEO-FFI possesses satisfactory psychometric properties and corresponds well with the full 181-item scale (Costa & McCrae, 1988, 1989).

Existential regret in life was measured by the 20-item Existential Regret Scale (ERS) developed by Reker and Parker (1999). Existential regret is defined as an inner experience of discomfort, a brooding over lost opportunities, of not having fulfilled one's potential, of having "unfinished business," and of not having respected the natural and global environment. The inner urgings reflect the need to take responsibility to actualize one's potential and therefore demands attention. Existential regret primarily taps into regret over having failed to act (omission) rather than having committed an act (commission) over which one feels guilty. An example item is, "Missed opportunities have haunted me all my life," responded to on a 7-point Likert-type scale (*strongly agree*, *strongly disagree*). Scores can range from 20 to 140. Higher scores reflect greater intensity of existential regrets in life. The alpha coefficient was found to be .92 for a sample of university students. For the current sample of older adults, the alpha coefficient was .89. In a study of 110 young and middle-aged adults, existential regret correlated positively with existential frustration ( $r = .65$ ) and negatively with Ryff's (1989) measure of integrity ( $r = -.70$ ) and the conscientiousness dimension of the NEO-FFI ( $r = -.40$ ; Reker & Parker, 1999).

Fear of aging was measured by the 16-item 7-point Likert-type scale of General Attitudes Toward Aging (GATA) developed by the primary author. GATA measures fear of aging in terms of mobility restrictions, declining future, fear of being ignored, fear of isolation, financial constraints, and a general fear of the aging process itself. Example items are, "I feel

that I have less to look forward to in the future than I did in the past" and "As I grow older, I have a fear that I may be alone and shut in from the world." Scores can range from 16 to 112. Higher scores reflect a greater fear of aging. For the current sample of older adults, the alpha coefficient was found to be .87. In a study of 66 older adults, fear of aging was positively correlated with depression ( $r = .45$ ) and regret ( $r = .35$ ) and negatively correlated with life satisfaction ( $r = -.43$ ) and integrity ( $r = -.59$ ).

Attitudes toward life was measured by the Life Attitude Profile-Revised (LAP-R; Reker, 1992), a 48-item, 7-point Likert-type scale consisting of six factorially derived dimensions: purpose, coherence, choice/responsibleness, death acceptance, existential vacuum, and goal seeking. Purpose refers to having life goals and a sense of direction from the past, in the present, and toward the future. Coherence refers to having a sense of order, a reason for existence, and a clear sense of personal identity. Choice/responsibleness refers to the degree to which a person perceives to have personal agency in directing his or her life. Death acceptance refers to the absence of fear and anxiety about death and the acceptance of death as a natural aspect of life. Existential vacuum refers to an absence of meaning in life, boredom, apathy, or feelings of indifference. Goal seeking concerns the desire to get away from the routine of life and to search for new experiences and challenges and an eagerness to get more out of life. Scores on each dimension can range from 8 to 56; a high total score reflects a high degree of the attribute being measured. Indices of internal consistency are generally satisfactory, ranging from an alpha of .77 to an alpha of .87. Short-term test-retest reliability at a 4- to 6-week interval ranges from .77 to .87. Validation studies involving a number of instruments measuring identical and related constructs show good convergence for all LAP-R dimensions (Reker, 1992).

## Data Analyses

For 14 participants, some questionnaire items contained missing data. In these instances, the mean value of the item was substituted. Preliminary analyses were conducted to examine the data for violations of univariate and multivariate homogeneity of variance assumptions. The assumptions were met for all psychosocial variables except for the personality trait of neuroticism.

The data were analyzed using a 2 (sex)  $\times$  4 (meaning orientation) between-participants MANCOVA. The demographic variables of age, education level, marital status (married vs. not married), and financial satisfaction served as the covariates in the analysis as these showed significant associations with some of the major psychosocial variables (see Table 1). The four levels of meaning orientations were determined by K-means cluster analysis performed on the SOMP-R measure, using the cluster analysis module of the Statistica software program (StatSoft, 1995). All significant univariate main and interaction effects of sex and meaning orientation were



**Table 1.** Correlation Matrix of Demographic and Psychosocial Variables

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
(1) Age	1.00									
(2) Marital status (1 = married)	0.41***	1.00								
(3) Education	-0.01	-0.21*	1.00							
(4) Financial satisfaction	-0.05	-0.19*	0.12	1.00						
(5) Physical health	-0.10	-0.18*	0.09	0.32***	1.00					
(6) Life satisfaction	-0.27**	-0.28***	-0.01	0.35***	0.32***	1.00				
(7) Depression	0.25**	0.22*	-0.07	-0.19*	-0.43***	-0.49***	1.00			
(8) Existential regret	0.07	0.19*	-0.14	-0.39***	-0.15	-0.35***	0.35***	1.00		
(9) Fear of aging	0.14	0.22*	-0.03	-0.27**	-0.37***	-0.48***	0.54***	0.39***	1.00	
(10) Purpose	-0.07	-0.16	-0.10	0.16	0.25**	0.46***	-0.49***	-0.18*	-0.44***	1.00
(11) Coherence	0.01	0.01	-0.21*	-0.10	0.02	0.22*	-0.23*	-0.01	-0.20*	0.70***
(12) Choice/responsibleness	-0.17	0.05	-0.00	0.07	0.17	0.28**	-0.34***	-0.05	-0.20*	0.50***
(13) Death acceptance	0.00	0.20*	-0.10	-0.13	-0.15	0.11	-0.03	-0.10	0.01	0.22*
(14) Existential vacuum	0.08	0.24**	-0.14	-0.28**	-0.28***	-0.31***	0.54***	0.40***	0.32***	-0.31***
(15) Goal seeking	-0.14	0.21*	-0.05	-0.29***	-0.02	-0.05	0.06	0.25**	0.10	0.02
(16) Neuroticism	0.04	0.13	0.02	-0.09	-0.30***	-0.27**	0.63***	0.40***	0.51***	-0.28**
(17) Extraversion	-0.09	0.06	-0.11	-0.12	0.19*	0.23*	-0.40***	-0.09	-0.32***	0.39***
(18) Openness to experience	-0.08	0.10	.33***	-0.01	-0.07	0.15	-0.13	-0.11	-0.04	-0.01
(19) Agreeableness	0.06	0.07	-0.11	0.15	0.13	0.33***	-0.30***	-0.25**	-0.35***	0.30***
(20) Conscientiousness	-0.13	-0.20*	0.04	0.15	0.28**	0.27**	-0.41***	-0.13	-0.22*	0.29***
(11) Coherence	1.00									
(12) Choice/responsibleness	0.39***	1.00								
(13) Death acceptance	0.40***	0.30***	1.00							
(14) Existential vacuum	-0.03	-0.13	0.08	1.00						
(15) Goal seeking	0.12	0.15	0.24**	0.38***	1.00					
(16) Neuroticism	0.01	-0.15	0.02	0.55***	0.19*	1.00				
(17) Extraversion	0.31***	0.24**	0.11	-0.17	0.22*	-0.46***	1.00			
(18) Openness to experience	-0.00	0.08	0.28**	0.09	0.31***	-0.02	0.09	1.00		
(19) Agreeableness	0.30***	0.10	0.06	-0.28**	-0.04	-0.29**	0.21*	0.02	1.00	
(20) Conscientiousness	0.24**	0.27**	0.03	-0.34***	-0.10	-0.25**	0.28**	0.05	0.20*	1.00

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

further assessed using the Least Significant Difference (LSD) post hoc testing procedures.

## Results

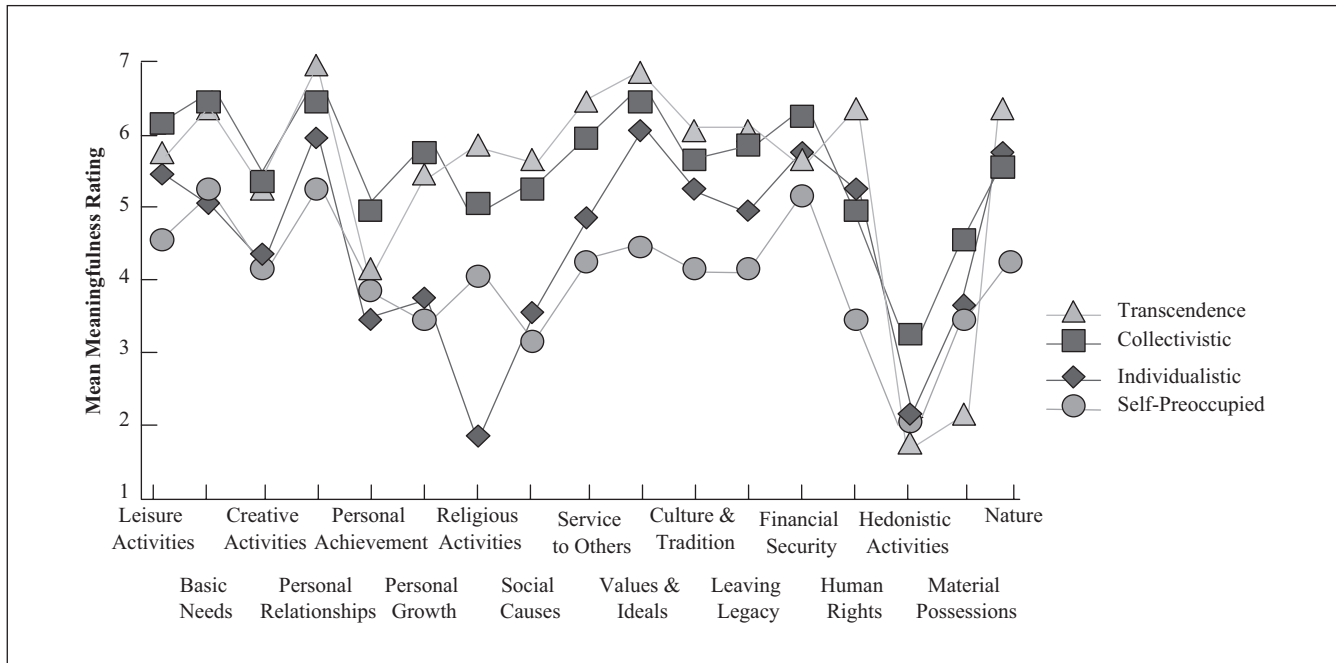
### Cluster Analysis

As a test of Hypothesis 1, cluster analysis performed on the SOMP-R Scale revealed four distinct groups. Results are graphically presented in Figure 1. Cluster 1 (*self-transcendent meaning orientation*) consisted of 32 individuals oriented toward transcendent sources of meaning, such as engaging in religious activities, preserving human values and ideals, leaving a legacy for the next generation, interest in humanistic concerns, and relationship with nature. Cluster 2 (*collectivistic meaning orientation*) comprised 24 individuals who found meaning in personal relationships, service to others, and commitment toward larger societal/political causes. Cluster 3 (*individualistic meaning orientation*) consisted of 34 individuals who found meaning through devotion of time and energy to realize their personal potential such as taking part

in creative activities, experiencing personal growth, and taking part in religious activities. Cluster 4 (*self-preoccupied meaning orientation*) identified 30 individuals who were primarily oriented toward finding meaning through pursuing self-serving interests, such as engaging in hedonistic activities and obtaining material possessions, without any real commitment to personal development, interpersonal relationships, or social causes. These meaning-orientation clusters formed the four levels of the independent variable.

### Bivariate Correlation Analyses

The results of the bivariate correlation analyses are shown in Table 1. As can be seen, the demographic variables are significantly, but moderately, related to some of the major psychosocial variables. Consequently, the demographic variables are treated as covariates to control for their association with the psychosocial variables. The correlational analyses indicate that the psychosocial variables constitute a set of relatively independent measures and support the contention that multicollinearity in the data is not a concern.



**Figure 1.** Plot of means of sources of meaning for each cluster

### Multivariate Analysis of Covariance

Hypotheses 2 and 3 were tested using the MANCOVA module of the Statistica software program (StatSoft, 1995). With the use of Wilks's criterion, the combined psychosocial variables were significantly related to the combined covariates, Wilks's  $\lambda = 0.272$ ,  $p < .001$ . Subsequent multiple regression analyses of each psychosocial variable with the covariates as multiple predictors showed that age provided a significant adjustment for goal seeking ( $p < .05$ ), marital status provided a significant adjustment for purpose and goal seeking ( $p < .05$ ), education level provided a significant adjustment for openness to experiences ( $p < .001$ ), and financial satisfaction provided a significant adjustment for life satisfaction ( $p < .001$ ), physical health ( $p < .01$ ), fear of aging ( $p < .05$ ), existential regret ( $p < .001$ ), existential vacuum ( $p < .01$ ), and goal seeking ( $p < .001$ ).

The covariate adjusted means of the psychosocial variables are presented in Table 2. MANCOVA analysis revealed a significant multivariate main effect for meaning orientations, Wilks's  $\lambda = 0.33$ ,  $p < .001$ . No statistically significant multivariate main effect was found for gender, Wilks's  $\lambda = 0.78$ ,  $p = .073$ , or the Gender  $\times$  Meaning orientation interaction, Wilks's  $\lambda = .54$ ,  $p = .081$ . A test of univariate effects of meaning orientations found statistically significant differences on physical health,  $F(3, 108) = 2.91$ ,  $p < .05$ ; depression,  $F(3, 108) = 4.13$ ,  $p < .01$ ; purpose,  $F(3, 108) = 11.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ; coherence,  $F(3, 108) = 9.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ; choice/responsibleness,

$F(3, 108) = 5.90$ ,  $p < .001$ ; goal seeking,  $F(3, 108) = 4.83$ ,  $p < .01$ ; extraversion,  $F(3, 108) = 7.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ; openness to experience,  $F(3, 108) = 4.81$ ,  $p < .01$ ; agreeableness,  $F(3, 108) = 3.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ; and conscientiousness,  $F(3, 108) = 2.67$ ,  $p < .05$ . No statistically significant univariate effects were found for life satisfaction, existential regret, fear of aging, death acceptance, existential vacuum, and neuroticism.

Subsequent post hoc comparisons of the significant univariate effects (see Table 2) showed that individuals with a transcendent meaning orientation were significantly less depressed, experienced greater purpose, experienced a greater sense of coherence, perceived greater choice and a sense of responsibleness, were more active in goal pursuits, and exhibited positive personality traits such as being more outgoing, more open to experience, more agreeable, and more conscientious compared with individuals who found meaning in sources reflecting self-serving interests. No significant difference between the transcendent ( $M = 3.6$ ) and the self-preoccupied ( $M = 3.5$ ) meaning orientations was found for self-rated physical health. When compared with the collectivistic and the individualistic orientations, transcendents also enjoyed better physical health, experienced greater purpose in life, perceived greater choice and a sense of responsibleness, were more active in goal pursuits, more outgoing, and more open to experience. In turn, individuals with a collectivistic orientation enjoyed better physical health, experienced greater purpose and coherence in life, and were more conscientious compared with those with a self-preoccupied orientation

**Table 2.** Covariate Adjusted Means (Standard Deviations) of Psychosocial Variables as a Function of Personal Meaning Orientations

Psychosocial variables	Personal meaning orientation				F	Planned comparisons					
	1	2	3	4		1 vs. 2	1 vs. 3	2 vs. 4	2 vs. 3	2 vs. 4	3 vs. 4
	Transcendent (n = 32)	Collectivistic (n = 24)	Individualistic (n = 34)	Self-preoccupied (n = 30)							
Physical health											
Physical health rating	3.6 (0.98)	3.0 (0.75)	3.1 (0.93)	3.5 (0.68)	2.91*	**	**	—	—	*	—
Mental health											
Life satisfaction	22.7 (2.19)	22.2 (2.64)	22.3 (2.43)	22.1 (2.81)	<1.00	—	—	—	—	—	—
Depression	32.0 (6.79)	34.6 (6.18)	37.0 (5.77)	37.0 (6.68)	4.13**	—	***	**	—	—	—
Existential regret	58.1 (22.12)	62.7 (20.03)	61.2 (23.36)	55.5 (17.32)	<1.00	—	—	—	—	—	—
Fear of aging	47.2 (16.66)	51.8 (16.02)	51.4 (18.31)	53.5 (16.03)	<1.00	—	—	—	—	—	—
Life attitudes											
Purpose	45.2 (6.88)	40.2 (5.14)	40.6 (5.85)	35.5 (7.13)	11.52***	**	**	***	—	**	***
Coherence	44.8 (8.19)	41.1 (4.88)	42.1 (5.90)	34.8 (7.46)	9.92***	—	—	***	—	***	***
Choice/responsibleness	46.9 (6.80)	43.9 (5.54)	40.3 (6.08)	41.8 (6.16)	5.90***	*	***	***	*	—	—
Death acceptance	42.5 (9.89)	39.6 (7.41)	39.2 (6.95)	37.0 (6.87)	2.06	—	—	—	—	—	—
Existential vacuum	22.0 (8.24)	24.9 (6.68)	23.8 (6.98)	23.7 (6.44)	<1.00	—	—	—	—	—	—
Goal seeking	36.1 (7.96)	31.5 (6.98)	30.6 (8.04)	29.4 (7.10)	4.83**	**	***	***	—	—	—
Personality											
Neuroticism	27.0 (9.99)	28.4 (7.54)	28.5 (6.08)	29.0 (6.26)	<1.00	—	—	—	—	—	—
Extraversion	44.0 (7.24)	39.2 (5.20)	40.2 (5.43)	36.3 (6.25)	7.34***	**	*	***	—	—	**
Openness to experience	39.4 (5.59)	35.9 (5.96)	35.1 (5.24)	34.8 (5.07)	4.81**	*	***	**	—	—	—
Agreeableness	47.9 (5.64)	46.1 (6.06)	46.8 (5.02)	43.5 (5.12)	3.06*	—	—	**	—	—	*
Conscientiousness	49.3 (6.31)	49.1 (4.67)	46.3 (6.59)	45.3 (7.12)	2.67*	—	—	*	—	*	—

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

(2 vs. 4). Individuals with an individualistic orientation experienced greater purpose and coherence in life, were more outgoing, and were more agreeable compared with those with a self-preoccupied orientation (3 vs. 4). Finally, the adjusted mean scores on the psychosocial variables for the collectivistic and the individualistic meaning orientations fell between the transcendent and the self-preoccupied orientations, but only choice/responsibleness significantly differentiated the collectivistic from the individualistic individuals, with the former perceiving greater choice in their lives and an increased sense of responsibleness. In general, when all significant psychosocial variables are considered together, individuals with a transcendent personal meaning orientation showed the best adjustment in physical, psychological, social, and emotional well-being domains whereas those with a self-preoccupied orientation anchored the opposite end of the adjustment continuum.

## Discussion

The overall purpose of this study was to address two general questions: “Are there different pathways to experience one’s life and aging as meaningful?” and “How do these pathways relate to psychosocial adaptation?” In exploring the ways, we focused on the identification of patterns of sources of personal meaning in older adults and attempted to extend earlier research on young and middle-aged adults in whom four distinct meaning orientations were found. We then examined

the impact of these meaning orientations on both positive and negative indicators of psychosocial adaptation.

Our results fully support Hypothesis 1. Cluster analysis of sources of meaning identified four distinct groups of older men and women who are distributed fairly equally across the clusters: transcendent (27%), collectivism (20%), individualism (28%), and self-preoccupied (25%). Consistent with what one might expect in an individualistic North American society, the individualism meaning orientation was found to be most salient in this sample of older adults. However, percentage differences across meaning orientations were very small. Thus, there is little evidence that one meaning orientation predominates over another. The personal meaning system of older adults appears to be characterized by heterogeneity, a finding also observed in the physical and cognitive domains of human functioning. There are, indeed, a variety of different pathways through which to experience one’s life and aging as meaningful.

Hypothesis 2 stated that transcendents would show better adjustment on a number of positive psychosocial variables compared with the self-preoccupied. The hypothesis was supported for some but not all psychosocial variables. Transcendents showed better adjustment in terms of lower depression, higher meaning and purpose in life, greater sense of choice and control in directing one’s life, and higher scores on the global personality dimensions of extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Transcendents could not be differentiated from the self-preoccupied

on self-rated physical health, life satisfaction, and neuroticism. Our results regarding life satisfaction and neuroticism (i.e., anxiety facet) support the findings based on community-residing older adults reported by Van Ranst and Marcoen (2000). The finding that transcendents could not be differentiated from the self-preoccupied on life satisfaction in the Van Ranst and Marcoen study as well as the current study raises doubts regarding Tornstam's (1997) postulate that gerotranscendence leads to increased life satisfaction. However, it is possible that our measure of personal meaning orientations reflect life goals and values that have been adopted and pursued but not yet achieved by the respondents. According to Frankl (1959), one way of finding meaning in life is through committing oneself to something, be it nature, culture, or by loving another human being. Therefore, a deeper sense of commitment to values and the attainment of life goals may be required before life satisfaction can ensue. Future longitudinal studies that distinguish between sources of meaning that have actually been achieved versus sources that have only been endorsed might help to clarify this issue. Nonetheless, our findings suggest that adopting values that go beyond self-interests is associated with a number of positive indices of psychosocial adaptation.

Hypothesis 3, which focused on psychosocial variables reflecting existential distress, was not supported. Transcendents could not be significantly differentiated from the self-preoccupied in terms of fear of aging, existential regret, existential vacuum, and fear of death (i.e., low death acceptance). In fact, none of the personal meaning orientations could be differentiated from each other on the distress variables. Two factors may have contributed to this finding. First, the sample as a whole did not experience high levels of existential distress on any of the individual indicators as evidenced by the absolute mean values relative to the maximum/minimum scores possible. Second, although the differences were in the predicted direction (existential regret being the exception), greater variability on some psychosocial variables was noted for some meaning orientations. Consequently, it is possible that the combination of a higher functioning sample and differential variability precluded finding significant differences among meaning orientations on the distress measures. Thus, before drawing any firm conclusions regarding the influence of personal meaning orientations on existential distress, additional studies will need to be conducted on samples of older adults who are confronted with more distressing life experiences such as chronic illnesses, life-threatening health problems, and/or end-of-life decision making regarding treatment.

### *Limitations of the Study*

Before considering the implications of our findings, a number of limitations should be addressed. First, our initial goal was to demonstrate that different meaning orientations could

be reliably identified in a sample of older adults and differentiated on a number of psychosocial variables. Although it is tempting to speculate as to the direction of influence, the cross-sectional design of this study does not permit us to determine the causal relationships among the variables assessed. A strong association between personal meaning orientations and a number of positive psychosocial variables has been demonstrated; however, it is not known whether having a particular meaning orientation leads to better psychosocial adaptation or whether good psychosocial adaptation leads to the adoption of values that go beyond self-serving needs. Second, the present study used a volunteer sample of community-residing older adults characterized by above-average functioning. Such individuals are expected to have a coherent life structure and high goal achievement. Thus, it is not clear whether our present findings would generalize to the general population of community-residing elderly or to those living in institutional environments. Finally, the present results were achieved with a relatively small sample size and are in need of replication and cross-validation.

In spite of these limitations, our findings have implications for positive psychology and what is possible to achieve in the later years (e.g., Reker, 2002; Ryff, 1989; Seligman et al., 2005). Given the psychosocial variables investigated in this study, it would appear that older men and women who "see the bigger picture" by discovering and creating meaning from sources that go beyond self-serving interests are characterized by stable personalities and higher levels of psychological, social, and emotional well-being. The experience of meaning at higher plateaus and broader horizons facilitates transformation, the process of converting a given reality into a new potentiality. Transformative processes can lead to a succession of adaptations and the unlimited capacity to deal with a variety of personal and situational circumstances. Through transformation, the older individual is able to resolve the contradictions, conflicts, and absurdities of life and create new ways of being-in-the-world.

In conclusion, our focus on an older person's existential belief system (i.e., personal meaning orientation) offers an explanation as to why many older adults do not show a decline in life satisfaction and purpose for living in the face of difficult life situations. Although our society has done a good job in providing for the physical, health, and mobility needs of older adults, we have been slow to address their existential needs through existentially based interventions, such as meaning-making and spirituality, that offer a more holistic and multifaceted approach. We hope that our findings will lead to the implementation of programs for community-residing as well as institutionalized older adults that provide the structural supports and opportunities necessary for engagement in self-transcendent behaviors with the goal of strengthening the inner resilience of our aging population.



## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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