

# PERCEIVED MEANING OF LIFE AND SATISFACTION WITH LIFE

## A research synthesis using an on-line findings-archive

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### ABSTRACT

'Meaning' and 'happiness' are leading topics in Positive Psychology but their relationship is not well understood. A first step to better understanding is to inspect the pattern of correlations found in the research literature. In this paper we focus on the relationship between perceived meaning of life and satisfaction with life, taking stock of the available research findings on their co-occurrence. Specifically we seek answers to the following questions of fact:

- Is there a correlation between perceived meaning of life and satisfaction with life?
- If so, is that correlation positive or negative?
- How strong is this correlation?
- How variable is this correlation across persons and situations?
- Do the correlations differ across components of happiness?
- What aspects of meaning are most/least associated with happiness?
- What sources of meaning are most/least associated with happiness?
- Does seeing meaning relate differently to happiness than searching for meaning?

We used data from the World Database of Happiness, which holds standardized descriptions of 171 observed relations between perceived meaning of life and satisfaction with life. The standardized technique used in this on-line findings-archive allows a condensed presentation of the rich findings in this field, while providing the reader with access to the full details of the underlying studies.

We found that perceived meaning of life and satisfaction with life are closely related at the micro-level of individuals, but not at the macro-level of nations. We explored the possible causal mechanisms behind these correlations.

*Keywords: happiness, meaning, purpose, research review*

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

'Meaning' and 'happiness' are leading topics in positive psychology, but their relationship is not well understood. Most attention has been devoted to the differences: meaning being presented as an aspect of *eudaimonic* happiness and happiness in the sense of life-satisfaction as *hedonic* happiness. This conceptual difference goes often with a moral preference for the former over the latter, which fits the current practice in positive psychology, positive psychological interventions (PPIs) focusing more on strengthening eudaimonic strengths than on boosting life-satisfaction. Though recognized as separate topics, the relationship between meaning and happiness is little understood.

Perceived meaning of life and satisfaction with life are both appraisals of the quality of life. Their relation can be considered from the following perspectives.

Need-theory of happiness holds that we feel better when innate needs are being met and that this affective experience gives rise to greater satisfaction with life (Veenhoven 2009). One such innate need is presumed to be a need for meaning (Steger & Frazier (2005), Routledge & FioRito (2021)). If so, perceived meaning of life will go together with satisfaction with life, and this correlation will be universal. A positive correlation can also be expected if meaning adds to happiness through the gratification of other needs, for instance, if a sense of mission pushes to active involvement in life and as such caters needs for social respect and the use of one's potentials. In this instrumental perspective, one can also think of negative effects of a sense of meaning on life-satisfaction. A strong sense of mission can interfere with the gratification of other needs, such as in the case of Catholic priests who choose to forego sexual contact.

Next there are several cognitive views on happiness, one of which holds that the satisfaction with one's life-as-a-whole results from the summing of satisfactions with parts of life in a 'bottom-up' process. Part-satisfactions concern *domains* of life, such as family and work, as well as satisfaction with *aspects* of life, such as its richness or uniqueness (Andrews & Withey 1976). In that context, perceived meaning of life can be seen as an aspect evaluation of life. Seeing life as meaningful will then add to life-satisfaction, while seeing life as meaningless will detract from it. In the cognitive view, satisfaction with that aspect of life will depend on the degree to which life fits a *want* for meaning, which can draw on an innate need for meaning but can also be a cultural phenomenon.

Effects of perceived meaning of one's life on the satisfaction with life are likely to vary across persons and situations. Contingencies will exist for positive as well as for negative effects and for effects through gratification of innate needs as well as for meeting learned wants. One of the personal moderators will be the aptness to believe in a cause and the ability to cope with philosophical doubt about the meaning of life. Situational moderators will be in culture; a sense of meaning is more likely to add to happiness in cultures that value living a meaningful life and provide practicable models to do so.

Next to effects of perceived meaning on satisfaction with life, there can be effects of life-satisfaction on perceived meaning in life. These 'top-down' effects are also likely to be contingent to personal and situational characteristics.

In this paper, we will not go into all these possible complexities, but start with some basic questions of fact, on the basis of which we will explore some theoretical issues in the discussion section. These questions are:

- Is there a correlation between perceived meaning of life and satisfaction with life?
- If so, is that correlation positive or negative?
- How strong is this correlation?
- How variable is this correlation across persons and situations?
- Do the correlations differ across components of happiness?
- What aspects of meaning are most/least associated with happiness?
- What sources of meaning are most/least associated with happiness?
- Does seeing meaning relate differently to happiness than searching for meaning?

We seek answers to these questions of fact by taking stock of the available research findings. Selection of such findings requires that we be clear about what we mean by 'perceived meaning of life' and with 'satisfaction with life' and that we establish how these phenomena can be measured.

## 2 CONCEPTS

In the widest sense the word 'happiness' is seen as denoting 'living a good life', while the term 'meaning of life' is taken to refer to what a life contributes to something good beyond that life. As such, there is a conceptual overlap between these notions; meaning is part of happiness. A correlation between living a good life and living a meaningful life is therefore implied, but can hardly be demonstrated empirically, since we cannot measure how 'good' a life is and neither how much 'good' of a life contributes to other sakes than that life itself.

In this paper, we focus on happiness and meaning in the more limited sense of subjective appraisals of one's life, respectively with perceived meaning of one's life and satisfaction with life. These are measurable phenomena. We will further avoid the use of the words 'meaning' and 'happiness' here, since these suggest a wider objective worth. We will deal with subjective perceptions of one's life; 'perceived meaning of one's life' and 'satisfaction with one's life'. What we want to determine is how these subjective appraisals of life are related.

### 2.1 Satisfaction with life

We follow the definition of life-satisfaction as the overall appreciation of one's life as a whole; in other words, how much one likes the life one lives. This concept is at the basis of the World Database of Happiness, our data source. A detailed delineation is found [here](#).

#### *Components of life-satisfaction*

In assessing how much we like the life we live, we draw on two sources of information: how well we feel most of the time and the degree to which we perceive that life brings us

what we want from it. These sub-appraisals are referred to as 'components' of life-satisfaction, respectively an affective component called '*hedonic level of affect*' and a cognitive component called '*contentment*'. The differences between overall life-satisfaction and these components are explained in more detail [here](#). In this paper we explore whether the relationship with perceived meaning of life differs across overall life-satisfaction and these components.

### *Measures of life-satisfaction*

Since life-satisfaction is something we have in mind it can be measured using questioning. Some common questions are:

- *Questions on overall life-satisfaction*
  - Taking all together, how happy would you say you are these days?
  - On the whole, how satisfied are you with the life you lead?
- *Questions on hedonic level of affect.*
  - Would you say that you are usually cheerful or dejected?
  - During the past few weeks, did you ever feel ....? (yes/no)<sup>4</sup>
    - + Particularly excited or interested in something?
    - So restless that you couldn't sit long in a chair?
    - + Proud because someone complimented you on something you had done?
    - Very lonely or remote from other people?
    - + Pleased about having accomplished something?
    - Bored?
    - + On top of the world?
    - Depressed or very unhappy?
    - + That things were going your way?
    - Upset because someone criticized you?(Affect balance computed subtracting negative from positive 'yes' responses)
  - How is your mood today? (repeated several days)
- *Questions on contentment*
  - How important was each of the following goals in life in the plans you made for yourself in early adulthood?
  - How successful have you been in the pursuit of these goals

## **2.2 Perceived meaning of life**

While life-satisfaction is a rather clear concept (how much you like the life you live), perceived meaning of life is a more ambiguous notion. The word 'meaning' has different connotations, which cannot be captured in one distinct concept. This leaves us with a set of aspects of perceived meaningfulness, which can be considered separately or in sum.

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<sup>4</sup> (+) signifies the positive emotions, and (-) signifies negative emotions

### *Aspects of perceived meaning of life*

When interpreted as an answer to the existential question of *why we live*, perceived meaning refers to the role of human life in evolution and one's place in that context. This involves philosophical reflection in which not everybody will engage. When interpreted as *what one lives for*, it refers to a sense of mission, such as a better life for one's children, which involves some good beyond one's own life. This is referred to as the perceived *usefulness* of one's life. However, meaning of life is also seen in a *sense of direction*, which does not necessarily imply contribution to a greater good, such as getting rich. Other aspects or perceived meaning of life are the *significance* of one's life to the good or the bad or the *uniqueness* of one's life. These differences are reflected in the questions used in research on perceived meaning of one's life.

Another topic that is often addressed in studies on perceived meaning is a *sense of coherence*. We see this as a matter of personality integration and will not consider it in this paper.

### *Measures of perceived meaning of life*

Like life-satisfaction, perceived meaning is life can be measured using questioning, typically asking respondents to endorse or not statements such as:

- I feel my life is meaningful
- My life has no clear purpose

Note that these terms are not synonymous, meaning does not always require a purpose (direction) and a purpose can be meaningless (useless). Next to such items on either meaning or purpose in questionnaires, several measures combine these aspects, either in one question or in multiple questions.

- My personal existence is utterly meaningless, without purpose

Some questionnaires also contain items on other aspects of the meaningfulness set, such as these items in the Purpose in Life test (Crumbaugh & Maholic 1969)

- In achieving life goals I've made no progress whatever (vs progressed to complete fulfillment)
- My life is: empty, filled only with despair (vs running over with exciting things)
- If I should die today, I'd feel that my life has been completely worthless (vs very worthwhile).
- In thinking of my life, I often wonder why I exist – (vs always see reasons for being here)

The more aspects of meaning addressed in a questionnaire, the less clear it becomes what it actually measures. An additional problem for this study was that such questionnaires also contain items close to happiness, such as the item on suicidal ideation in the Purpose in Life test.

Next to the above questions on *degree* of perceived meaning of life, there are also questions on the *satisfaction* with one's sense of meaning. These things do not necessarily go together, one can see little meaning in one's life but nevertheless be

satisfied.

Other aspects of perceived meaningfulness are, the *search* for meaning and perceived *sources of meaning*.

### 3 METHOD OF THIS RESEARCH SYNTHESIS

A first step in this review was to gather the available research findings on the relationship between perceived meaning of one's life and satisfaction with life. The second step was to present these findings in an uncomplicated form. For both steps we used the [World Database of Happiness](#), which is an online 'findings archive' on happiness in the sense of life-satisfaction. The structure of this source is depicted visually in [Figure 1](#), a more detailed description is found [here](#).

#### 3.1 Selection of studies

We could draw on an existing collection of reports of research on our topic, available in the collection of correlational findings of the World Database of Happiness, subject section [Meaning of life](#). This collection is gathered using the following steps:

- Scientific publications on happiness are gathered on a continuous basis in the context of the World Database of Happiness. Selection criterion is that happiness in the sense of life-satisfaction is addressed.
- Selected publications are included in the Bibliography of Happiness and their main topics noted using a subject classification. One of the subject categories in the Bibliography is [Perceived meaning of Life](#).
- Publications are selected from this collection that report an empirical investigation using an acceptable measure of happiness.

This procedure is described in more detail [here](#)

We updated the collection, which left us by April 30<sup>th</sup> 2022 with 28 *publications*, which together reported 75 *studies* (one publication reported 47 studies). These studies are listed in [Table 1](#). Together they yield 171 separate *findings* on which we focus in this paper.

#### 3.2 Description of research findings

The findings obtained using a valid measure of happiness are described on electronic 'finding pages', using a standard format and terminology. Each page has a unique internet address, to which we have linked in the text of this review. An example of such a finding page is presented in [Figure 2](#)

#### 3.3 Format of this review

In this review, we started by summarizing the research findings in a table in which the observed statistical relationships are presented in +, – or 0 signs. These signs link to finding pages in the World Database of Happiness. If you click on a sign one such a finding page will open.

#### *Organization of the findings*

We first sorted the findings by the research method used and present these in three separate columns. We distinguished 1) cross-sectional studies, which assess same-time relationships between perceived meaning of one's life and satisfaction with life, 2) longitudinal studies, which assess change in life-satisfaction following change in meaning, and 3) experimental studies, which assess the effect on induced change in meaning on life-satisfaction. In the result table we also distinguish between studies at the micro level, which assess the relation between meaning and life-satisfaction of individuals and studies at the macro level, which link average meaning in nations by average life-satisfaction of citizens.

#### *Presentation of the findings*

The observed quantitative relationships between perceived meaning of one's life and satisfaction with life are summarized in 3 possible signs: + for a positive relationship, – for a negative relationship and 0 for a non-relationship. Statistical significance is indicated by printing the sign in **bold**. Each sign contains a link to a finding page in the World Database of Happiness on which the reader can find more detail.

Some of these finding pages appear in more than one cell of the tables. This is the case for pages on which both a 'raw' (zero-order) correlation is reported and a 'partial' correlation in which the effect of control variables is removed.

#### *Advantages and disadvantages*

The advantages of such representation are: 1) an easy overview of the main trend in the findings, in this case the many + signs, 2) access to full detail behind the links, 3) an easy overview of the white spots in the empty cells in the tables, and 4) easy updates, by entering new signs in the tables, possibly marked with a color.

The disadvantages are: a) that much detail is not directly visible in the + and – signs, b) in particular not the effect size and control variables used, and c) that the links work only in electronic texts.

This review technique has been applied in earlier syntheses of research on 'Happiness and Private Wealth' (Jantsch & Veenhoven 2019), 'Happiness and Healthy Eating' (Veenhoven 2020) and 'Happiness and Consumption' (Veenhoven et al. 2021).

## **4 RESULTS**

An overview of the 171 research findings is presented in [Table 2](#). We can now inspect what these findings tell us about the relationship between perceived meaning of life and satisfaction with life.

#### 4.1 Degree of perceived meaning in life and satisfaction with life

Most of the findings are on this topic. Correlations at the micro-level of individuals are presented in the upper part of Table 2 and one correlation at the macro-level of nations at the bottom of this table.

##### *Is there a correlation?*

Yes there is, of the 171 observed relationships only one found no correlation (0) and 15 studies observed a correlation that did not reach statistical significance. The other 155 findings denote a significant correlation.

##### *Direction of the correlation*

Plus signs (+) dominate in Table 2, denoting that perceived meaning of life typically goes with greater satisfaction with life, however, there is a notable exception. Though correlations at the *micro-level of individuals* are positive, a study at the *macro-level of nations* found a negative correlation between average degree of perceived meaning and average life-satisfaction. We will discuss this phenomenon in section 5.5

##### *Strength of the correlations*

136 findings are expressed in a comparable correlation coefficient. These, quite sizable, effect sizes are presented in [Table 3](#). The average correlation between the perceived degree of meaning and life-satisfaction is +.36

##### *Variability across cultures*

Since all the correlations are positive, variability is in the size of the correlations. The OECD study among high school pupils covers 50 nations from different parts of the world. In [Table 3a](#) we marked the coefficients observed in different parts of the world using colors. No systematic difference appeared.

##### *Similarity across components of happiness*

Likewise, we visualized a possible difference across components of happiness in [Table 3b](#), marking the correlations with overall life-satisfaction **blue**, with affect level **red** and with contentment **purple**. We also found no clear difference.

#### 4.2 Aspects of perceived meaning and satisfaction with life

Most studies used multiple aspect indicators of perceived meaning of life; only 25 of the 136 correlates in Table 3 are about the correlation between single aspects of perceived meaning and happiness. These correlates are presented in the top segment of [Table 3](#). No great differences appeared, although the correlations with questions about 'meaning' tended to be stronger than the correlations with questions about 'purpose' and existential significance'. We will come back to this difference in section 5.3.

#### 4.3 Perceived sources of meaning and satisfaction with life

Findings on this subject are reported in the lower part of [Table 3](#). All the correlations were positive, but there was a difference in strengths. Seeing meaning in social bonds is most strongly related to life-satisfaction, as in the cases of 'interpersonal relations',



'community' and 'society'. The low correlation with seeing meaning in 'family' does not fit this pattern. Life-satisfaction related equally strongly with seeing meaning in life itself, such as in the cases of 'health' and 'personal development'. The weakest correlations were with seeing meaning in 'spirituality and religion' and with 'work'.

#### 4.4 Pursuit of meaning and satisfaction with life

At first sight, reported pursuit of meaning was found to be unrelated to life-satisfaction. After control for presence of meaning, the correlation became negative. A comparison across nations also showed a negative correlation in rich countries, but a positive correlation in poor countries. We will come back to this latter phenomenon in section 5.5.

## 5 DISCUSSION

What do these correlational findings tell us about the interplay between perceived meaning of one's life and satisfaction with life?

### 5.1 Is there an innate need for meaning?

At first sight, the findings fit the theory that we have an innate need for meaning (cf Section 1.1) and that therefore, the more meaning we see in our life, the more satisfied we are with it. Not only are the correlations positive and sizable as we saw from [Table 3](#), but they also appear to be universal, given the little variation across countries seen in [Table 3a](#). The strong correlations with affect level, which we saw in [Table 3b](#), can also be interpreted as resulting from need gratification, especially in the context of Veenhoven's (2009) theory of happiness in which the affective component reflects the gratification of universal human needs.

However, we also met with a finding that contradicts this theory. A lot of people appear not to care about the meaning of their life and are still reasonably happy. This was observed in the study of [DeHart et al \(2022\)](#) among the general public of the Netherlands, where 20% agreed with the statement 'the meaning of life is a subject that does not interest me very much'. Though a bit less happy than their fellow citizens who disagreed with this statement, these people were still quite happy with an average of 7,47 on the 0-10 scale of life-satisfaction. So, the quest for seeing meaning in one's life is apparently not universal and nor very pressing.

At a more theoretical level one can also doubt that there is an innate need for seeing meaning in one's life. A 'need' is not just a 'want' or a 'preference' but something that is required for survival and which has, for this reason, become an innate part of human nature. This is clearly the case for our needs for food and social belongingness and can also be seen to apply to the need to use and develop our potentials. The survival value of perceived meaning of one's life is less obvious, in particular when situated in the life situations of our early forefathers. Because of their survival value, needs were linked with strong affective signals. The affective signals that attend perceived meaning of one's life are typically less strong than those of hunger and loneliness.

An alternative explanation for the universal quest for meaning is that it is a consequence of human cognition, self-awareness in particular. Because we know that we are, we tend to wonder why we are and whether our life serves any other good beyond our own life. Though these questions come to mind, we can apparently live without convincing answers. Seen in this light, the quest for meaning can be better seen as an evolutionary unintended by-effect of the otherwise highly functional capacity of cognition. This interpretation fits the distinction Wentholt (1995) makes between innate 'organic needs' which we share with most primates and 'universal strivings' which come forth from human self-awareness.

## **5.2 How does perceived meaning of life otherwise affect satisfaction with life?**

If not automatically in response to the gratification of an innate need, how else can seeing meaning of life contribute to satisfaction with life? One possibility is that a sense of meaning is pleasant, even if not required. In this respect perceived meaning of life is comparable to enjoyment of arts, not a basic need either, but even so a source of satisfaction. In this view, perceived meaning of one's life is one of the appraisals of life-aspects that contribute to one's satisfaction with life as a whole, and as such is comparable to the perceived 'richness of life', which also goes with greater satisfaction with life (Oishi & Westgate 2021). In section 1.1 we depicted this mechanism as a 'bottom-up effect. A related effect seems to be that a sense of meaning can help us to cope with unhappiness, a heuristic being 'I suffer, but I live for a good cause'.

This brings us to the wider instrumental value of perceiving meaning in one's life, which positive psychologists typically see as a 'strength'. In this view, a sense of meaning facilitates functioning by adding a moral premium to one's activities, which helps us to get involved and overcome dips. In this case, the causal mechanism is 'activity', also known as 'fully functioning'. Activity appears to be a main determinant of life-satisfaction, be it that more activity is not always better. We feel best at a personal optimum between boredom and anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi 1995)

## **5.3 How does satisfaction with life affect perceived meaning of life?**

The observed correlations between perceived meaning of life and satisfaction with life should not be interpreted too easily as a causal effect of the former on the latter, since reversed causality is likely to be involved in this case. One causal mechanism is certainly that meaning of one's life is often seen in one's life as such. We saw from [Table 3](#) that 'health' and 'personal development' are seen as sources of meaning. Even more telling is the qualitative study done by Kok et al (2015) among Malaysian youngsters in which about half of the respondents appeared to see meaning in leading a happy life, thus implying a correlation with life-satisfaction.

Another causal effect of life-satisfaction on perceived meaning is found in Fredrickson's (2005) 'Broaden and Build Theory' of positive affect, which draws on a large body of empirical research. When we feel good, our adaptational repertoire 'broadens' in several ways, which results in the long-term 'building' of more resources, both career-wise and in interpersonal relations. As such, life-satisfaction adds to one's chance of doing meaningful things and thereby also to having a perception of leading a meaningful life.

As well as adding to the actual meaningfulness of one's life, life-satisfaction will also affect your mere perception of how meaningful your life is. The meaningfulness of one's life is an intangible object, the perception of which is highly vulnerable for the observer's mental set. As such, it is likely that happy people tend to see more meaning in their lives than unhappy people, irrespective of the actual meaning of their lives. In this context, it is worth remembering [Table 3](#), in which we see stronger correlations of life-satisfaction with general statements of 'meaning', than for more specific aspects of meaning, such as 'purpose' and 'existential significance'.

A related effect seems to be that the issue of the meaning of one's life will present itself more urgently when one is unhappy and wonders 'What is this suffering good for?' and 'Why do I live?'. Since convincing answers to such questions are often not available, unhappy people tend to become more aware of a lack of meaning in their lives and some will attribute their unhappiness to this lack. This will also boost the correlation between perceived meaning of life and satisfaction with life.

#### **5.4 How strong are these effects relatively; the effect of meaning on happiness and happiness on meaning?**

As yet we have not (enough) data to provide an answer to this chicken and egg problem. All we can say is that the one longitudinal study and the one experimental study, undertaken so far, suggest that there is a causal effect of perceived meaning of life on satisfaction with life. See the right-hand columns in [Table 2](#). Yet, this is not to say that there is no effect of life-satisfaction on perceived meaning, and nor that this effect is less strong.

This is worth further investigation, both for the sake of intellectual curiosity, and for priority setting in therapy and education. If life-satisfaction is the main determinant in this relationship, it is better to foster life-satisfaction than to preach meaning; not only because happiness education appears to be effective (Bergsma et al 2021) but also because of the beneficial side effects of enjoying one's life on moral behavior, such as voluntary work (Lawton et al 2021). We expand further on this in section 5.6.

#### **5.5 Why a negative correlation at the macro level of nations between perceived meaning of life and average satisfaction with life?**

Although perceived meaning of life had been found to relate positively to satisfaction with life at the micro level of individuals, the one study at the macro level of nations found a negative relationship; with a correlation between average sense of meaning and average life-satisfaction of  $-.33$ .

Though counter-intuitive at first sight, this is not uncommon. A similar pattern is observed with religion, although religious people are typically happier than the non-religious, average happiness tends to be lower in the most religious countries of the present-day world (Veenhoven & Berg 2009), even though in the unhappy-religious countries the most religious people are still the happiest. An explanation of this phenomenon holds that a main function of religion is to cope with misery and that people therefore tend to be more religious in miserable nations; which are typically less

developed nations. Note that the above-mentioned study also found a negative correlation between perceived meaning of life in nations and their economic development, which relationship was mediated by average religiousness (Oishi & Diener 2013). Religion may reduce the pain of miserable conditions, but apparently not enough to provide a satisfying life. This medicine may also be worse than the disease, such as when religion inhibits cultural modernization, which pattern appears to fit human nature better than the traditional orientations that were functional in the agrarian phase of development of human societies (Veenhoven 2010).

In this case of perceived meaning, a related explanation is that the question about meaning of life presents itself more in miserable conditions, in which little meaning can be found in one's life, life being full of suffering. In such contexts, there is more demand for meaning beyond one's own life, such as 'saving the country' or 'spreading the gospel'. Cultures respond to this demand by providing ways to see meaning in misery and glorifying them. This may reduce the pain of misery but apparently not enough to provide individuals with a satisfying life. As in the case of religion, some ways to meaning can bring people 'from the frying pan into the fire', for example in the case of drawing them into a holy war.

This explanation fits the finding by that time spend thinking about the meaning of life relates positively to life-satisfaction in poor countries but negatively in rich countries as can be seen [here](#).

## 5.6 Implications of the top-down effect

Satisfaction with life tends to foster a sense of meaning in one's life (cf section 5.3) and this top-down effect should be acknowledged in programs that aim to promote meaningfulness, such as currently in moral education.

Over the ages, education has not only involved the passing of knowledge but also included 'character building', in the context of which much attention has been devoted to 'moral education'. Parts of this, traditionally religious inspired, education lives on in present day Positive Psychology, In Positive Education in particular, since there is a moral component in notions of 'positive mental health'. In the contemporary post-modern climate, there is less emphasis on the passing along of particular norms and values but more attention for developing a personal moral orientation. A view on the meaning of one's life is part of such orientation and consequently trainings in seeing meaning have been developed; an example of which is found [here](#).

While the emphasis in moral education is to provide examples of leading a just life, there is growing attention for development of the strengths and skills needed to live a just life. This shift links up with the notion of 'performance character' (Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Davidson, 2014; Davidson et al., 2010; Davidson et al., 2011) and fits the focus on strengthening strengths in Positive Psychology. People perform typically better when feeling good and for that reason Lovat et al (2010) plea for including student wellbeing as a goal in moral education.

Given the probable effects of life-satisfaction on perceived meaning in life (cf. section 5.3), moral educators should consider to foster the life-satisfaction of their students, including positive affect, which mental state is typically not cherished by moral

educators. For this purpose, moral educators can draw on the rich research on happiness education from Positive Psychology (Bergsma et al 2021).

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

Seeing meaning in one's life tends to go together with greater satisfaction with that life, at least at the micro level of the individual. At the macro level of nations, it goes with lower average life-satisfaction. The relation between perceived meaning of life and satisfaction with life is bi-directional and involves several causal mechanisms. An innate need for meaning is unlikely to be involved.

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**Table 1**  
**75 studies in which a correlation between perceived meaning and life-satisfaction was assessed**

People	Measure of perceived meaning	Measure of happiness	Source
<b>General public</b>			
18+ aged, USA. 201?	3 questions on perceived meaning	Time felt happy	<a href="#">Baumeister et al 2013</a>
15+ aged, 94 nations, 2006-2007	Do you feel your life has an important purpose or meaning?	Best-worst possible life	<a href="#">Joshanloo (2018a)</a>
16+ aged general public, The Netherlands 2020	Goal directedness Existential significance	Happiness	<a href="#">DeHart et al. 2022</a>
18+ aged, 85 developed and developing countries, 1994-2007	How often, if at all, do you think about the meaning and purpose of life?	Happiness	<a href="#">Duff &amp; Ivlevs (2011)</a>
18+ aged, general public, USA, 1973/7	How do you feel about how much you are really contributing to other people's lives?"	Life-satisfaction (question asked twice)	<a href="#">Andrews &amp; Withey (1976)</a>
15+ aged general public, 132 nations, 2007	Self report on a single question: Do you feel your life has an important purpose or meaning?	Best-worst possible life	<a href="#">Oishi &amp; Diener (2014)</a>
18-88 aged, general public, Denmark, 1993	Single question: "Do you feel part of a larger whole?"	Happiness Life satisfaction Affect level	<a href="#">Ventegodt (1995)</a>
50+ aged, general public, Europe, 2006,2007	How often do you feel that your life has meaning?	Life satisfaction	<a href="#">Becchetti et al. (2016)</a>
25+ aged, USA, 199?	3 questions on perceived meaning	Happiness Life satisfaction	<a href="#">Ryff &amp; Keyes (1995)</a>
<b>Special publics</b>			
<b>Patients</b>			



Cancer out-patients, Warsaw, Poland, 2008	Purpose In Life test	Best-worst possible life Life-satisfaction	<a href="#">Wnuk et al. (2012)</a>
18-42 aged mental patients, before and after psychotherapy, Netherlands, 199?	Life Regard Index Framework	Happy person Life satisfaction	<a href="#">Debats (1996a)</a>
Remitted mental out-patients and controls, Italy, 199?	Purpose in Life Scale (Ryff)	Affect level	<a href="#">Rafanelli et al. (2000)</a>
Cancer patients, followed 6 months after onset, Trier, 198?	Self report on questions focusing on attempts to find meaning in the illness experience, especially with reference to religious issues	Affect level	<a href="#">Filipp &amp; Klauer (1991)</a>
<i>Age groups</i>			
31-33 aged, Denmark 1993, born in University Hospital in Copenhagen	Do you think your work is meaningful?	Happiness Life satisfaction Affect level	<a href="#">Ventegodt (1996)</a>
30 - 51 aged, urban areas in 7 countries, 2006	questions about meaning associated with 10 domains of life	Life satisfaction	<a href="#">Delle-Fave et al. (2011)</a>
Elderly, British Columbia, Canada, 2005	How satisfied are you with your sense of meaning of life?	Life satisfaction Happiness	<a href="#">Michalos et al. (2007)</a>
50+ aged, general public, Europe, 2006,2007	How often do you feel that your life has meaning?	Satisfaction with life	<a href="#">Becchetti et al. (2016)</a>
<i>University students</i>			
Students, Turkey, 2012	10 questions on perceived meaning	Satisfaction with life scale Affect balance	<a href="#">Dogan et al. (2012)</a>
147 college students, Philippines 201?	5 questions on perceived meaning and purpose	<a href="#">Affect balance</a>	<a href="#">Navares 2017</a>
College students, USA, followed 7 weeks 1991-1992	3 questions on perceived meaning and purpose	Average mood over 52 days	<a href="#">Diener et al. (2012)</a>
18-46 aged undergraduate psychology students, Netherlands,	Life regard index	Happy person Satisfaction with life	<a href="#">Debats (1990)</a>

198?			
Aged 17-40, undergraduate university students, Canada, 2017	Self report on 'functioning well' on 8 items	Affect balance	<a href="#">Passmore et al. (2018)</a>
University students, Great Britain, 1995	Purpose in Life test	Affect balance	<a href="#">Lewis et al. (1997)</a>
<i>High school pupils, age 15</i>			
Albania, 2018	3 questions on perceived meaning and purpose	Satisfaction with life Affect balance	<a href="#">OECD (2019a)</a>
Argentina, 2018			
Austria, 2018			
Azerbaijan (Baku), 2018			
Belarus, 2018			
Bosnia Herzegovina, 2018			
Brazil, 2018			
Brunei Darussalam, 2018			
Bulgaria, 2018			
Chile, 2018			
Colombia, 2018			
Costa Rica, 2018			
Croatia, 2018			
Czech Republic, 2018			
Denmark, 2018			
Dominican Republic, 2018			
Estonia, 2018			
Finland, 2018			
France, 2018			
Georgia, 2018			
Germany, 2018			
Greece, 2018			
Hungary, 2018			
Iceland, 2018			
Indonesia, 2018			
Ireland, 2018			

Italy, 2018			
Kazakhstan, 2018			
Lebanon, 2018			
Lithuania, 2018			
Luxembourg, 2018			
Morocco, 2018			
Malaysia, 2018			
Mexico, 2018			
Moldova, 2018			
Montenegro, 2018			
Netherlands, 2018			
North Macedonia, 2018			
Panama, 2018			
Peru, 2018			
Portugal, 2018			
Qatar, 2018			
Russia (Tatarstan), 2018			
Switzerland, 2018			
United Arab Emirates, 2018			
United Kingdom, 2018			
Multiple countries, 2018			
<b><i>Users of positive psychological interventions (PPIs)</i></b>			
Users of a positive psychology website, United States, 2002-2005	<p>I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful.</p> <p>I am always looking to find my life's purpose</p> <p>I am always searching for something that makes my life feel significant.</p> <p>I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life.</p> <p>I am searching for meaning in my life.</p>	Affect balance	<a href="#">Park et al. (2010)</a>
Participants in a meaning training, Australia and New Zealand, 202?	<p>In the past several hours I have led a purposeful and meaningful life</p> <p>Treated also answered questions</p> <p>- What activity are you currently doing?</p>	<p>Affect balance</p> <p>Momentary life satisfaction</p>	<a href="#">Van Aqteren et al. (2021a)</a>

	- Is your current activity fulfilling?		
<i>Further populations</i>			
Working population, Spain, 2012	Purpose in life	On the average, what percentage of the time do you feel?	<a href="#">Merino &amp; Privado (2015)</a>
65+aged, ethnic Korean naturalized as Japanese and Japanese, Japan, 2005	One question having sense of purpose in life (vs not)	Write any number between 0 and 100 that describes your quality of life	<a href="#">Moon &amp; Mikami (2007)</a>

**Table 2**  
**171 findings on the relation between perceived meaning of life and satisfaction with life**

Aspects of perceived meaning in life	Observed relation with happiness by research method					
	Cross-Sectional		Longitudinal		Experimental	
	Zero order	Partial	Zero order	Partial	Zero order	Partial
	<i>Micro-level of individuals</i>					
<b>Degree of meaning</b>						
<i>Single aspects of meaning</i>						
• Meaning only	+/+/+ +/+/+ + +	++ ++	+			
• Purpose only	+/+ ++	+/+				
• Usefulness	+ +/+/+					
• Existential significance	+ +/+/+ +/+/+					
<i>Multiple aspects of meaning combined</i>						
• Meaning + purpose	+ +/+	+ -				
• Purpose in Life test	+/+/+ +					
• Purpose in life scale	+/+					
• Life Regard index		+				
• Meaning index	+					
<b>Pursuit of meaning</b>						
Interested in meaning	+			+		
Searching for meaning	+/+/+ + -	-				
Followed meaning training	+/+				+	

<b>Perceived sources of meaning</b>						
• Work	+	0				
• Family	+	+				
• Standard of living	+	+				
• Interpersonal relations	+	+				
• Health	+	+				
• Personal growth	+	+				
• Leisure and free time	+	+				
• Spirituality and religion	+	+				
• Community	+	+				
• Society	+	+				
	<b>Macro-level of nations</b>					
<b>Degree of meaning</b>	-					

Meaning of signs

<p><b>+</b> = positive and significant</p> <p><b>+</b> = positive, non-significant</p> <p><b>0</b> = unrelated</p> <p><b>-</b> = negative, not significant</p> <p><b>-</b> = negative, significant</p>	<p><b>+ -</b> = positive in one subgroup, negative in another</p> <p><b>+/+</b> = positive on two measures of happiness</p> <p><b>+ -</b> = positive before control, negative after</p>
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**Table 3**  
**136 findings on strengths of correlation between perceived meaning of life and satisfaction with life**

Aspects of perceived meaning in life	Observed correlation with happiness in cross-sectional studies expressed in Pearson correlation	Average and (SD)
	<i>Micro-level of individuals</i>	
<b>Degree of meaning</b>		
<i>Single aspects of meaning</i>		
• Meaning only	<b>+ .32 +.45/+.50/+.43 +.39/+.46/+.38 +.42 +.67</b>	+ .45 (0.09)
• Purpose only	<b>+ .13/+.10 +.26 +.42</b>	+ .23 (0.15)
• Usefulness	<b>+ .70 +.18/+.20/+.16</b>	+ .31 (0.26)
• Existential significance	<b>+ .36 +.23/+.30/+.28 +.27/+.31/+.31</b>	+ .29 (0.04)
<i>Multiple aspects of meaning</i>		
• Meaning + purpose	<b>+ .27 +.25/+.28 +.35/+.30 +.39/+.33 +.36/+.29 +.34/+.30 +.45/ +.42 +.43/+.41 +.55/+.50  +.39/+.36 +.43/+.44 +.45/+.43 +.33 /+.34 +.54/+.48 +.27/+.32 +.39/+.39 +.37/+.34  +.26/+.34 +.47/+.39 +.51/+.49 +.41/+.33 +.33/+.33 +.53/+.47 +.33/+.37 +.18/+.21  +.44/+.40 +.34/+.31 +.41/+.35 +.44 /+.44 +.42/+.41 +.27/+.25 +.29/+.29  +.39/+.32 +.47/+.44 +.35/+.38 +.39/+.37 +.39/+.40 +.36/+.35 +.31/+.29 +.41/+.43  +.37/+.37 +.36/+.38 +.23/+.29 +.43/+.44 +.41 +.39/+.39</b>	+ .38 (0.08)
• Purpose in life test	<b>+ .53/+.55/+.55 +.61</b>	+ .46 (0.19)
• Purpose in life scale	<b>+ .08/+.54</b>	
• Meaning index	<b>+ .34</b>	
<b>Pursuit of meaning</b>		
Interested in meaning	<b>+ .00</b>	+ .02 (0.02)
Searching for meaning	<b>+ .02/+.05/+.01</b>	
<b>Perceived sources of meaning</b>		
• Work	<b>+ .22</b>	
• Family	<b>+ .27</b>	
• Standard of living	<b>+ .27</b>	

• Interpersonal relations	+ <b>.36</b>	+ <b>.32</b> (0.08)
• Health	+ <b>.36</b>	
• Personal growth	+ <b>.43</b>	
• Leisure and free time	+ <b>.24</b>	
• Religion and spirituality	+ <b>.23</b>	
• Community	+ <b>.42</b>	
• Society	+ <b>.35</b>	
<b><i>Macro-level of nations</i></b>		
<b>Degree of meaning</b>	<b>-.33</b>	<b>-.33</b>



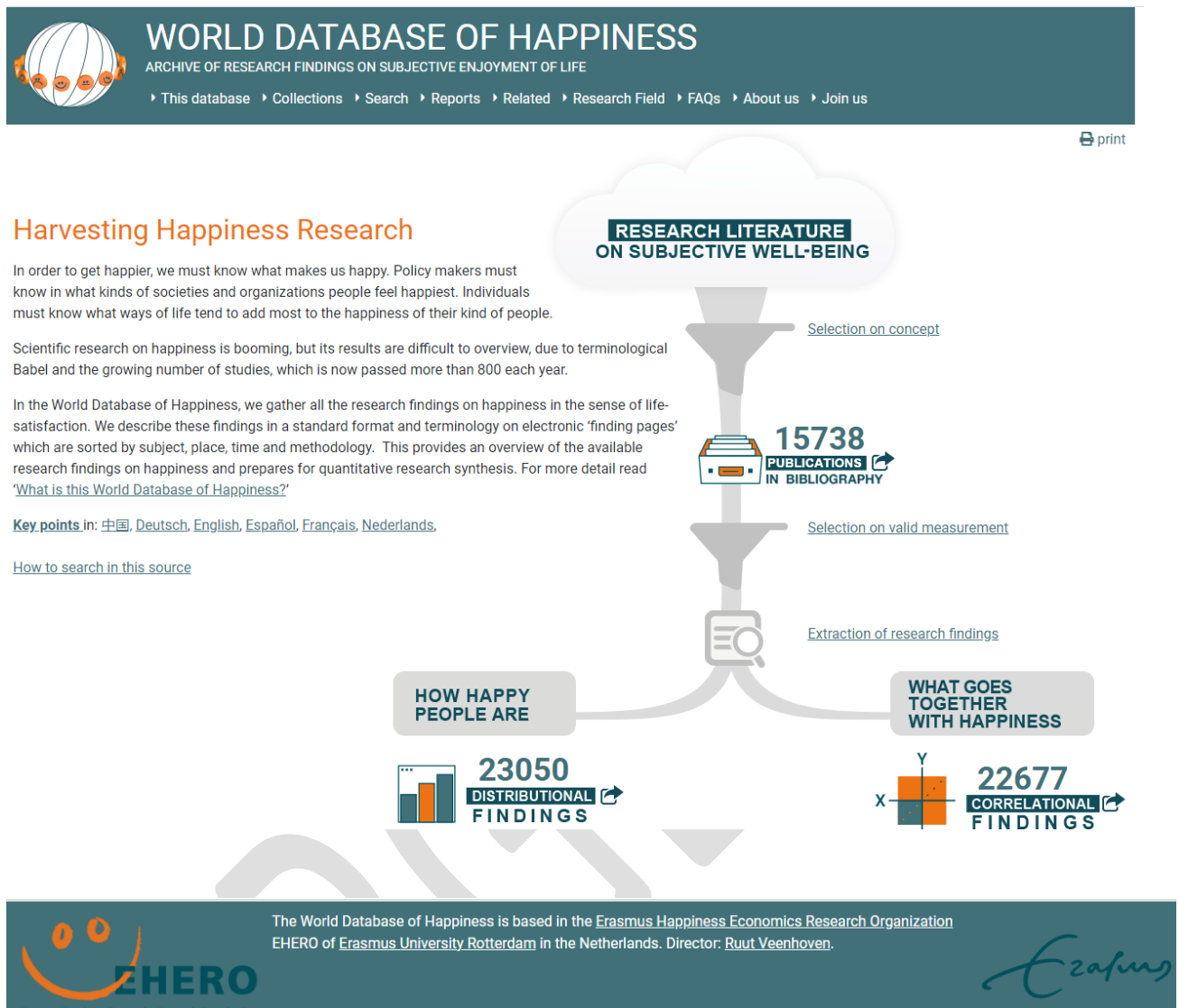
**Table 3a**  
**117 findings on strengths of correlation between perceived meaning of life and satisfaction with life**  
in **Africa**, **Asia**, **Latin America**, **Middle East** and **Western nations** (Australia, Europe, North America)

<b>Aspects of perceived meaning in life</b>	<b>Observed correlation with happiness</b> in cross-sectional studies expressed in Pearson correlation
	<i>Micro-level of individuals</i>
<b>Degree of meaning</b>	
• Meaning only	+.32 +.45/+.50/+.43 +.39/+.46/+.38 +.27/+.31/+.27 +.23/+.30/+.28 +.42 +.67
• Purpose only	+.13/+.10 -.26
• Meaning + purpose	+.27 +.25/+.28 +.35/+.30 +.39/+.33 +.36/+.29 +.34/+.30 +.45/ +.42 +.43/+.41 +.55/ +.50 +.39/+.36 +.43/+.44 +.45/+.43 +.33 /+.34 +.54/+.48 +.27/+.32 +.39/+.39 +.37/+.34 +.26/+.34 +.47/+.39 +.51/+.49 +.41/+.33 +.33/+.33 +.53/+.47 +.33/+.37 +.18/+.21 +.44/+.40 +.34/+.31 +.41/+.35 +.44 /+.44 +.42/+.41 +.27/+.25 +.29/+.29 +.39/+.32 +.47/ +.44 +.35/+.38 +.39/+.37 +.39/+.40 +.36/+.35 +.31/+.29 +.41/+.43 +.37/+.37 +.36/+.38 +.23/+.29 +.43/+.44 +.41 +.39/+.39
• Usefulness	+.70
• Existential significance	+.36
<i>Questionnaires involving additional aspects</i>	
• Purpose in life test	+.53/+.55/+.55 +.61
• Purpose in life scale	+.08/+.54
• Meaning index	+.44


**Table 3b**  
**136 findings on strengths of correlation between perceived meaning of life and satisfaction with life**  
**distinguishing between overall life-satisfaction, hedonic level of affect and contentment**

Aspects of perceived meaning in life	Observed correlation with happiness in cross-sectional studies expressed in Pearson correlation
<i>Micro-level of individuals</i>	
Degree of meaning	
• Meaning only	+.32 <b>+.45/+50/+43</b> <b>+.39/+46/+38</b> <b>+.27/+31/+27</b> <b>+.23/+30/+28</b> <b>+.42</b> <b>+.67</b>
• Purpose only	<b>+.13/+10</b> <b>-.26</b>
• Meaning + purpose	<b>+.27</b> <b>+.25/+28</b> <b>+.35/+30</b> <b>+.39/+33</b> <b>+.36/+29</b> <b>+.34/+30</b> <b>+.45/</b> <b>+.42</b> <b>+.43/+41</b> <b>+.55/</b> <b>+.50</b> <b>+.39/+36</b> <b>+.43/+44</b> <b>+.45/+43</b> <b>+.33 /+.34</b> <b>+.54/+48</b> <b>+.27/+32</b> <b>+.39/+39</b> <b>+.37/+34</b> <b>+.26/+34</b> <b>+.47/+39</b> <b>+.51/+49</b> <b>+.41/+33</b> <b>+.33/+33</b> <b>+.53/+47</b> <b>+.33/+37</b> <b>+.18/+21</b> <b>+.44/+40</b> <b>+.34/+31</b> <b>+.41/+35</b> <b>+.44 /+.44</b> <b>+.42/+41</b> <b>+.27/+25</b> <b>+.29/+29</b> <b>+.39/+32</b> <b>+.47/</b> <b>+.44</b> <b>+.35/+38</b> <b>+.39/+37</b> <b>+.39/+40</b> <b>+.36/+35</b> <b>+.31/+29</b> <b>+.41/+43</b> <b>+.37/+37</b> <b>+.36/+38</b> <b>+.23/+29</b> <b>+.43/+44</b> <b>+.41</b> <b>+.39/+39</b>
• Usefulness	+.70
• Existential significance	+.36
<i>Questionnaires involving additional aspects</i>	
• Purpose in life test	<b>+.53/+55/+55</b> <b>+.61</b>
• Purpose in life scale	+.08/+54
• Meaning index	+.44
Interested in meaning	<b>+.04</b>
Searching for meaning	<b>+.02/+05/+01</b>
Perceived sources of meaning	<b>+.22/+27/+27/+36/+36/+43/+24/+23/+42/+35</b> <b>-.18/-20/-16</b>
<i>Macro-level of nations</i>	
Degree of meaning	<b>-.33</b>

**Figure 1**  
**Structure of the World Database of Happiness**




**Figure 2**  
**Example of a finding page**



# WORLD DATABASE OF HAPPINESS

ARCHIVE OF RESEARCH FINDINGS ON SUBJECTIVE ENJOYMENT OF LIFE

[▶ This database](#) ▶ [Collections](#) ▶ [Search](#) ▶ [Reports](#) ▶ [Related](#) ▶ [Research Field](#) ▶ [FAQs](#) ▶ [About us](#) ▶ [Join us](#)

 print

## Study [Andrews & Withey\\_\(1976\): study US 1973 /1](#)

Public: 18+ aged, general public, USA, 1973/7

Sample:

Respondents: N = 222

Non Response:

Assessment: Interview: face-to-face  
Using highly structured questionnaires.

### Correlate


Authors's Label: Satisfaction with contribution to others life

Our Classification: LIFE APPRAISALS: OTHER THAN HAPPINESS » ... » Meaningful (vs useless)  
 MEANING OF LIFE » ... » Satisfaction with meaning of life  
 SELF-IMAGE » ... » Satisfaction with contributions to others

Operationalization: Closed question: "How do you feel about how much you are really contributing to other people's lives?"  
 Rated on a 7-point scale: terrible/ unhappy/ mostly dissatisfied/ mixed/ mostly satisfied/ pleased/ delighted

### Observed Relation with Happiness

Happiness Measure	Statistics	Elaboration / Remarks
Q-DT-u-sqt-v-7-a	$r = +.32$	



The World Database of Happiness is based in the [Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organization](#) EHERO of [Erasmus University Rotterdam](#) in the Netherlands. Director: [Ruut Veenhoven](#).

