

Construction of Meaning of Life: A Qualitative Study on a Subaltern Individual

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ABSTRACT

Meaning of life forms the core of human existence and is the primary motive behind human action. Considering the role of culture and context in conferring meaning of life, the literature in subaltern studies in this area is severely lacking. The present study seeks to understand construction of meaning of life of a person belonging to a subaltern background from a qualitative perspective. The data was collected using unstructured interview from one individual with low job permanency and low financial stability. Using thematic network analysis, four global themes emerged: construction of rigid boundaries/ insurmountable walls in life; enhancing quality of life through positivity, balance, and work; living in the present; and a cauldron of strong repressed emotions. Meaning of life impacts an individual's psychological well-being, health, quality of life, life satisfaction and meaninglessness may lead to psychological problems and depression. The study doesn't comprehensively view the relation between meaning of life and class. It is important to carry out studies delineating the role of culture and class in construction and development of meaning of life.

Keywords: *Meaning of life, Subaltern, Qualitative analysis, Interview*

“You lay a heavy question on me: What is the meaning or purpose of life? It seems to me the only question worth asking and one that probably a person ought not spend too much time answering.” - David Small

In Existential Psychology, ‘Meaning of Life’ forms the core. Meaning of life pertains to, attends to and addresses philosophical questions like “What is the meaning and purpose of human existence”. It is interested in knowing the ‘nature of a meaningful life experience’ and the “operating conditions under which a person will experience such meaning?”

The term "meaningful life", though often used in colloquial terms has yet to find a clear definition as a construct in the domain of psychology. In his book, Man's Search for

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Meaning, Victor Frankl, an existential psychologist, stressed the role and importance of finding the meaning in one's life. He argues that 'the will to find meaning' is the primary motive of human behaviour lest the person would keep wondering about his limited and often confusing experience (Frankl, 1959). For him the meaning varies for every individual and from moment to moment. People discover their meaning of life only after being put under the demands of the situation. Under these circumstances they choose their own unique path/duty, and at the same time, allowing themselves to believe in an ultimate meaning. The meaning could be 'religion', 'worship of mankind', 'realising his own unique traits' etc. Weisskopf-Joelson (1968) describes meaningful life as a life based on a feeling of integration and relatedness or a feeling of fulfillment and significance (Maslow, 1964). Martin Seligman defines it as "using your signature strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than you are."

According to Frankl (1973), a person can realise his/her meaning of life through 1) his/her unique talents which one discovers through goal achievement and/or by contributing to life or society (e.g., in workplace, home or social sphere.). 2) The experiences, which is enjoyed through something that this nature, society has to offer, which is good, beautiful or true (e.g., enjoying music, panorama, human bonds etc.). 3) By attitudes that one holds and displays in a tough situation which is amounting to suffering. This is indicative of an individual's deeper perception for life and the world around. This third way to achieve meaning of life has been explored in this paper.

Though the realisation of meaning could be a long drawn process but it has potential to affect our day to day life until unrealised as it gives a coherence to the person's worldview and is crucial for his/her psychological and general well-being. Frankl cautions that life has meaning under all situations and that it is psychologically damaging if the person's search for meaning is obstructed or for some reason the person fails to strive for meaning then sooner or later the person will lose his psychological well-being (Frankl, 1967, 1969). Meaninglessness induces a situation called "existential vacuum" afflicted with symptoms of boredom, depression and/or aggressive behavior. Maddi (1967) prefers to call it "existential neurosis". It is different from depression in that it is closer to apathy and less with depression or depressive feelings. For Camus meaninglessness is reflected in feelings of alienation and nothingness.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Despite inflating concerns of modern society with the meaning and value of life, and repeated demands for a psychology of human growth and potential (Allport, 1955; Maslow, 1953), the study of meaning in life has mostly been ignored by quantitative social scientists. In all possibility this is because of a preference for behavioral, empirical data rather than experiential findings, or from a disease-oriented rather than a health-oriented tradition. Nevertheless, meaning of life has been found to be empirically associated with some important predictors of human health.

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Meaning of life has a positive impact on physical and psychological health of an individual (Holahan, Holahan, & Suzuki, 2008). It also has a role in acceptance of death (Routledge & Juhl, 2010). Researchers have also concluded that individuals who can understand the role of diseases in their life gets better equipped to cope with the diseases as severe like cancer and HIV (Visser, Garssen, & Vingerhoets, 2010; Lyon & Younger, 2001)

Ryff and Keyes (1995) with a thousand plus sample have found positive correlation between many aspects of meaning of life with different indicators of psychological well-being. Moreover they also found negative relation between the same indicators and psychological discomfort. Zika and Chamberlain (1992) also found similar encouraging results. Ho, Cheung, and Cheung (2010) with their large sample size used structural equation model, to reach the conclusion that meaning in life and optimism are significantly correlated with life satisfaction. Kleftras and Psarra (2012) used Purpose-In-Life Test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1969) and found that meaning in life was negatively associated with depression but positively associated with some measures of general health.

Lukas (1991) argues that seeking and pursuing meaning and fulfillment works as a shield against emotional instability, and as a warrantor of mental health and well-being. Studies by Zika & Chamberlain (1987), Shek (1992) confirms meaning and purpose of existence as a strong and consistent predictor of psychological well-being.

Rationale of the Study

The present study seeks to understand construction of meaning of life of a person belonging to a subaltern background from a qualitative perspective. Recently, the construct of meaning of life has been operationalised in many scales (eg. Meaning of Life Questionnaire (Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M., 2006), Purpose in Life Test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964).), but the construct's subjective dimension has not been studied empirically. The meaning of life is actively constructed by the individual who is located in a particular culture and bounded in a specific context. The present study places the individual's experiences at the center of the analysis that helps in understanding the essence of his/her world and how he/she defines 'meaningfulness'. Considering the role of culture and context in conferring meaning of life, the literature in subaltern studies in this area is severely lacking. It is imperative to include the perspectives of individuals from subaltern background so as to understand how the 'meaning-of-life' impacts their well-being, mental health, and intrinsic motivation which might be considerably different from the perspective of the majority.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample consisted of one individual from a subaltern background. The sample was selected using purposive sampling. The following three criteria were set beforehand to define 'subaltern':

1. The participant had a low job permanency.

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2. The participant also had low financial stability.
3. No direct monetary relationship was present between the interviewer and the participant.

The participant, Phoolchand is a 33-year old male working as a mason as well as a night-guard at a construction site. He hails from UP. He lives at the construction site with his family. He has a wife, Pushpa, and has 5 children, 3 sons and 2 daughters. He came to Delhi 10-years ago to find a suitable job. The job security is low as once the construction is completed, he has to look for another construction site. Although his wife also works with him sometimes or helps in his work money is always a problem as he has a large family to provide for.

Instruments

Unstructured interview method was used to understand how the participant constructs of his meaning of life. Since, it is a non-directive method, it was the participant who took forward the interview, and was not directed by the interviewer's pre-decided questions. The questions emerged from the participant himself. The interview was audio-recorded and was later transcribed for analysis.

Analysis

The qualitative data obtained through the interview was analysed using Thematic Network Analysis. The data was first encoded using line-by-line open coding. This helped in generating exhaustive codes relevant to the theme under study. Through this process, each line of the transcript was viewed, minimizing the risk of skipping key ideas or concepts emerging from the data. Throughout the coding process the researcher maintained rigorous memos which helped in documenting the emergent conceptual connections between the categories. It also gave the researcher, the required space to locate his own understanding of the concept, avoiding the risk of his own subjectivity influencing the interpretation and linkages between of codes. In the next step, the emergent open codes were re-examined and organized into selective categories. Certain conceptual connections emerged and the data was integrated to some extent into organizing themes. In the third step, the organizing themes were integrated into global themes. These selective codes or categories were further examined and the connections between them re-evaluated. In a way, the data was re-visited to gain insights into the underlying themes and patterns.

RESULTS

TABLE 1: Representing Organizing Themes and subsequent Initial Open Codes

S.No.	Organizing themes	Open Codes
1.	Work as a medium to alleviate Self	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Work as an escape from stressful life· Work keeps one busy and away from the wrong path
2.	Striking a balance between	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Personal freedom has to be balanced with

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S.No.	Organizing themes	Open Codes
	personal freedom and societal responsibilities	societal pressure
3.	Deterministic thinking as a defense mechanism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Labour work is the only choice that he has · Helplessness imposed by God/fate · Takes quality of life as a fixed thing given by, God · Believes in fate · Has no choice but be content with what he has · A strong belief in God · Curses destiny · Hopelessness; cannot improve own circumstance · Accepted a poor life
4.	Suppressed Emotional Self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Suppression of emotions (listens to harsh words because of circumstances) · Crushed from inside yet can't express it · Suppresses negative emotions · Understands the ill effects of negative thinking · Stops/suppresses thinking about things that bothers
5.	Positive characteristics that help in handling stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Knows that work needs patience · Recognizes authority · Self-awareness · Ready to accept consequences of his acts · Realistic point of view · Keeping self calm · Moralistic · Feels that he has no big crisis in life (doesn't magnify things) · Takes problems as a necessary part of life
6.	Conventional thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Women can cry in front of anyone but a man can't (it is a rule of god) · A man cannot cry except under some uncertain unwanted events (Operate under some strict non-negotiable rules) · Moralistic; Operating under strict conventional rules · Girls shouldn't work outside; should stay and work indoors

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S.No.	Organizing themes	Open Codes
7.	Financial constraint	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Could also be because of heavy financial burden · Troubled due to inflation · Low earnings a source of stress · Difficult to fulfill financial necessities of family · High financial insecurity expressed · Constant tension of feeding the family
8.	Physical self dominates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Hardworking · Multitasking · Hardwork as an obligation; work an only mean for survival · Believes in Hard work. · Doesn't believe in wishful thinking · Works 8 hours during the day (and then night duty) · Work-oriented thinking
9.	Relational component important for happiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Sense of responsibility towards family · Feels satisfied through feeding family and oneself · Loving and caring towards family · Content with family · Sense of responsibility towards family (parents) · Attachment with family · Positive view of family life · Importance of family in life; Depends on his family · Relations are important for happiness · Emotionally attached with wife
10.	Lives in present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Focus on day-to-day momentary happiness · Feeling of gratitude for what one has · Believes that one should stay happy · Focus on inner happiness (doesn't talk about happiness from materialistic things) · Finds happiness in small things
11.	Seemit soch (narrow perspective on life)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Lack of vision; children's education is not a priority · No permanent future plan · Ad-hoc thinking · Do not seem to contemplate about life. · No higher goals or needs · Lacks a futuristic bigger perspective · Defense mechanism to ward off stress

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S.No.	Organizing themes	Open Codes
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · No higher goals, focus only on fulfilling basic necessities · Feels there is nothing to learn from life · Just wants to improve his circumstances
12.	Inadequate education a snatcher of opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Uneducated background · Social factors as hindrance in education · Studies hampered because of an affair · Lack of concern on family's part (parents busy with work, can't keep a tab on children) · Lack of opportunities · Inadequate education is an insurmountable hurdle · Feels doomed to do the labour work
13.	Factors limiting the expression of personal self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Lack of spirit to fight back · Lack of family support · Burden of responsibility since an early age · Personal freedom curtailed due to responsibility towards family · Feels humiliated if someone talks rudely · Needs financial independence to assert personal freedom
14.	Views employer as caretaker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Gratitude, respect towards employers · Wants someone to become a shade, a guide, a caretaker.
15.	Future aspirations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Desire for self respect (has to obey others) · Desires financial security
16.	Positive personal traits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Humble enough to seek permission · Responds to good and polite behavior. · Integrity; honesty; maintains distance from the girl · No feelings of envy; positive thinking towards others
17.	Negative aspect of self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Lack of self-control/discipline in childhood/adulthood
18.	Equates happiness with no responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Regresses back to childhood days in search of happy moments

TABLE 2: Representing Global Themes

S.No.	Global Themes	Organizing Themes
1.	Constructing rigid boundaries/ insurmountable walls in life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Deterministic thinking as a defense mechanism · Inadequate education a snatcher of opportunities · Seemit soch (narrow perspective on life) · Financial constraint · Conventional thinking · Lack of vision
2.	Enhancing quality of life through positivity, balance, and work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Work as a medium to alleviate Self · Physical self dominates · Striking a balance between personal freedom and societal responsibilities · Positive Personal trait · Positive characteristics that help in handling stress
3.	Lives in present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Importance of day-to-day moments · Relational component important for happiness · Equates happiness with no responsibilities
4.	A Cauldron Inside	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Factors limiting the expression of personal self · Suppressed Emotional Self

DISCUSSION

The objective of the study was to understand the construction of meaning of life by a person belonging to a subaltern background from a qualitative perspective. The present paper defines subaltern background as, a person with low job permanency and low financial stability. To ensure objectivity, there was no direct monetary relationship between the interviewer and the participant which could have influenced the data collection. It is often assumed that people in same situation with similar background will have roughly the same experiences disregarding that the quality of their experiences could be vastly different. It is necessary to bring the subaltern experiences to the center stage in qualitative analysis and understand their world through their voice instead of imposing the experiences of majority on them. The interview gave insight into the life experiences of the participant, his way of thinking, his sense of the world around him, and how he constructs the meaning of life.

Constructing insurmountable walls around

Throughout the interview, it seemed that the participant was under a strong belief that his life is limited by some constraints which appear insurmountable. This deterministic thinking could well be his defence mechanism. Walls being finances and low education and deterministic thinking. Though the person has a fair idea that good education could improve his condition, not completely change, but he lacks the vision which could well be because of his limited education (He is read till class 5th; “*padhe likhe hote toh kuch aage bhi bhadte..*”). Moreover, lack of job security and nomadic accommodation, the person is forced to resort to ad-hoc thinking, which is consumed in fulfilling food and security needs. The blame for all this is projected on God, as he is the one who has decided things for him in life. He believes that it is his destiny to work as labourer, and there is no other choice for him. There is a streak of helplessness in his responses. So resigning to fate is also a way to ‘accept’ the circumstances. According to Frankl ‘meaning of life is essentially found in some kind of suffering. In the midst of his tough physical conditions he probably finds meaning in his work. (“*insaan sochta hai ki mai aesa kar lun magar hoyega kaisa. Maan lijiye mehnat karoge toh tabhi toh hoga. Aese toh hoga nahi..*”). In a qualitative study, Saraf et al. (2013) found that faith in God and religiosity facilitated hope and resilience thereby mediating meaning of life. He knows that he doesn’t have the freedom to give in to the stress and unhappiness. He has to work for his family, and just cannot give way to sadness. ‘Work’, mostly physical as his physical self dominates, could be the meaning of his life.

Enhancing quality of life through positivity, balance, and work

Bhattacharya (2011) found that meaning in life involves fulfillment of work, a sense of self-worth, a belief in inherent meaning, and peace. The participant has successfully made his work as a medium to alleviate his self. Through his work, he managed to move out of the village to create a life for himself in the city. He says, “*Pardes jao saara din bhar kaam karo, apna aaram se sham ko jao, banao khao so jao. Kissi se koi tension nahi, na kissi se jhagda na kissi se kuch..*” His work is an escape from his otherwise stressful life. It keeps him away from going down the spiral of wrong path. Throughout the interview there were strong streaks of positivity in his responses. He has accepted that since he is not educated he will have to work hard. He is aware that his work demands utmost patience from him. Whenever he is hurt or feels humiliated, he keeps himself calm. He has a very realistic point of view and is ready to accept the consequences of his acts. He takes problems as a necessary part of life and thus, doesn’t magnify little issues. There is a sense of humbleness and gratitude in his life which gives him peace as he doesn’t feel envious of others. He says, “*Apna toh beta yeh kaam hai muh se manga ke kha lenge, kissi ki chori nahi karenge. Na kissi ka galat sochenge.*” His meaning of life is constructed on the foundations of honesty, integrity in work, and morality in life. He realises the need to strike a balance between his own personal freedom and societal pressure. Though his responsibility towards his family constrains him, he feels that it also gives his life a purpose for existence.

Lives in Present

It is often assumed that the stress of financial insecurity leaves little space for happiness in life. Happiness for the participant flows from his gratitude towards life and finding meaning in day-to-day moments. He says, “*Aur phir hum, bhagwan ki daya se, koi cheez se dukhi bhi nahi hai. Hmm, sab hi cheez se sukhi hai bhagwaan ki dua se. Sukhi kar rakha hai toh sukhi hi hai..*”. Happiness for him isn't a static goal which he wants to attain. Not once in the entire interview did he associate happiness with materialistic things in life. “*Khush hi rehna chahiye zindagi mai. Dukhi hone se matlab kya apni tension mai dimag bhi rahega..*”. He regressed back to his childhood days when thinking about the happiest moments of his life. He felt free back then with no responsibilities to care for. Paradoxically, this very sense of responsibility has now become an important part of his self. The fact that he can feed himself and his family makes him feel satisfied. He is emotionally attached to his wife and children, and feels content with them. Even though he lives is constant pressure of low finances, it is in the present moment with his family that he finds peace.

A Cauldron Inside

The one truth that remains for the poor class is that they are after all oppressed. They don't have the liberty to express their emotions and opinions freely. The participant says, “*woh toh dekho jab aap log chaar jane bethe ho, koi kuch kehne lage toh usme aatma dukhi ho jaati hai....phir apni aatma ko shaant hi karna padta hai ki chalo itni majboori nahi hoti toh chaar baatein sun ni bhi nahi padti*”. Although he feels humiliated and hurt if someone speaks harshly to him, he cannot do anything about it. All that he can do is calm himself down.

Often under the burden of responsibilities towards his family, he finds no space to express himself. Even if he is stressed or deeply agitated, he keeps his emotions hidden. He says, “*uska kured hota hai jaise maan lijiye lakad bhunti hai na keede ke dwara..aese hi...kissi bhi bande ko aap socho insaan ko..mardo ko.. maan lijiye woh andar andar apne chura ban jaata hai..*” No matter how crushed he feels from inside he cannot express it in front of anyone. To cope with such negative emotions, he tries to throw them out of his consciousness. He says, “*Han jaise matlab apne gam ko bujha deta hai. Ki sala merko yeh cheez ko sochna hi nahi hai, isko sochna hi band dete hai. Isiliye matlab uski tension door ho jaati hai..*” Avoiding falling in the pit of sadness, helps him focus on his current task. High avoidant coping style is related to meaninglessness where meaning or purpose in life doesn't guard the individual from perceived stress (Halama et al., 2009)

Factors that limit his expression of personal self include financial instability, lack of family support, his own lack of spirit to fight back, and burden of responsibilities since an early age. All these factor simmer in his broken spirit which he manages to keep intact by extracting happiness and meaning in his everyday life.

Walking the Tunnel: Concluding Remarks

The person seems to be walking in a 'tunnel'. The periphery of this tunnel is made of financial constraints coupled with familial responsibility, lack of permanency in job and

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housing leading to day-to-day struggles. This tunnel is dark while one walks, except for the next foot. This prevailing darkness is because of missing light of education hence better job opportunities. Every step is same similar to the previous, with no hope for a completely different future but at best, of a better life condition. This life is significantly tough and in the absence of any creative talent, as put forward by Frankl, this suffering will pave the way for his meaning of life.

Meaning in life comprised of four dimensions: value, purpose, goals and reflections on the past (from Battista & Almond, 1973; Wong, 1998). His life goal i.e. meaning of life is constructed around his physical self. His 'work for his family' appears to be his 'meaning of life'. Support from family or others is also related to increased meaning of life (Saraf, 2013). He has learnt to adapt to his circumstances. He knows that negative thoughts, and sadness kills a person from inside. He has learnt to live in present. He has learnt to sustain happiness in limited means. According to Psarra & Kleftras (2013) meaning of life is positively related to psychological well being i.e. happiness. This is an indicator that participant is on the path of finding his meaning of life.

Implications and Limitations

The study is one step in the direction of including subaltern voices in the field of research. The meaning of life is a subjective personal experience which cannot be imposed on any individual. Thus, there is a need to redirect attention to meaning of life as constructed by individuals living in constant pressures of basic needs. Meaning of life is positively related to psychological well-being, health, quality of life, life satisfaction (e.g., Psarra & Kleftras, 2013; Steger, Oishi, & Kesebir, 2011) and is negatively related to psychological problems (Baiocco, Crea, Fizzotti, Gurrieri, Laghi & Paola, 2009), clinical depression (Cohen & Cairns, 2010). The study gives only a small glance into the experiences of a person belonging to subaltern background and doesn't comprehensively view the relation between meaning of life and class. It is important to carry out studies delineating the role of culture and class in construction and development of meaning of life.

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