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A short note on the measurement of a meaningful and purposeful life

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Abstract

Do individuals behave in ways that maximize their happiness, well-being, or life satisfaction? There is substantial empirical evidence suggesting that individual behavior is aligned with the maximization of reported life satisfaction. However, individuals are also bound to take other considerations into account when making decisions about their lives. Notably, they may seek purpose and meaning, or the fulfillment of human capacities. While many datasets include measures of life satisfaction and well-being (used by academics, organizations and policymakers to guide research and policy), there is much more limited information on individuals' subjective perceptions of how meaningful (or purposeful) their lives are. Yet current social transformations (including the mental health crisis, rapidly changing patterns of family formation and fertility, changing views of work, the growing importance of free time, or the impact of AI as a new social agent) require alternative measures to understand behavior and preferences. In this context, we argue for the inclusion of measures of meaning and purpose in surveys, alongside standard measures of life satisfaction.

Keywords: Measurement, purpose of life, meaning in life, wellbeing, satisfaction, happiness.

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1 Introduction

While life satisfaction and happiness have long attracted attention, individuals' sense of purpose has received substantially less attention in public debate. This short note argues for the importance of measuring sense of purpose, or meaning in life, as a distinct and complementary concept to life satisfaction, well-being, and happiness. Questionnaires around the world have increasingly included questions and instruments to measure life satisfaction, while measures of individuals' perceptions of how meaningful and purposeful their lives are have been largely ignored. As a result, we know very little about how individuals' sense of purpose or meaning in life has evolved over time, or about its correlates—that is, what determines individuals' sense of purpose. We argue that it is important to include these measures in questionnaires in order to evaluate what is now invisible and to better understand rapid contemporary social transformations. We are not the first ones to argue for the need to consistently measure sense of purpose (see, for example,), but nevertheless while there is a large consistency on the measurement of life satisfaction, there is still little robust and consistent measure of purpose or meaning (see, for example, Mahoney (2023) and Abdallah and Mahoney (2024))

Social progress is about well-being, but it is also about improving people's sense of having a good and meaningful life, a life that is worth living. Such a life allows individuals to contribute to their communities, pursue valued projects, develop a sense of direction, and build bonds with others. We argue that measuring this dimension, and analyzing its evolution and determinants, may be key to understanding rising mental health problems, psychological distress, and ill-being, especially when these trends are accompanied by weakening social capital and growing loneliness. In other words, a declining sense of meaning may partly explain the deterioration of mental health observed in many contemporary societies.

A greater sense of purpose in life is associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety Boreham and Schutte (2023), better physical health M. Steger, Mann, and andTC Cooper (2009), lower mortality Boyle, Barnes, Buchman, and Bennett (2009), and higher levels of well-being Barcaccia et al. (2023); M. F. Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler (2006); Zika and Chamberlain (1992). Ill-being is increasingly affecting contemporary societies, generating large social and economic costs, including rising numbers of individuals out of work due to health problems, lower productivity, reduced social participation, weaker human capital formation, and slower productivity growth.

Measuring individuals' sense of purpose and its evolution over time is important not only for assessing social progress and well-being, but also for understanding preferences and behavior. We argue that such measurement and analysis might help explain current trends in mental health, ill-being, loneliness, as well as broader social transformations.

First, it is necessary to analyze whether there are important differences between what constitutes a happy and satisfying life and what individuals need and seek to give meaning and purpose to their lives. Second, we need to understand whether individuals' preferences and choices are aligned not only with maximizing satisfaction, but also with pursuing a full life marked by purpose and meaning. Under the premise that individuals value not only a happy and satisfying life, but also purpose, understanding what gives life meaning can help explain major life decisions, including work choices and family formation. To examine the importance of sense of purpose or meaning in life, researchers and organizations need better

data, which are currently scarce. We argue that only with good measures of these concepts we can fully capture individual well-being and better understand current social transformations, including increasing disengagement from work and demand for leisure, rapidly changing dynamics of family formation and fertility, and the deterioration of mental health and well-being.

In modern economics, utility is a mere mathematical representation of individuals' preferences used to model and understand individuals' behavior. That is, utility is not a psychological measure of pleasure, rather it represents preferences and shapes behavior to the extent that individuals act to maximize, or improve, utility, subject to constraints. It remains an empirical question whether individuals' behavior aligns not only with their reported life satisfaction, as shown in the literature, but also with their reports of having a meaningful or purposeful life. We are not the first to make this claim. Karlsson, Loewenstein, and McCafferty (2004) argue that "the desire for meaning" is an important driver of human behavior that has been largely ignored by economists.

2 Measuring Meaning in life or Sense of Purpose

2.1 Definitions

Meaning in life is a construct in psychology that has received limited attention in economics and policymaking. Meaning in life, or sense of purpose, refers to having goals or commitments that individuals consider worthwhile; goals that function as life purposes and sources of meaning. Although there is not consensus on what well-being means, and although there is debate on the difference between being happy and leading a happy life, we define happiness and life satisfaction pragmatically as individuals' answers to happiness or life satisfaction questions, related or positive emotions. We define individuals' perception of having a meaningful and purposeful life as a distinct concept, although arguably strongly correlated with reported happiness and life satisfaction. This pragmatic approach allows to plea for the inclusion of measures that capture individuals' perceptions of their lives in relation to concepts that have been largely ignored in empirical discussions.

In economics, (Karlsson et al. (2004)) distinguish four interpretations of meaning based on how they can be incorporated into economic models through the concepts of utility and behavior. We quote form the abstract: "These four interpretations are, in decreasing order of their amenability to modeling in conventional terms: (1) meaning as a resolution of preferences; (2), meaning as an extension of oneself either socially or temporally; (3) meaning as an act of making sense of one's life; and (4) meaning as an assertion of free will". In a related paper, Nick Chater and George Loewenstein, one of the authors of the previous paper, argue that evolution has generated "the desire to make sense of our immediate experience, our life, and our world"(Chater and Loewenstein (2016)). If this is true, then we should expect human behavior and preferences to be aligned, at least in part, with individuals' perceptions of how meaningful and purposeful their lives are. In that paper, Chater and Loewenstein (2016) develop a theoretical model of human preferences and behavior that is consistent with sense-making.

The scarce literature on meaning in life in economics also includes research related

to labor economics. In this literature, sense of meaning and purpose has been defined in far more concrete way, which makes it easier to measure and operationalize. Empirical evidence shows a positive relationship between having (or perceiving that one has) a meaningful job and workers' motivation and engagement, including lower levels of absenteeism and turnover. Some evidence also shows that workers are willing to accept lower wages for more meaningful and purposeful jobs (retention) (De Neve, Kaats, and Ward (2024), Ariely, Kamenica, and Prelec (2008), and Chandler and Kapelner (2013)).

2.2 Measurement

The main challenge to study sense of propose (or meaning in life) is how to measure it in large population-base questionnaires. Although the validity and reliability of measures of subjective life satisfaction and happiness has been well demonstrated, the measurement of purpose of life in these settings is much more recent, with only very few questionnaires in which these measures are included. See Abdallah and Mahoney (2024) for a thoughtful and deep discussion measurements of the eudemonics components of subjective well -being on as well as on measurement recommendations.

To the best of our knowledge, the first psychometric scales to measure individuals' perceptions of meaning and purpose in their life were published in 1996 (Reker (1996)) and 1998 (Ebersole (1998)). Both scales aim to capture individuals' perceptions of different sources of meaning. The first measure, the *Sources of Meaning Profile Revised* (SOMP-R), is a 17-item scale in which each item is measured on a 7 point Likert scale, producing a total score that ranges from 17 to 119. It can be divided into four factor scores: self-transcendence, collectivism, individualism, and self-preoccupation. The second, the *Personal Meaning Profile* (PMP) is a 57-item questionnaire in which each item is rated from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a great deal). The scale is divided in seven scores: achievement, relationship, religion, self-transcendence, self-acceptance, intimacy, fair treatment or perceived justice. The questionnaire can be found here.

In a similar sprit, Schnell developed a first version in 2006 and second version in 2009 of a larger 151-item questionnaire, known as the *Sources of Meaning and Meaning in Life Questionnaire* (SoMe)(Schnell (2009)), which includes four dimensions and evaluates 26 different sources of meaning in life. More recently, Schnell and Danbolt (2023) developed the *Meaning and Purpose Scales* (MAPS) with 141 items. This instrument distinguishes meaningfulness, understood as "a basic sense that life is worth living"; crisis of meaning, understood as "a judgment on one's life as frustratingly empty, pointless, and lacking meaning, and sources of purpose..."; as well as five sources of purpose: sustainability, faith, security, community, and personal growth.

These above mentioned questionnaires are very difficult to include in large individual or household questionnaires aimed at population-base samples. Including a measure of meaning and purpose in such questionnaires however would be urgent to track the evolution of these measures over time, see their evolutions across groups, and understand what are the determinants of a meaningful life.

For this purpose, one can use the *Meaning in Life Questionnaire* (MLQ), M. F. Steger et al. (2006) and M. F. Steger and Shin (2010), which uses 10 items to assess two dimensions of meaning in life. These measures can be more easily included and implemented in large

questionnaires and, as the authors note, "has good reliability, test-retest stability, stable factor structure, and convergence among informants"(,M. F. Steger et al. (2006)). Respondents can answer each of the 10 items on a scale from 1 (absolutely untrue) to 7 (absolutely true). The full questionnaire can be found here and translations to other languages here.

Alternatively, to make measurement feasible in large population-based questionnaires, some studies and surveys use a one- or two-item direct questions. For example, the OECD Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-being [1] suggests asking respondents(as part of the core module of subjective well-being measures) to what extent they feel the things they do in their life are worthwhile on a scale from 0 to 10. Other questionnaires ask respondents whether they feel what they do in life is valuable and worthwhile (European Social Survey, Round 9), whether they think about meaning and purpose of life (World Value Survey), or whether their life has no meaning (World Value Survey). Similarly, some composite measures of well-being include one or more items related to sense of purpose and meaning in life.

Researchers who have focused on measuring and understanding *Meaning at Work*, an area that has become particularly important amid concerns about job turnover and absenteeism, use questionnaires specifically developed for the workplace. De Neve et al. (2024) find a positive relationship between purpose, job satisfaction, and performance using the *Work Well-being Score*, a measure that includes four questions to measure happiness (I feel happy at work most of the time), purpose (my work has a clear purpose), satisfaction (overall, I am satisfied with my job) and stress (I feel stressed at work most of the time).More generally, individuals with a stronger sense of purpose and meaning in life tend to report higher well-being and mental health, greater work engagement and productivity, and lower absenteeism and turnover. Related workplace items in De Neve et al. (2024) include: "My work has special meaning: this is not just a job"; "I feel good about the ways we contribute to the community"; "When I look at what we accomplish, I feel a sense of pride"; and "I'm proud to tell others I work here.").

3 Existing Evidence

A search in the literature and across population-based data sets shows that relatively few representative household or individual surveys that include any measure of individuals' meaning in life and sense of purpose. Without aiming to be exhaustive, we briefly summarize some datasets that include relevant measures.

European Social Survey (ESS). The ESS includes the item "What I do in life is valuable and worthwhile" in two waves (2006–2007 and 2012–2013), with responses ranging from 1 (agree strongly) to 5 (disagree strongly). The same survey also measures life satisfaction and happiness on a 0–10 scale. Preliminary analyses suggest policy-relevant differences across these outcomes. For example, the number of children in the household is negatively associated with life satisfaction and happiness, but positively associated with whether life feels worthwhile. Similarly, education and working hours have negative coefficients for satisfaction and happiness, but positive coefficients for the worthwhile-life measure.

[1] See: OECD (2025), *OECD Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-being*, OECD Publishing.https://doi.org/10.1787/9203632a-en

Understanding Society. The UK Understanding Society Panel includes the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), a 12-item module measuring psychological distress. Two relevant items ask whether respondents have 'felt that life isn't worth living" and whether they have 'been feeling unhappy or depressed," with answers ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (much more than usual). The survey also includes life satisfaction, measured on a 1–7 scale. These items are useful but limited for our purposes, since GHQ questions are designed to be used as part of an overall psychological distress scale rather than as separate measures of meaning or purpose.

German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP). In 2014, the SOEP Innovation Module included the item "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life," answered on a 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (fully agree) scale. This item formed part of the 8-item Flourishing Scale, which also includes questions on social relationships, engagement in daily activities, contribution to others' well-being, competence, optimism, and respect Diener and Wirtz (2009). However, the innovation module provides limited individual background information, restricting analyses of the determinants of purpose relative to life satisfaction. A simple regression of life satisfaction on the purposeful-and-meaningful-life item yields an adjusted R^2 of only 0.063, suggesting that the two constructs overlap but are far from equivalent.

MIDUS. The MIDUS survey asks several purpose-related questions within its 'Personal Beliefs" module (in a 1-7 scale), including whether respondents have 'a sense of direction and purpose in life," whether they lack a clear sense of what they are trying to accomplish, and whether their daily activities seem trivial or unimportant. Respondents also identify the five most important elements of a good life from a list that includes 'sense of purpose," 'sense of accomplishment," and "enjoyment of life's pleasures." MIDUS therefore offers rich information on purpose, but it does not include a standard life satisfaction question, limiting direct comparison between purpose and subjective well-being. One can find the full questionnaire here.

World Values Survey. The VWS asks individuals whether they think about meaning and purpose of life and how often they do that on a scale from 1 (often) to 4 (never) (*F001*). They also ask life has no meaning and respondents can answer on a 1 to 3 scale, agree to disagree (F010).

Pew Research Center. A large study of the Pew Research Center uses a direct question that reads like "What Makes Life Meaningful?". Respondents had to cast their answer in an open format. The results indicate that family and children are the most mentioned areas of life, followed by professional career and occupation.

Gallup. Using data from the Gallup World Poll,Graham and Nikolova (2015) examine the differences across a set of measures aimed to assess positive well-being (questions on the best possible life, experienced happiness, stress and anger) and a question on meaning and purpose of life, which was asked in 2009-2011 in a set of countries. In concrete, respondents are asked "Do you feel your life has an important purpose or meaning?".

4 Conclusion

If societies are to track well-being in a richer way, surveys should measure not only whether people are happy or satisfied, but also whether they experience their lives as meaningful, purposeful, and worthwhile. Although there is only very limited data available, preliminary evidence suggests that, while correlated, these two concepts might not be be identical.

While many datasets include measures of life satisfaction , there is much more limited information on individuals' subjective perceptions of how meaningful (or purposeful) their lives are. Investing in better data on meaning and purpose would make visible an important life dimension that is currently only partially measured. It would allow researchers to study how purpose evolves across cohorts and social groups and how it relates to life choices. Even a short module included regularly in large representative surveys would substantially improve our ability to understand contemporary social transformations and to design policies that support not only satisfied lives, but meaningful ones.

A minimal module could begin with a small number of direct questions in which respondents are asked whether their lives are (or feel) meaningful, with a sense of purpose, worthwhile or significant. For example,

- "Overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in life are worthwhile?" (used, for example, by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) of the UK within the program "Measuring progress, well-being and beyond GDP" as one of the four questions to measure Personal Well-being) and pruposed by Eurostat (2017).[2]
- "I generally feel that what I do in my life is valuable and worthwile" (European Social Survey,Round 3 and 6, 'Personal and Social Wellbeing' module)
- Alternatively, questionnaires could also include an open question in which individuals are asked about what makes a life meaningful (see, for example, PEW Research Center)

These questions should be asked alongside standard measures of life satisfaction and happiness, so that researchers can examine when these concepts move together and when they diverge.

In longer (household) questionnaires, we argue that a more complete measure should be included. For example, the *Meaning in Life Questionnaire* (MLQ) (see 2.2) or a shorter version of it.

[2]Eurostat, 2017 "Final report of the expert group on quality of life indicators"; doi: 10.2785/021270

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