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Constructing Meaning through Connection: Religious Perspectives on the Purpose of Life

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Abstract: Given prior research, which establishes a connection between religiosity and an increased sense of meaning in life, this study draws on qualitative data from interviews with 172 religious individuals living in Ireland and the United Kingdom in order to analyze what religious individuals perceive as their purpose in life. Interviews were conducted in person, recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded utilizing a team-based methodology. Researchers identified three main themes from the data related to the idea that the purpose of life is tied to relationships and connection: love and service toward others, family relationships, and connection with God. An analysis of these findings and prior research on the topic suggests that part of religion's role in increasing a sense of meaning in life is that of encouraging adherents to build and foster meaningful relationships.

Keywords: Purpose of Life, Meaning, Relationships, Connection, Religion

Among religion's most enticing claims is that of being able to provide a sense of meaning and purpose to an otherwise empty existence (Ward 2000). While some may dispute the validity of such a claim (Smith 2011; Abel and Schaefer 2010), research linking religious participation to an increased sense of both meaning and satisfaction in life suggests that there is value in considering how religion influences an individual's sense of purpose in life (Błażek and Besta 2012; Brown et al. 2011; Childs 2010; Elliott and Hayward 2009; Gall 2004; Krause 2009; Peacock and Poloma 1999; VanderWeele 2017).

Despite the work of prior researchers in establishing a correlation between religiosity and a greater reported sense of meaning in life, inquiries aimed at explaining how religion provides this increased sense of meaning to life are often confined to an abstract line of reasoning. While it is clear that these theoretical speculations have merit given the complex nature of the topic (Singer 1992, 17), such inquiries are limited in their ability to provide insight into how an understanding of the purpose of life applies in practical terms to the everyday lives of the common populace. John Hick (2000, 276), a philosopher of religion, explained the limitations of this purely theoretical perspective in terms of the disparity "between the meaning of life as taught by our religion and the immediate concrete meanings in terms of which we live our daily lives." In short, while there is no shortage of ideas aimed at explaining the meaning that religion provides to life in philosophical terms, it remains unclear as to how these abstract perceptions translate to the everyday lives of religious individuals.

Additionally, the difficulty of assigning a set of fixed values to a person's perception of the purpose of life has led to limited research on this topic using quantitative methods. While the few primarily quantitative studies that do exist help to establish general trends about people's perceptions of the purpose of life, they are limited in their ability to analyze the unique, context-dependent reasoning behind each participant's response. Due to the inevitably imprecise nature of defining sources of purpose in an individual's life, these quantitative inquiries risk oversimplification of the topic and do not allow for adequate depth.

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The current study is unique in that it approaches the question of what religious individuals find purpose in through an analysis of themes about the purpose of life drawn from qualitative interview data. It is thought that this type of qualitative approach allows for emphasis to be placed on the “respondents’ own interpretation and wording” of an idea otherwise left in terms of “intangible abstractions” (Heyink and Tymstra 1993, 300–01). In addition, such an approach acknowledges that “individuals and their behaviours are unique” and “context-dependent” and takes into account not only people’s individual experiences, but “the meaning that people ascribe to their experiences” (Yilmaz 2013, 317, 313). In short, a qualitative approach to this topic has the potential to provide insight into common themes that emerge from an analysis of people’s ideas about the purpose of life without sacrificing the complex nature of each individual’s unique response.

Literature Review

Prior research on the relationship between religion and the purpose of life has established a clear association between religious participation and a greater reported sense of meaning in life (Błażek and Besta 2012). In fact, research on the influence of religion on a person’s life has revealed not only a correlation between religiosity and a strong sense of meaning in life, but overall life satisfaction (Barkan and Greenwood 2003; Elliott and Hayward 2009; Peacock and Poloma 1999), happiness (Green and Elliott 2010; Roemer 2010), self-esteem (Krause 2009), and psychological well-being (Francis and Kaldor 2002). These additional positive effects are important to consider due to the fact that other studies have found a correlation between an increased sense of meaning in life and overall life satisfaction (Diener et al. 2012; Proctor, Linley, and Maltby 2010), happiness (Van Tilburg and Igou 2018), self-esteem (Halama and Dedová 2007) and psychological well-being (Hadden and Smith 2019). These relationships suggest that religion may have an indirect role in increasing a sense of meaning in life through influencing measures of well-being which in turn impact a person’s reported sense of meaning in life.

Purpose Theory

Much of the research into how religion provides a sense of meaning to life approaches the topic from the perspective of religion itself instead of from the perspective of those who practice religion. In this way, conclusions are often drawn from an analysis of the mandates or doctrines tied to a specific religion instead of how adherence to such precepts affects people’s views of their purpose in life. One such approach is based on the idea “that a life is meaningful insofar as one fulfils a purpose that God has assigned” (Metz 2000, 295). This concept is often referred to as purpose theory. From the perspective of purpose theory, religion endows meaning to life through providing a way for worshippers to discover and ultimately fulfill the purpose that God has assigned to their lives. A review of the literature on this topic reveals both arguments for (Quinn 2000; Ward 2000) and against (Metz 2000) the theoretical validity of purpose theory. However, this debate is limited to a predominately philosophical line of reasoning and does not provide insight into how purpose theory may influence the everyday lives of individuals.

Social Connection and Meaning in Life

Another common explanation for how religion gives meaning to life is the idea that religion allows an individual to become part of a larger whole and subsequently feel that his or her life has meaning outside of itself (Levine 1987). This “larger whole” is often referred to in terms of God’s love for humankind (Gerber 1994, 156) or the relationship that an individual develops with the divine through “joyfully loving, knowing, and serving” God (Smart 2000, 48). In this way, it is thought that religion gives meaning to life through providing a means by which people

can strengthen their connection to God. Like purpose theory, the majority of the literature on this topic approaches the issue from a theoretical standpoint. However, an analysis of quantitative data collected from a Gallup survey found that people who have a perception of a loving God have a greater sense of purpose in life (Stroope, Draper, and Whitehead 2013). This data-based finding supports the theory that a connection with God can increase an individual's sense of meaning in life and suggests that this theory has relevance in the lives of everyday worshippers. However, the mechanisms behind how religion influences people's connection with God and ultimately their sense of purpose in life are still uncertain.

While the exact connection between religion and a greater sense of meaning in life remains unclear, quantitative studies that explore sources of meaning in general terms have found relationships to be influential in providing a sense of meaning to life. In one such case, through a series of studies of undergraduate students in the US, researchers found that "a relatively strong sense of belonging predicted and even caused people to perceive high levels of meaning in their lives" (Lambert et al. 2013, 18). Additionally, a study of 122 people experiencing bereavement concluded that purpose in life is connected to social support (Ulmer, Range, and Smith 1991), and a study of men over the age of sixty found that loneliness is correlated with a low sense of purpose in life (Neville et al. 2018). Furthermore, a study looking at self-reported sources of meaning in life among adults found that relationships were the most often cited source of meaning for survey participants (Debats 1999). However, the results of a study of Polish university students suggest that this finding may not be consistent for men. In the study, researchers found that while relationships were a good predictor of meaning in life for women, financial success was a better predictor for men (Siwek, Oleszkowicz, and Słowińska 2017). Despite this difference, there remains a clear connection between people's social ties and their sense of meaning and purpose in life.

A possible factor linking religion and social connection to an increased sense of meaning in life is religion's ability to encourage people to create and foster social ties. Research on this topic has found that people often associate religiosity with helping others and that church attendance and close relationships with neighbors are tied to increased volunteering (Einolf 2011; Becker and Dhingra 2001). Additionally, a strong sense of belonging in a congregation has been shown to influence a person's religious involvement and sense of meaning in life (Stroope 2011; Brown et al. 2011). These findings suggest that religion encourages social connection through both an assumed religious responsibility to serve others and the relationships that a religious person forms with members of her congregation.

Research also suggests that religious involvement not only encourages people to form new relationships but also to strengthen their already-existing relationships. Studies looking at the connection between prayer and relationship satisfaction have found that prayer plays an integral part in preventing and resolving marital conflicts (Beach et al. 2008; Lambert and Dollahite 2006; Marsh and Dallos 2001), as well as promoting forgiveness and achieving lower levels of anxiety in general (McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal 1997; Lambert et al. 2010; Harris, Schoneman, and Carrera 2005). These findings suggest that religion may provide a greater sense of meaning in life both through its role in encouraging people to form new relationships and through the positive influence it has on people's already-existing relationships.

While these findings provide a general framework for understanding what individuals find meaning in, religion's exact role in influencing these reported sources of meaning remains somewhat unclear. Additionally, while there are a number of theories aimed at explaining religion's connection to a sense of meaning in life, it remains unclear as to how such theories affect the everyday lives of individuals. For these reasons, this study seeks to investigate the relationship that religion has with an increased sense of meaning in life on the individual level through an analysis of qualitative interview data from a sample of religious people.

Method of Inquiry

Sample

We employed a purposive sampling approach, seeking religious individuals and religious leaders who reported a high level of involvement in their faith. Our sample includes 172 interview participants from various faith backgrounds, seventy-one of which are religious leaders in their faith. Given that this sample was not randomly selected, this study does not attempt to draw broad conclusions about the opinion of an entire population on the topic of the purpose of life but rather seeks to gain further insight into how the issue is perceived among religious individuals. For this reason, our sample deliberately includes people with a high self-reported level of religious participation, with 81 percent of the 101 non-religious leaders in the sample rating their level of activity in their faith as a 6 or a 7 on a 7-point scale. In terms of gender, 59 percent of participants were male and 41 percent were female. Eighty percent of the sample was Christian (34% from various Protestant denominations, 28% Catholic, 12% non-denominational Christian, 3% Latter-day Saint [Mormon], and 3% other), 10 percent Muslim, 4 percent Jewish, and 5 percent others (Hindu, Buddhist, and Baha'i). In terms of race, 78 percent of participants were white and 22 percent were an ethnic and/or racial minority (including African, Asian, Middle Eastern, Indian, Caribbean, and Latino).

Participants were contacted primarily via the religious institutions' websites. We first reached out to religious leaders via phone or email. We then invited them to be interviewed and to refer families within their congregation who would be interested in being interviewed. To increase our sample size, we also sent flyers to over 1,000 places of worship throughout Ireland and the UK. This approach yielded few respondents, so we continued to contact religious leaders directly and employed some snowballing among our participants, particularly among the more difficult to reach faiths (i.e. Judaism and non-Abrahamic faiths). All participants signed an informed consent form before participating in the interviews.

Interview Procedure

Trained team members conducted semi-structured interviews in June and July of 2016. Interviews took place in person, generally in either the participant's home or at his or her place of worship. Interviews lasted seventy minutes on average and consisted of approximately twenty open-ended questions. The current study focuses on responses to the question, "What is the purpose of life?" Follow-up questions were used to elicit further information based on participant responses. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Coding and Analysis

The transcriptions were coded and analyzed using a team-based methodology (see Marks 2015). This methodology is used in qualitative research in order to produce results that are more reliable, valid, and replicable (Levitt et al. 2018; Marks 2015). Strategies for greater reliability included keeping a detailed audit trail of the coding, coding in pairs, and tracking inter-rater reliability. The data was analyzed using NVivo 11 qualitative coding software. Paid undergraduate research assistants read through the interviews and coded 281 accounts under "Purpose of Life." The second and third authors along with one paid research assistant reviewed these accounts and created a codebook. The codebook was given to two pairs of undergraduate students enrolled in a semester-length research methods course. The accounts relating to "Purpose of Life" from the 134 interviews were divided between the pairs and each account was coded twice, once by each member of the partnership. Then, coding partners met to review their codes line-by-line in a check and balance system, resolving discrepancies as they arose.

While our sample includes people from a variety of different faiths, our analysis does not separate participants by religious affiliation. This was done in an effort to specifically analyze commonalities that exist among religious individuals as a whole regarding their perception of the purpose of life rather than potential differences between distinct faith traditions. While there are some who disagree with such an approach due to the diverse nature of different faith traditions (Prothero 2011), grouping individuals of differing religious affiliations by a common sense of “religiousness” is frequently used to evaluate the general effect of religiosity independent of a person’s specific faith tradition (Błażek and Besta 2012; Dalton, Dollahite, and Marks 2018 31; Brown et al. 2011).

Themes and Findings

The majority of responses gathered framed the question of the purpose of life in terms of connection, either with other people or with God. Participants expressed ideas about their purpose in life which were tied to their relationships. Specifically, our analysis identified three main themes related to connection in the data: love and service towards others, family relationships, and connection with God. In addition to these three main themes, love and service towards others through evangelization was identified as a subtheme of love and service towards others, and God’s love and serving God were identified as subthemes of connection with God.

Table 1: Numerical Content Analysis of Qualitative Coding

	<i>Theme</i>	<i># References</i>	<i># Sources</i>	<i>% Interviews</i>
<i>1a.</i>	Love and Service toward Others	52	42	50.6
<i>1b.</i>	Love and Service toward Others through Evangelization	25	21	28.9
<i>2.</i>	Family Relationships	41	31	37.3
<i>3a.</i>	God’s Love	38	26	31.3
<i>3b.</i>	Serving God	36	30	36.1
	Total	192	83	100 (61.9)

Note: The percent of interviews is calculated out of the 83 interviews that contain accounts related to the purpose of life, not out of the larger sample of 134 interviews conducted.

Source: Callister, Galbraith, and Kelley

For many participants, defining a single, independent purpose to life proved to be a difficult task. In many instances, purpose in life was expressed in terms of a connected network of relationships rather than one definitive source. For this reason, researchers identified some overlap between ideas about purpose defined by love toward others and ideas about purpose defined by family relationships or a connection with God. Thus, while any given excerpt may conceivably be applicable to multiple themes, passages were assigned to whichever theme they best represented.

Love and Service toward Others

We need other people. When we consider...why we are here on earth—what is the purpose of life—we understand and feel that it is to interact with people and not just to live a selfish life, [but] to be a help to others. (John, 65-year-old Amish Mennonite)

Many participants acknowledged the central role of relationships in providing meaning in life by expressing life’s purpose in terms of loving and serving others. This idea was often expressed in general terms, with some participants making reference to the concept of a shared human connection that encourages one to acknowledge the common humanity of others and seek to

better the world through building peaceful connections. A short excerpt from an interview with Lucy, a 64-year-old Quaker, exemplifies the way that this connection was often framed by interview participants in terms of showing and receiving love. Lucy explained:

I was with a friend yesterday and sadly she has inoperable bowel cancer and she said, “What’s the meaning of life [Lucy]?...I’m sure it’s to learn unconditional love,” and I said “Yes,” because that’s what I believe. I believe we are here to learn to love and to show love. It came to me many years ago but I really believe that is the meaning of my life.

Similarly, Owen, a 38-year-old Christian minister, expressed:

What is the purpose of life? Wow. Love God, love your neighbor sort of thing. Yeah. He has created us as God’s family to be God’s family and to look after this world that He’s given us and [to share] life together.

Both Lucy’s and Owen’s responses appear to be based on the assumption that there is an underlying responsibility to actively seek other people’s best interests through love and service toward them. As presented by Owen’s explanation of the purpose of life, this assumption was often tied to religious beliefs. For many participants, treating others with love and kindness was seen not only as an idealistic model of living but a divinely mandated duty. Neerav, a 40-year-old Hindu religious leader, sums up the essential charges of this duty in his statement that in order to fulfill the purpose of life, one must “share with everyone, help everyone, and be selfless.” This inclination to love and serve others can also be seen as the reason behind why some participants explained the purpose of life in terms of the need to “build...stronger communities and a stronger world” as well as to promote “peace and harmony” in a general sense.

A quote from Libby, a 47-year-old Catholic, further illustrates the way that this value of treating others well was often explicitly tied to a person’s religious beliefs:

Well, I’ve always thought the whole of religion boils down to kindness actually. And [Mark] has just come up with Jesus’s two commandments; love your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your soul and love your neighbor as yourself. And if you do those you can’t go wrong. That covers the whole structure of how you should live your life.

Love and Service toward Others through Evangelization

In addition to encouraging participants to treat others with kindness, religious convictions also motivated some participants to share their religion with others. Although such acts of evangelization are not always received as such, participants often talked about their efforts to share their religion as a genuine service to others. In this way, from the perspective of those who talked about sharing their religion with others, evangelization was merely another means of fulfilling their religiously-mandated obligation to treat others with love and kindness.

In terms of the influence of evangelization on relationships, this desire to share one’s religious beliefs with others was often a catalyst for promoting interaction with other people. This idea can be seen in an interview with Molly, a 33-year-old Christian, wherein she explained:

Biblically, the purpose of life is to go and proclaim Jesus Christ is Lord to everyone. To get as many people saved as possible, so they don’t go to Hell. I think that is our purpose in life. That doesn’t mean necessarily stuffing the gospel down people’s throats. It’s just about...talking to people about our faith openly and stuff like that. It’s not about locking ourselves away and living a completely holy huddle in a bubble. It’s about living with people in the real world.

Molly's description shows the way that her desire to share her religious beliefs with others influenced her to focus on "living with people in the real world." In this way, Molly's efforts to evangelize became a means of motivating her to interact with other people. In like manner, Caitlin, a 53-year-old Methodist, described her efforts to share her beliefs with others as being connected with her efforts to interact socially with others. She related:

We are here to make disciples of people. But there's various ways of going about doing it. And so I'll always learn about people first, I'll always learn about where they are, how they feel about things, and then move forward...so that I'm not pushing something on them that they're not ready for. I think that's the way forward.

Caitlin's evangelization efforts can be seen as a means of encouraging her to more fully invest in her relationships through an effort to genuinely "learn about people" before sharing her beliefs with them. These descriptions illustrate the way that evangelization was described by participants in relation to interacting in positive ways with other people.

Family Relationships

To make yourself happy, you need to make others happy. We live in a tiny two-bedroom flat. I don't care. I'm with the person I love, I have a family that love me. We make each other happy. (Rosi, 26-year-old Protestant)

While participants expressed a religiously motivated desire to improve their relationships with others in a general sense, family relationships were often cited as taking precedence over other social ties. In many cases, participants voiced the importance of family ties in terms of the central role of children in providing a sense of direction and purpose to life. Mark, a 44-year-old Catholic with two children, demonstrated this through his description of how he found a renewed sense of purpose after the birth of his first child. He related, "As soon as our oldest son was born I thought, 'This is what I'm meant to be doing. It's not about me anymore. It's about him.'"

Mark's description of his entrance into the world of parenthood is tied to a reevaluation of his priorities and a newfound sense of connection and purpose. As suggested by the importance that many participants placed on finding purpose from sources external to themselves, perhaps it is this immediate sense of connection that accompanies the birth of a new baby that refocuses a parent's interests from primarily self-directed motivations to other-directed motivations. In this way, the parent-child connection becomes a catalyst for increasing a sense of meaning and purpose in life.

While this idea of gaining meaning in life from the parent-child relationship is not unique to religious individuals, participants often linked their description of the importance of family to their religious beliefs. Such was the case with Anna, a Catholic mother of two, who, when asked about how her faith influences her purpose of life, replied:

I see parenting, the children—having the kids—as part of that. It's all integral. They are a gift to be treasured. And a gift...from God. So it's all one and the same. Looking after them is my primary concern.

Further analysis of participants' responses on this topic suggests that this sense of purpose comes not only from the immediate need to take care of and provide for children, but also from the potential influence that having children has on bettering the world and the lasting nature of the parent-child relationship. Riya, a 66-year-old Hindu mother of two, related how the idea of passing on her values influenced her decision to get married and have children:

My decision to get married was to create a family....Think about you when you are at a certain stage. You have done so much for the society in other ways, but not for the immediate family or who would take your values further. Other people will, but not as strongly as your own children. That convinced me.

Riya's reasoning behind starting a family illustrates the way that some participants presented the parent-child relationship as valuable not only in and of itself but also through the potential that this relationship has to influence future generations.

In addition to the desire to leave a legacy through family ties, several participants talked about their goal of nurturing parent-child relationships motivated by a belief that such relationships will be continued after death. This idea was expressed by Shannon, a 49-year-old Latter-day Saint (Mormon) mother of two, who said:

The way I see it, we are just here for a short period of time. So, the main goal is to go back to Heavenly Father. I want all of us to be together. To go back and live in Heaven together.

Shannon's comment demonstrates her belief that her family relationships are important not only because of the connection they give her in her current life but also because of the potential they have of providing a continued sense of connection after this life. The importance that Shannon placed on family relationships can be seen as being motivated by both the meaning which she currently derives from her relationships and the expectation that she is investing in relationships that will last forever.

Similarly, Danielle, a 34-year-old Christian mother of three, expressed her belief in life after death as a factor influencing her responsibilities as a parent. She related:

If you don't believe that you are created by God and He's put you here for a reason, then your life is just about the immediate and the here and now. There's no goal ahead....In terms of family life, you're equipping your children for maybe 80 years of life. You're training them for 80 years to eat healthily, dress respectably, or whatever. Whereas, actually, eternity is a very, very long time.

This belief that some participants expressed about the everlasting nature of family ties seemed to endow their relationships with an even greater sense of meaning and purpose. In this way, religion's role in providing a greater sense of importance to family relationships can be seen in terms of both defining an inherent value to family relationships and creating an incentive to invest in and strengthen such relationships.

Adherence to religious beliefs was also seen as a means of influencing how participants interacted with family members. Many participants reported their participation in religious practices as a family as having a positive influence on family relationships and ultimately increasing the meaning and value they derived from family relationships. Tom, a 50-year-old Presbyterian father of four, expressed how family prayer and scripture study influenced his family when his kids were young:

[Prayer] was the fabric of our whole family life. For our lives, we have our own quiet time. In the morning we read the Bible and we pray on our own and commit anything to the Lord. Then we come together. We pray and read the Bible together.... We would call that family worship which was every single day, morning, and evening. It was the bookends of the day. It was like a ritual, but it was more meaningful.

Tom's description of the meaningfulness of participating in religious practices as a family hints at religion's ability to strengthen family ties in terms of incentivizing people to spend more

time in activities as a family. Thus, according to our analysis, participants viewed religion as influencing family relationships both through its role in impacting peoples' beliefs about the importance of children and families and through its role in encouraging people to spend time together as a family by participating in religious practices. It is unclear if these influences on family relationships prompted participants to cite families as a source of meaning in life or if participants found meaning in family relationships independent of their religious beliefs. However, it remains that religion was often viewed as impacting family relationships and beliefs about the family in general. Therefore, in terms of family relationships, religion's role in providing a greater sense of meaning to life can be viewed at the very least as that of encouraging people to place greater emphasis on an already-established source of meaning and purpose.

Connection with God

In the past I went through a difficult patch. I was quite low and I [think] without God I'd have probably committed suicide. But God gave me this purpose....Whatever happens—even if I'm homeless and on the streets—he created me to be here. He gives me the biggest purpose in my life. (Kate, 39-year-old Catholic)

Due to the religious nature of our sample, responses from participants about the purpose of life often included a statement about their personal connection with or belief in God. These accounts tended to focus on one of two main views of their relationship with God in terms of their purpose of life: the first that meaning in life comes from God's love for them and the second that their purpose is to worship God and acknowledge His existence. While these two views are in no way mutually exclusive, each colored the way that participants talked about their personal relationship with God. Thus, these two perspectives on how God influences a sense of purpose in life were coded as separate subthemes. Participants who focused on recognizing God's love in their lives were more prone to express their relationship with God in terms of how believing in God influenced them personally and provided them with a greater sense of meaning and purpose. In contrast, participants who focused on the need to worship God talked less about a direct, personal relationship with God and more about the sense of purpose they gained from believing in and serving God.

God's Love

A statement by Andrew, a 70-year-old Catholic priest, wherein he outlines his initial thoughts on the purpose of life exemplifies this first view of God providing meaning to life through His love. He said, "The purpose of life...my first answer would be to discover how much God loves us....Discovering God's love for us means that I discovered the full truth of what it means to be alive." Additionally, an account from Melissa, a 58-year-old Methodist minister, gives further insight into the core assumptions tied to this view. She explained:

I believe the purpose of life is to know God, to know that you are loved by God, and to know that He is with you throughout every part of your life....For me, the purpose of life is to know God, know where you've come from, and to know where you are going and to know that He is with you.

Both of these responses assume not only the existence of a loving God, but a God whose love is the very reason for existence. Participants with this focus on the love of God derived meaning from a connection with the divine primarily based on God's inherently loving nature and its subsequent influence on their lives rather than their own individual actions directed toward serving God. It is not to say these participants were less motivated to serve God than those who focused on worship, only that they expressed their perception of purpose more in

terms of God's influence on them than their actions toward God. As a result of this focus on God's side of the human-God relationship, participants with this view talked more about knowing, connecting with, or enjoying God instead of obeying and serving Him.

This view of God's love was also expressed in terms of the way that participants viewed God as a means of support and direction in times of trial. When asked about what the purpose of life is for her, Helen, a 58-year-old Baptist minister, related:

I think the purpose of life is to know God, and to know that He loves you and to know that He has a plan for you....Life hasn't turned out for me as I thought it would turn out. I did not expect to get divorced. I did not expect to be on my own. But God loves me and still has a plan for me even though life has turned out differently....God can take anyone's life and make it a better life. That's it. Absolutely that's it.

Helen's response emphasizes her belief in the positive influence that God can have on a person's life. For her, God's influence endows life with meaning in spite of everything that is wrong or unfair about life. In this way, a person's relationship with God can be viewed as a means of providing an overall positive outlook to the otherwise dismal adversities that a person faces in life. This change in the way that participants viewed trials in their lives had the effect of making difficult situations appear to be more meaningful due to the fact that participants saw God as being cognizant of and concerned for their struggles. Thus, participants viewed times of hardship not as cases of random misfortune, but as part of a larger, divinely appointed scheme, managed by a benevolent God ultimately concerned for their greater welfare.

Abigail, a 25-year-old Catholic, talked about this idea in terms of the trust she placed in God during a time of hardship in her life:

When [our daughter] was diagnosed with hydrocephalus, that was really hard because when you're faced with something that is so difficult, your whole life changes....During that time, we were worried, but then after, just through prayer and...having a submission, a trust in God and His will, I felt more peace with the situation...lots of peace. You just have an acceptance. Whatever God's will is, you just feel okay with it.

Abigail's account illustrates how a relationship with God allowed her to have a sense of trust and peace despite uncertainty about the future consequences of her daughter's diagnosis. For her, this appeared to have the effect of converting a challenge that would typically be ascribed to nothing more than callous chance into a meaningful part of a higher plan orchestrated by "God's will." In this way, participants talked about finding purpose and meaning in difficult experiences through their relationship with God.

Serving God

In contrast to the emphasis that some participants placed on God's role in bettering their lives, participants who talked about the purpose of life in terms of worship expressed a more active role in their relationship with God. For these participants, emphasis was placed not on the influence that God had on their lives, but on the idea that their very existence and actions were a means of glorifying God. This idea is captured in a statement by Ali, a 46-year-old Muslim. He related:

We are created to worship God. There is no other reason why we are here. We also feel that by worshipping God we will be able to live a happy life. So worshipping God equals happiness for any practicing Muslim. I cannot see myself living any other life. For me this is the ultimate life. My existence is to worship God.

Ali explained how he gained both happiness and purpose from the knowledge that the way he was living was a means of worshipping God. In this way, Ali's response focuses on the human side of the human-God relationship and emphasizes his role in glorifying God instead of God's role in influencing his life.

As an emphasis on worshipping God was more tied to one's own actions than God's actions, participants with this view also expressed a connection between their relationship with God and their relationship with other people. This was often voiced in terms of worshipping God through service to others. Shamel, a 32-year old Imam, talked about his perception of how worshipping God is tied to serving other people:

There's a chapter in the Koran...that says "I did not create [the jinn] and mankind [except] to worship Me" [(51:56)]. So the primary purpose of the creation of humankind is to worship God. But what is worship? Worship is defined as a comprehensive term for all the things that God loves and is pleased with from the sayings and the actions whether they be inward or outward. What I always tell the congregation is that "Let us not have a restrictive understanding of worship as being just certain rituals like praying, fasting, giving charity." Worship is just you smiling in the face of a human being, worship is about serving and the creation, going out there, doing volunteer work, helping out the needy, empowering people and educating people.

Shamel's response provides an example of how a relationship with God, primarily viewed in terms of worship, fostered a motivation to serve others. The implication of this idea is that people who actively seek to fortify their relationship with God end up strengthening their relationships with others. This point is further illustrated in an account from John, a 65-year-old Amish Mennonite pastor, wherein he explained his view on worshipping God. He said, "We can't really physically do something for God but we can to our neighbors and people, anybody we can reach out to and help. Loving our fellow man is the way we express our love for God."

Due to the way that both Shamel and John connected their worship of God to their treatment of others, they expressed their worship in social, rather than individual, terms. For them, interacting with others was part of their purpose in life because it was connected to their relationship with God.

This point further illustrates some of the overlap that researchers identified among the three themes presented in this study. Due to this overlap, a relationship with God can be seen as affecting participants' perception of the purpose of life both in and of itself and through the way that it influenced how participants interacted with other people.

Discussion

As suggested by research linking a greater sense of purpose in life to social connection (Debats 1999; Lambert et al. 2013; Neville et al. 2018; Ulmer, Range, and Smith 1991), participants talked about the purpose of life in terms of their relationships with others. Even from an evolutionary standpoint, this idea that life is about connection seems to harmonize with the notion that there is a biological source to peoples' innate need to form relationships (Lieberman 2013, 241) driven by a "genetic propensity for desiring social connection" (Cacioppo 2008, 67). Indeed, it can be argued that religion itself was created in part to fulfill this need for connection and community (Sacks 2015). However, both the universal nature of this innate need to form relationships and the fact that prior research on the connection between social ties and a sense of meaning in life does not distinguish between religious and non-religious people seem to suggest that the role of social connection in increasing a sense of meaning in life is not unique to religious individuals. Rather, it may be that relationships are tied to a general sense of meaning in life independent of a person's religiosity and that religious involvement simply encourages a person to place more importance on their relationships, thus increasing their sense of meaning in

life. This would explain the connection between religiosity and a greater sense of meaning in life as coming more from religion's ability to focus a person's priorities on things that are shown to be correlated with a sense of purpose instead of providing a completely different means of finding fulfillment in life (Błazek and Besta 2012; Childs 2010; Elliott and Hayward 2009; Gall 2004; Krause 2009; Peacock and Poloma 1999).

Support for this idea can be found in the way that participants tied their religious beliefs to their idea of a basic human responsibility to act with kindness toward others. Such a responsibility can be explained both by an innate sense of moral judgment (a conscience) and a learned desire to adhere to the tenets of one's faith. In this way, the desire to interact with others in a positive way can be seen as coming from both religious and non-religious sources. Prior research showing that people tend to equate religiosity with helping others further suggests that religion may enhance an already-innate desire to care for others (Einolf 2011). Thus, religiosity can be seen as a means of increasing a person's sense of meaning in life through encouraging the formation of meaningful relationships.

In terms of the importance of family relationships, participants frequently referenced children as a source of meaning and purpose in life. According to prior research, while there appears to be a general consensus that "people tend to believe that parenthood is central to a meaningful and fulfilling life, and that the lives of childless people are emptier, less rewarding, and lonelier, than the lives of parents," (Hansen 2012, 29), it is unclear as to whether or not this belief accurately describes the true effects of parenthood. Different studies on the topic have produced results showing a positive correlation between parenthood and happiness (Baranowska and Matysiak 2011), a negative correlation (Hansen 2012), and no consistent correlation either way (Aassve, Goisis, and Sironi 2012). Some suggest that this discrepancy could be a result of research that focuses narrowly on "the relatively short-term costs of raising a child" while ignoring the compensatory effect of "the long-term advantages" of parenthood (Lyubomirsky and Boehm 2010, 330). The idea behind this explanation is that the perceived costs of having a child are not consistent over the child's lifetime and may in fact be outweighed by the future benefits of having an adult child.

Another explanation for this disparity can be found in a study based on the effects of parenthood on US adults, which differentiated between a reported degree of happiness and a reported degree of sense of meaning. The study concluded that while parents did not have a greater reported degree of general happiness than non-parents, they did have a greater reported sense of meaning (Umberson and Gove 1989). Further research has suggested that this difference is a result of the fact that parenthood "provides a purpose and coherence to one's life" through the connection that parents develop with their children (Hughes 2006, 617). Thus, regardless as to whether or not parenthood increases happiness, findings suggest that it increases a sense of purpose in life. Again, while the sense of purpose provided by parenthood is likely influential regardless of religion, participants in this study expressed how their religious beliefs influenced both the value that they placed on family relationships and the way that they interacted with individual family members.

Finally, participants' emphasis on the importance of a relationship with God harmonizes with prior research showing a connection between a relationship with God and an increased sense of meaning in life (Stroope, Draper, and Whitehead 2013). Additionally, qualitative research has found that those who "believe in a God with whom they have an adherent, emotional, reciprocal relationship" have "a more connected sense of belonging" (Day 2011, 203). This suggests that a connection with God has the potential to increase a person's sense of meaning in life not only through the relationship that a person forms with deity in and of itself, but also through the influence that such a relationship has on encouraging social connection with others. Thus, religion's role in encouraging people to foster a relationship with God can be seen as a means of increasing their sense of meaning in life as well.

Limitations

There are several notable limitations to this study. First, our sample only included religious individuals. As noted, our analysis identified purpose as deriving from relationships, which are a meaningful construct regardless of religiosity. We proposed that religion encourages people to focus more on these relationships and teaches people to value these relationships more. Other nonreligious groups or belief systems, such as Humanism, may have a similar influence on people's perceptions of meaning in life. Future research should investigate the influence of nonreligious groups and belief systems on people's sense on meaning in life. Additionally, this study only investigated what religious individuals perceive to be their purpose in life and why, but did not provide insights into the potential consequences of how religion influences an individual's purpose in life. Although the literature review cited primarily positive benefits of having an increase sense of purpose and meaning in life, other research has found that religion has the potential to both help and harm relationships (Dollahite, Marks, and Dalton 2018; Kelley, Marks, and Dollahite 2019; Mahoney 2010). While this paper has primarily dealt with the positive effects of religion on relationships, religion has also been identified as a means of increasing pressure in relationships and, in some cases, a cause of relational struggles (Dollahite, Marks, and Young 2017). Future research should explore both the positive and negative influences of religion's impact on relationships.

Conclusion

Despite coming from a variety of different religious backgrounds, participants in this study voiced a limited set of similar themes when asked about the purpose of life. These responses found commonality through their emphasis on connection. This connection was expressed in terms of interaction with other people, family relationships, and a relationship with God. Participants talked about the action of showing and receiving love as an underlying human responsibility which required the individual to serve others and build a stronger community. In regards to family relationships, responses focused on the importance of family relationships over other social connections as well as the way that children provide purpose to life both through the parent-child relationship in and of itself and through the potential that this relationship has to influence future generations. Responses also frequently referred to a relationship with God as the main source of purpose in life, either based primarily on God's influence on the individual's life or the individual's efforts to worship God. Additionally, a relationship with God was often tied to a desire to help and serve other people.

Due to both the use of a purposive sample of religious individuals and the qualitative approach, this study does not seek to make broad generalizations about the widespread nature of these themes. Rather, building upon existing research which presents the connection between religiosity and an increased sense of meaning in life, the value of this study comes from the further insight it provides into what religious individuals perceive to be their purpose in life. Due to the fact that this topic has been largely treated from a theoretical point of view, the data gathered from participants in this study gives a unique perspective into how religious individuals view their purpose in life.

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