# Perceived meaningfulness in life: a matter of what makes life meaningful?

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The existential psychology's concern with the feeling of meaningfulness in life forms the basis for the present study aiming to investigate the relationship between perceived meaningfulness, and search for meaningfulness in life, and level of conformity. An online survey was distributed to employees at a university in Sweden, and included two questionnaires; the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) and the Concern for Appropriateness (CFA) questionnaire. One hundred and two respondents completed the survey. CFA was found to significantly correlate with MLQ-Presence (r = -.456 p = <.001) and MLQ-Search (r = .307 p = .002). The present study found that the feeling of present meaningfulness was significantly lower among those who cared more about fitting into others´ norms concerning how to behave.

Den existentiella psykologins intresse för upplevelse av livsmening ligger till grund för denna studies undersökning av huruvida upplevelsen av livsmening, samt sökandet efter livsmening har ett samband med grad av konformitet. En webbaserad frågeenkät utdelades till anställda vid ett svenskt universitet, ochinnefattade två formulär; Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) och Concern for Appropriateness (CFA). Etthundratvå svar var komplett ifyllda. Resultaten visade på statistiskt signifikanta samband mellan CFA och MLQ-Presence (r = -.456 p = <.001), samt MLQ-Search (r = .307 p = .002). Den aktuella studien fann att upplevelse av livsmening var signifikant lägre för dem som var mer angelägna om att passa in i andras mallar för hur de bör bete sig.

The question of life's meaning has found its way into psychology via the philosophical branch of existentialism with founding fathers as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre (Jacobsen, 2012). The philosophical aspect has handled the question as to what a meaningful life really is, and if life at all can inherit meaning? (Metz, 2013). The psychological aspect has been more concerned with the *feeling of meaningfulness* and to what extent one's life is found to be meaningful (Stillman, Baumeister, Lambert, Crescioni, DeWall, & Fincham, 2009). Viktor Frankl (2006) emphasizes strongly how a sense of meaningfulness was a common feature among those who survived the Nazi concentration camps (where he himself spent many years) and that those who at any time lost their sense of reasons to survive soon died, one way or the other (Frankl, 2006. pp 8, 75-76). Higher levels of self-reported meaningfulness have been found to be positively associated with i.e. satisfaction with life, enjoyment of work, happiness, positive affect, physical health and hope, and negatively associated with for example psychopathology, stress, need for therapy, suicidal ideations, and depression (see review by Stillman, et al. 2009). Loneliness and rejection have been found to negatively correlate with sense of meaningfulness, rather people seem to find meaning from each other (Stillman, et al. 2009). This would suggest that we tend to go a long way to avoid losing social approval from others, since that would threaten our feeling of meaningfulness in life.

Johnson (1989) states that in social psychology two classes of subjective phenomena have been extensively studied, the inner directives of the individual (e.g. values such as meaning, needs and desires), and the individual's perception of expectations on how to behave, imposed upon them by others (c.f. conformity). Related to expectations on how to behave, Johnson points out that both people scoring high and low on concern for appropriateness (instrument for measuring tendency to care

about behaving appropriately, further explained below) tend to conform more when (for them) unimportant values are in question than when important values are at stake. When the value is not important enough for the individual, the conflict of choosing between actions needed to ensure the value and those that ensure appropriate behavior seems to become easier to solve, in favor for getting along with others, to conform. When a value is important to an individual the inner conflict between behaving according to the values or to behave socially appropriate becomes harder to solve. Conformity comes at a cost (Johnson, 1989).

> Social acceptance, 'being liked' has so much power because it holds the feelings of loneliness at bay. A person is surrounded with comfortable warmth; he is merged in the group. . . . He temporarily loses his loneliness; but it is at the price of giving up his existence as an identity in his own right. (May, 2009. p.18)

This would suggest, in contrast to the previous suggestion, that we tend to hold on to our *innermost valuable* values, even if it means losing the social approval, since this threatens the feeling of meaningfulness.

In "The Lonely Crowd" David Riesman (1961, pp 13-24) touches upon similar concepts as Johnson (1989) when reasoning about inner- directed (ID) and other-directed (OD) personalities. Here, he describes how ID personalities seems to be given stability by an inner gyroscope, driven by strong ambition and motives from within. The OD personalities on the other hand, is according to Riesman guided by a radar, constantly telling them what others expect from them. Someone who seeks to fit in, who receives motives and directions from others, who have the ability to respond, but not to choose (Riesman, 1961). Similarly, the contemporary psychologist Rollo May discusses a comparable type of personality and states that "they generally can talk fluently about what they *should* want. . . . - but it is soon evident, even to them, that they are describing what others, parents, professors, employers, expect of them rather than what they themselves want." (May, 2009, p 4).

Taking into consideration Riesman's (1961) reasoning about ID- and OD personalities and Johnsons (1989) thoughts of a dichotomy between inner values and others approval, an intriguing question is whether it is better to conform, or to follow one's own goals and values to obtain a higher level of perceived meaningfulness in life.

Thus, the purpose of the present study was to investigate the association between perceived meaningfulness in life and conformity. More specifically, this study aimed to investigate how *perceived meaningfulness*, and *search for meaningfulness*, was related to levels of self-rated conformity. Here, higher levels of self-rated conformity were expected to be negatively associated with perceived meaningfulness, and positively associated with search for meaningfulness, while lower levels of self-rated conformity were expected to be associated with higher levels of perceived meaningfulness and lower levels of search for meaningfulness.

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Methods

*Participants*

The participants were 118 male and female employees at a University in Sweden (Age cohort see Table 1), 102 participants completed the questionnaire. The uncompleted questionnaires were not included in the statistics.

*Table 1*. Description of frequency of age category among participants.

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| Age cohort | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| <30 | 7 | 6,9 |
| 30-40 | 25 | 24,5 |
| 41-50 | 32 | 31,4 |
| 51-60 | 28 | 27,5 |
| >60 | 10 | 9,8 |
| Total | 102 | 100 |

In the present study gender was not taken into consideration. Partly to ensure anonymity, but also since there was no compelling reason for believing gender to matter in this survey, as seen in previous studies (Stillman et al. 2009; Steger et al. 2006; Lennox & Wolfe, 1984)

*Material*

A Swedish version of the *Meaning in Life Questionnaire* (MLQ; Steger, Frazier, Oishi & Kaler, 2006) was used to asses to what extent the participants viewed their lives to have meaning (Swedish version included in appendix 1). The MLQ consists of ten statements that the participant is asked to rate on a lickert-scale, ranging from 1 (absolutely untrue) to 7 (absolutely true). The MLQ includes two subscales, *MLQ-Presence* assessing the extent to which the participant finds meaning to be present ("My life has a clear sense of purpose"), and *MLQ-Search* that measures the extent to which one searches for meaning in life ("I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life"). Previous studies have shown good reliability and validity outcomes (MLQ-search: $\alpha$ =.92, MLQ-presence: $\alpha$ = .88) (Stillman, et al. 2009).

A Swedish version of the *Concern for appropriateness scale* (CFA; Lennox & Wolfe, 1984) was included (Swedish version included in appendix 2). The CFA consists of 20 statements related to concern for appropriateness in social situations (for example: "Different situations can make me behave like very different people"). The scale is graded from zero to six where zero indicates that the participant does not at all agree to the claim, and six meant that the participant did strongly agree to the claim. The CFA measures the individual's tendency to conform to surroundings and social expectations (Lennox & Wolfe, 1984). This was supported by Johnson's (1989) study in which he states that "Individuals high on Concern for appropriateness conform more than those who are low on the trait" (Johnson, 1989). CFA may, according to Lenox & Wolfe either be used as a two-subscale version or a unidimensional scale. In the present study, the scale was considered unidimensional. CFA has an $\alpha$ = .82 to .89 (Cutler & Wolfe, 1985). A test-retest reliability of .84 (Johnson, 1984). CFA have both a convergent and a discriminant

validity (Cutler & Wolfe, 1985). CFA is here included both as a validation for ID/ OD and as a separate measure to compare with MLQ.

*Procedure*
The online questionnaire (created in Surveymonkey) was distributed by mass e-mail to an unknown number of employees at the university and available to the respondents between the 29th of November to the 15th of December 2016. The prefect at each of the 29 institutions was left with the decision on sanctioning employer's participation or not. The data was analyzed in a free online statistical tool. (JASP, 0.8.0.1. 2016)

The first page of the questionnaire informed about the study and that a filled out and handed in questionnaire was considered as informed consent for participation in the study. Those who preferred not to participate were asked to not answer the questionnaire. The last page of the questionnaire included a more detailed description of the purpose of the study. It was not possible to go backwards in the questionnaire after the debriefing.

Results

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between level of conformity (CFA) and presence of meaning in life (MLQ-P) and search for meaning in life (MLQ-S), respectively. There was a significant negative correlation between CFA and MLQ-P ($r = -.456$, $p = <.001$) (Figure 1) and a significant positive correlation between CFA and MLQ-S ($r = .307$, $p = .002$) (Figure 2).
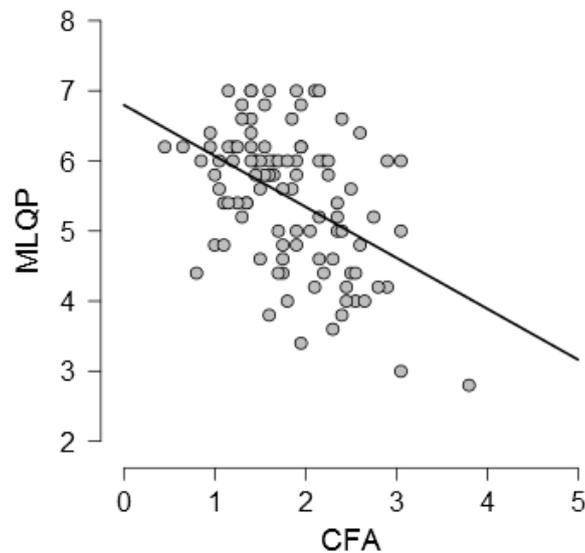


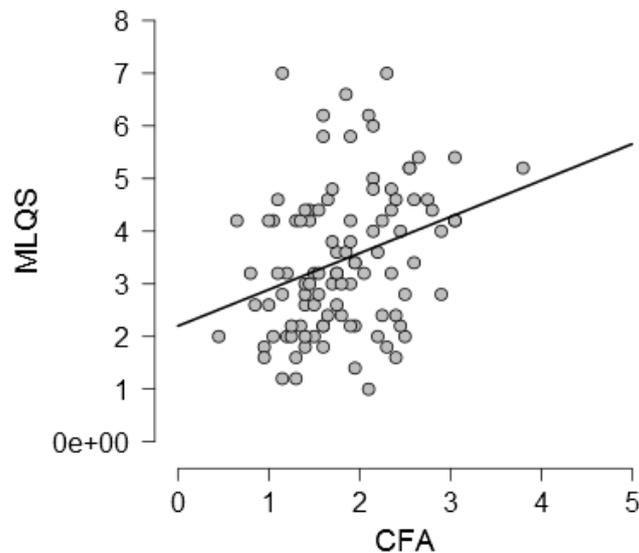*Figure 1*. Correlation between CFA and MLQ-P.

*Figure 2.* Correlation between CFA and MLQ-S.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate if one's feeling of present meaningfulness, and one´s search for meaningfulness (MLQ; Steger, et. al 2006) associated in any way with one´s level of conformity (CFA; Lennox & Wolfe 1984).

The hypothesis, that higher levels of CFA would have a positive relation with MLQ-S, and a negative relation with MLQ-P, and vice versa, were conformed. This indicates that the less the participants reported that they cared about behaving as others may think suitable, the higher they scored on the experience of presence of meaning in their lives. This is in line with Johnson's (1989) study which claims that the higher the individual value something the less they tend to conform. And thus, if meaningfulness in life is high (which presumably is highly valuable) tendencies to conform should be lower.

Schnell and Becker (2006) state that personality traits rather than sources predict the level of meaningfulness. "A direct path from Extraversion/Openness to meaningfulness proves fitting. It thus indicates an alternative way to a meaningful life: Irrespective of the sources of meaning they realise(*sic*), extraverted and open people show higher levels of meaningfulness." (Schnell, Becker. 2006. p. 126). If we consider conformity to be a personality trait the association between CFA and MLQ found in the present study is in line with the previous statement. Schnell and Becker further points to self-transcendence as a strong predictor of meaningfulness, "Self-transcendent persons place great importance on aspects beyond themselves, such

as spirituality, generativity, attentiveness, nature, or religion; their interests surpass themselves and their immediate needs." (Schnell, Becker. 2006. P. 126). Conformity as a personality trait is quite far from self-transcendent, rather the opposite would be a more fitting description. When one conforms one gives up certain ways in order to fulfill one´s own needs of social approval, thus the correlation between high conformity and low presence of meaning makes sense.

Returning to the previously presented conundrum: if to walk alone towards one's own goals or to walk in another direction for the sake of company would bring most meaning. Stillman et al. (2009) on the one hand suggests that we gain meaning from each other and social exclusion lower meaningfulness. On the other hand, Johnson (1989) suggests that we conform less the more valuable the item in question is to us. The results of the present study indicate that those who reported higher on MLQ-P on average reported lower on CFA. This means that those who cared most for fitting in did not experience most meaningfulness in their life, or that those who had a clear sense of meaning did not care as much for fitting in. Perhaps one could say that we are only afraid to walk alone if we don't know where we are heading. This could suggest that company is not as effective a method for finding meaningfulness as following one's own ways. However, that the search for *fitting in* and the actual *having company* is not the same thing could be a cofounder. One cofounding variable, that was not accounted for in the questionnaire, would be loneliness. It seems logic that those who seeks company (concerns to fit in) are those who finds themselves to be lonely, and that those who (on pair with Stillman et al., 2009) finds themselves to be lonely have low presence of meaning in life.

> The reasons for the close relation between loneliness and emptiness are not difficult to discover. For when a person does not know with any inner conviction what he wants or what he feels. . . . he senses danger; and his natural reaction is to look round for other people. They, he hopes, will give him some sense of direction, or at least some comfort in the knowledge that he is not alone in his fright. Emptiness and loneliness are thus two phases of the same basic experience of anxiety. (May, 2009 p.13)

The causation of CFA and MLQ-P has not been tested in this study, but it would not be entirely unintelligible to hypothesize that individuals with a clearer sense of presence of meaning, who have a high conviction of where they are heading, care less about what others think of it. They stop seeking others approval for the way they already know they "must" take, as Johnson states, we conform less when important values are in question. However, the opposite causation is not impossible to imagine either; that individuals who care less of what others thinks, avoids limiting themselves and finds it easier to explore different areas of possible meaningfulness, and thereby discover their own ways to meaningfulness. Returning to the philosophical branch of existentialism might shed some light upon the question. Jean-Paul Sartre talks of man as doomed to freedom, that there is no objective right or wrong in life and thus we are left out to our own choice, there is no guide who knows what's right for you to do (Sartre, 2007). It may seem odd that

this could be any problem, though Sartre means that it is for most people, this freedom is overwhelming. Take for example the question of choosing where to live: What continent is the best for me to live? What country? What area of that country? What city? Which part? Which house? Which apartment? To make a rational decision between billions of apartments all over the globe is impossible. Add to that all the other choices, important or unimportant, that we must make, without any objective guidelines. Sartre however claims that we must choose, we are doomed to that freedom. One often used method among man is to not choose, what Albert Camus calls the "philosophical suicide" to give up one's own questioning and choosing to instead follow a prearranged set of believes, opinions and ideas. (Camus, 2005) Aka: to conform. Camus points at religions, political parties, cultural or family norms and so on as examples of these prearranged sets of beliefs. The philosophical suicide destroys the freedom to choose, but instead it gives man a feeling of security, to be emerged in a group. Thus, freedom and security are two opposite feelings, reaching for one means losing the other. The problem is, when we stop choosing our own ways, give up our freedom for the sake of the security in the group, we will likely not end up in those places where we would like to be. It seems to, in line with Johnson´s (1989) study on conformity, take an inner conviction to avoid caring about others expectations and ideas, to dare to make one´s own choices. As the existential psychotherapist Jan Aronsson puts it: Freedom requires courage (Stiwne, 2008. P 60). When one goes one´s own way one always risks to be left out, to not be welcomed back to the group. When one doesn't fear to be left alone, when one does not seek the safety of the shared responsibility of the group one finds a freedom, a freedom to follow one's own ways, to the price of losing security, risking to be left alone (Stiwne, 2008. P 60).

One area of possible criticism is that the Swedish version (translation performed by the author of the present study) of MLQ and CFA has not been tested for neither reliability nor validity. In this study, however the Cronbach's alpha was very close to the English versions number (Swedish version: MLQ-S α = .913, MLQ-P α = .86. CFA: α = .855). The Swedish version of both MLQ and CFA are included in the appendix (MLQ in appendix 1 and CFA in appendix 2). Also, the causal relation between CFA and MLQ-P and MLQ-S should be investigated in future studies.

*Conclusion*
The study did show a significant association between high conformity and low presence of, and high search for, meaningfulness. Even though the present study cannot say anything about the causation of meaning in life and conformity perhaps the philosophical branch of existentialism is on to something. In that case, the way toward a meaningful life goes through daring to make those choices that one wishes to make. To follow one´s inner conviction regardless of others opinions of the matter. To not fear being left out of the group, to value one´s own goals higher than the approval of others.

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Appendix 1

*MLQ*

Vänligen ta en stund och fundera på det som gör att ditt liv och din existens känns viktig och betydelsefull för dig.
Ta ställning till i vilken grad följande påståenden stämmer för dig igenom att markera ett alternativ. Svara så sanningsenligt och exakt som du kan med siffrorna 1-7, där 1 indikerar att du ej håller med om påståendet och 7 indikerar att du håller med om påståendet helt och fullt. Kom ihåg att detta är mycket subjektiva frågor till vilka det inte finns något rätt eller fel svar

Jag förstår vad som ger mitt liv mening.

Jag söker något som gör att mitt liv känns meningsfullt.

Jag söker ständigt efter mitt livs syfte (purpose).

Mitt liv innehar en klar känsla av syfte (purpose).

Jag har en god känsla för vad som gör mitt liv meningsfullt.

Jag har funnit ett tillfredställande syfte med mitt liv.

Jag söker ständigt efter något som får mitt liv att kännas betydelsefullt.

Jag söker ett syfte eller ett mål i mitt liv.

Mitt liv har inget klart syfte.

Jag söker efter mening i mitt liv.

Appendix 2

*Concern for appropriateness scale*

1. Jag uppvisar olika sidor av mig själv mot olika människor.

2. Det är min känsla att om alla andra i en grupp beter sig på ett särskilt sätt så är detta det korrekta sättet att bete sig.

3. Jag undviker aktivt att bära kläder som inte är min stil.

4. I olika situationer och med olika människor agerar jag ofta som om jag vore väldigt olika personer.

5. På festliga tillställningar söker jag oftast bete mig så att jag passar in.

6. När jag är osäker på hur jag bör agera i sociala situationer betraktar jag andras beteenden för att hitta ledtrådar.

7. Även fast ja känner mig själv upplever jag det som att andra inte känner mig.

8. Jag försöker vara uppmärksam på hur andra reagerar på mitt beteende för att undvika att bete mig opassande.

9. Jag märker att jag efterhärmar andras slanguttryck och gör dem till en del av min egen vokabulär.

10. Olika situationer kan få mig att agera som om jag vore olika personer.

11. Jag brukar lägga märke till vilka kläder andra har på sig

12.Minsta blick av ogillande från en person med vilken jag interagerar är tillräckligt för att jag skall ändra min framtoning.

13. Olika människor har olika intryck av vad jag är för typ av person.

14. Det är viktigt för mig att passa in i den grupp jag är med.

15. Mitt beteende beror ofta på hur jag upplever att andra önskar att jag vore.

16. Jag är inte alltid den person jag visar mig vara.

17. Om jag är det minsta osäker på hur jag skall agera i en social situation betraktar jag andras beteende för att söka ledtrådar till passande beteende.

18. Jag hänger ofta med i modeförändringar igenom att betrakta vilka kläder andra bär.

19. Ibland har ja en känsla av att andra inte vet vem jag verkligen är.

20. När jag är i en social situation brukar jag inte följa gruppen utan istället agera i linje med det humör jag för tillfället har.