



The need for meaning and religiosity: An individual differences approach to assessing existential needs and the relation with religious commitment, beliefs, and experiences



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ABSTRACT

Meaning in life is a component of psychological health. Religion is a robust source of meaning; religiosity is positively associated with meaning and threats to meaning increase religiosity. In the present research, we extend past work by examining how individual differences in the need for meaning relate to religious beliefs and experiences. That is, we proposed that people may vary in the extent to which they desire or need to see their lives as meaningful and that these differences should be predictive of religiosity. To test this, we developed a 10-item Need for Meaning scale and across 2 studies ($N = 881$) explored relations with religious commitment (Studies 1 and 2), religious beliefs (Study 2) and religious experiences (Study 2). Need for meaning was associated with religiosity above and beyond related meaning measures, as well as the need for social belonging, and established cognitive correlates of religion.

A number of theoretical perspectives have articulated that people have a strong need to attain and maintain a sense of meaning in life (e.g., Frankl, 1959; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Yalom, 1980). Meaning in life refers to feelings about the value, purposefulness, coherence, and significance of one's life (e.g., Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; King, Heintzelman, & Ward, 2016; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Steger & Frazier, 2005). Consistent with other need based perspectives (e.g., need to belong, Baumeister & Leary, 1995; self-determination theory, Deci & Ryan, 2000) research has supported meaning as a psychological need by demonstrating that maintaining perceptions of meaning in life are a vital component of health. Specifically, perceptions of meaning in life are associated with psychological health and well-being (Heintzelman & King, 2014; Steger & Frazier, 2005), and predictive of physical health (Steger, Mann, Michels, & Cooper, 2009) and longevity (e.g., Hill & Turiano, 2014). In contrast, deficits in meaning have been found to be associated with negative psychological health outcomes such as depression (Steger et al., 2009), addiction (Kinnier et al., 1994), and suicidality (Edwards & Holden, 2001).

People satisfy the need for meaning by investing in culturally derived beliefs and practices that help them make sense of their existence and imbue their lives with purpose, significance, and coherence (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Park, 2010). Religion is a prominent belief system that helps people to satisfy the need for

meaning in a number of ways (Newton & McIntosh, 2013).

First, religions provide people with answers to big existential questions such as “Why am I here?”, “Is my existence consequential?”, “How should I live my life?”, and “What will happen to me after I die?” (Hefner, 1997). For example, religions offer teleological explanations of human existence (e.g., humans were purposefully created to live in the image of and to serve a divine creator, Park, Edmonson, & Hale-Smith, 2013). Moreover, religions provide a set of values and standards that influence the way people live their lives and treat others (Rothschild, Abdollahi, & Pyszczynski, 2009; Vail et al., 2010). Additionally, religious beliefs provide people answers to mortality concerns by offering some form of afterlife (Vail et al., 2010). Second, religion helps people maintain coherence by providing beliefs that they can use to make sense of their experiences (Park, 2005a). For example, research indicates that religious beliefs can help people cope with and find meaning in even the most traumatic of life experiences (Park, 2005b). Third, religion gives people the opportunity to take on social roles and establish meaningful social bonds, since being religious typically involves membership in a community of believers (Batson & Stocks, 2004; Lambert et al., 2010). Finally, religions provide people with goals and ideals to strive for as well as values with which to live their lives by (Mahoney et al., 2005), and the pursuit of goals contributes to a sense of meaning in life (Emmons, 2005; McGregor & Little, 1998). Religious-

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related goals might feel particularly meaningful because they are based on the teleological beliefs previously mentioned (i.e., humans were created with specific purpose in mind).

Much of the existing research on the link between the meaning in life and religion has focused on the association between the presence of meaning in life and religiosity, providing evidence of a positive association between meaning in life and religiosity (e.g., Hicks & King, 2008; Steger & Frazier, 2005). Religious people, compared to their less or nonreligious counterparts, report a greater sense that their lives are meaningful. Thus, it appears that religion helps satisfy the need for meaning. However, this past research does not speak directly to how the underlying desire or motivation to attain and maintain a sense of meaning in life relates to religiosity.

Search for meaning is defined as people's efforts and intentions to find sources of purpose, significance, and value (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). Deficits in presence of meaning may inspire an active search for meaning (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008), but there is not clear evidence that search for meaning corresponds with greater religiosity. For example, Steger et al. (2010) found that search was unrelated to religious beliefs and attitudes among Christians and reasoned that search for meaning may capture a secular form of existential seeking. Thus, based on this evidence it is not clear whether the desire to attain or maintain meaning as assessed by search for meaning relates to religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices.

Recent experimental studies, however, suggest that people turn to religion when the need for meaning is pressing. Specifically, existential threats like reading philosophical arguments that life is meaningless have been found to increase self-reported religiosity, belief in God, and belief in supernatural religious phenomena (e.g., miracles; Routledge, Roylance, & Abeyta, 2017; belief in supernatural evil forces; Routledge, Abeyta, & Roylance, 2016). Building on these experimental studies, we adopted a novel individual differences approach to investigate the link between the underlying need to attain and maintain meaning and religiosity. While other meaning scales capture the extent to which people feel like they have (e.g., presence of meaning, purpose in life scale) or are actively looking for meaning (e.g., search for meaning), we designed a need for meaning scale to capture more specifically the extent to which people desire or are concerned with having meaning to begin with. Irrespective of whether people feel like their lives are meaningful or are engaging in the active search for meaning in life, it has been argued that humans may vary in the extent to which they need or desire existential meaning (e.g., Schlegel & Hicks, 2017). It is likely that some people think about the meaning of their lives regularly, while others are relatively unconcerned with meaning in life. Indeed research indicates that while the majority of people experience distress as a function of deficits in meaning in life, a minority of people do not (Schnell, 2010). These people termed, "existentially indifferent", who do not experience distress as a function of lacking meaning are also less invested in meaningful pursuits (Schnell, 2010). Therefore, like other psychological needs (e.g., need to belong, Baumeister & Leary, 1995), it is important to theoretically and empirically distinguish the need for meaning from the feeling that one has met this need and the extent to which one is actively pursuing this need.

We propose that individual differences in the need for meaning in life should be predictive of religiosity. We tested this proposal in a pair of studies. In Study 1, we examined the relation between the need for meaning and religious commitment. We hypothesized that the need for meaning would be associated with greater religious commitment. In Study 2, we examined the relation between the need for meaning and specific religious beliefs and experiences. We hypothesized that the need for meaning would be associated with stronger religious beliefs and more frequent religious/spiritual experiences.

An additional purpose of the current research was to establish the need for meaning as an independent correlate of religiosity. First, we endeavored to discriminate the need for meaning from meaning measures such as the presence of meaning and the search for meaning

(Studies 1 and 2). We expected that the need for meaning would be related to meaning constructs. That is those who have a strong need for meaning may report a stronger presence of meaning and should be more likely to engage in the active search for meaning. However, we hypothesized that the need for meaning would be associated with religiosity above and beyond these related meaning measures. That is, we predicted that the extent to which people need meaning would explain variance in religiosity beyond the extent to which people feel they have meaning and are currently actively searching for meaning. Second, we endeavored to discriminate the need for meaning from the need for social belonging, as well as the established cognitive correlates of religiosity, namely mentalizing ability and intuitive thinking (Study 2).

1. Study 1

In Study 1 we explored the relation between individual differences in the need for meaning and religious commitment. We created a 10-item need for meaning scale and measured religious commitment. We hypothesized that need for meaning would be associated with greater religious commitment. Additionally, we sought to distinguish the need for meaning from having meaning and searching for meaning. If the need for meaning, in fact, motivates religiosity, it should remain a predictor of religiosity when controlling for meaning variables that are not specifically focused on assessing the underlying need for meaning.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Past research has evinced a moderate correlation between meaning in life and religiosity (e.g., Steger & Frazier, 2005); however because we were assessing a new meaning construct we planned for a small-to-medium effect. Based on a small-to-medium effect size ($r = 0.20$), power of 0.80, and $p = 0.05$, a power analysis indicated a desired sample size of at least 193. However, because of the exploratory nature of the study we endeavored to collect data using a larger sample.

Participants were 442 (235 female) adults residing in the United States recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT; $M_{age} = 34.19$, $SD_{age} = 11.35$). The majority of participants identified as Christian ($n = 220$). Among non-Christians, eight identified as Jewish, six as Buddhists, five as Hindu, five as Muslim, and one as Unitarian Universalist. Sixteen participants identified as spiritual but not religious, and the remaining 181 reported being unaffiliated with a religion. In addition to religious affiliation, we asked participants to indicate whether they identified as atheist (yes or no). Of the 442 participants, 132 identified as atheist.

2.2. Materials and procedure

Participants completed an online questionnaire containing measures of need for meaning, the presence of meaning, search for meaning, crisis of meaning, purpose in life, religious commitment, and religious affiliation/identification.

2.2.1. Need for meaning

We created a need for meaning scale by adapting the 10-item Need to Belong Scale (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2013). The scale was designed to assess a single factor representing the extent to which people the desire to attain/maintain a sense of existential meaning, just as the need to belong scale was designed to assess a single factor. Individual items are presented in Table 1. Participants rated their agreement to the 10-items using a six-point response scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). The internal reliability for the 10-item scale was excellent ($\alpha = 0.89$). Moreover, a principal axis factor analysis supported a single factor structure. Specifically, the analyses revealed one primary factor with an eigenvalue of 5.16 that accounted for

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