



The Existential Motivation: Searching for Meaning - The Contribution of Meaningful Work on Meaning in Life

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The main purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between meaningful work and meaning in life

Methods: Data were collected through a questionnaire-based survey with a cross-sectional design. Based on a convenience sampling 237 employees of different companies that belong to different sectors answered the questionnaire. To analyze the data descriptive statistics, Pearson coefficient, regression analyses were applied.

Results: Analysis showed that there is a positive relationship between meaningful work and meaning in life. Multiple regression analysis indicated that sub-dimensions of meaningful work: unity with others, inspiration and balancing tensions (being/doing, self/others) have positive contributions on experiencing meaning in life.

Originality: This study creates awareness of potential antecedents of meaning in life through the Logotherapy approach by answering the question: "Does the experience of meaningful work contribute the experience of meaning in life?"

Varoluşsal GÜdülenme: Anlam Arayışı. Anlamlı İşin Yaşamın Anlamına Katkısı

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ÖZ

Amaç: Bu araştırmanın amacı, anlamlı iş ile yaşamın anlamı arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemektir.

Tasarım/Yöntem: Veri, anket yöntemi ve kesitsel tasarım ile toplanmıştır. Kolayda örnekleme yolu ile farklı sektörlerde ait farklı firmalardan 237 çalışan anketi cevaplamıştır. Verilerin analizi için tanımlayıcı istatistik, Pearson katsayısı, regresyon uygulanmıştır

Sonuçlar: Analizler, anlamlı iş ile anlamlı yaşam arasında olumlu bir ilişki olduğunu göstermiştir. Çoklu regresyon analizi anlamlı iş alt-boyutlarının: diğerleri ile bir olmak, ilham, gerilim dengesi (olmak/yapmak, ben/ diğerleri) yaşamın anlamının deneyimlenmesine olumlu katkıda bulunduğunu göstermiştir.

Özgün Değer: Bu araştırma, "Logoterapi yaklaşımı aracılığı ile anlamlı işin deneyimlenmesi yaşamın anlamının deneyimlenmesine katkıda bulunur mu?" sorusuna cevap bularak yaşamın anlamının olası öncüllerinin farkındalığını yaratmaktadır

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1. Introduction

Existentialist philosophy argues that the fulfillment of human existence can be achieved by experiencing “real” meaning (Klemke, 2000; Metz, 2002). According to Frankl (1984), engagement, agency, and self-direction are functions of meaning, and people have innate will to find it. Hence, discovering meaning in our lives must prevail the idea of embracing provided meaning to us. Frankl (1988, p. 62) underlines that “meaning is something to be found rather than given”.

Within management science, the relationship between motivation and productivity let scholars understand human being at work (Driscoll & Wiebe, 2007). To this respect, understanding attributed meaning to work is crucial in order to illuminate the meaning at work. Researchers have confirmed that when people perceive themselves as creating positive, beyond-the-self change at work, they experience their work more meaningful (Cardador, 2009; Grant, 2007). Based upon existential perspective, meaningful work can be reached through experiencing a sense of completeness and coherence at work (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012).

According to self-determination theory, meaning is self-determined behavior and not only is crucial for an individual but also it is important for having positive outcomes (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003). The meaning attached to work leads to positive work outcomes (Wrzesniewski, 2003). When employees perceive their work meaningful, they are more committed, productive, creative and collegial (Amabile & Kramer, 2012). Employees who perceive their works as a way of serving others, expressing full potential or developing and becoming the self, report better psychological state and find their organizations more desirable. In this study, the contribution degree of meaningful work on the meaning in life will be analyzed.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Meaning in Life

Meaning can be experienced by answering the questions about “what is worth living for?”, “what is the purpose of my life?” or “what is the meaning of my life?”, “Why do I keep on living if there is death at the end?”. As Frankl (1984) points out, search for the personal sense of meaning in life is the most powerful motivation in our lives. In the history of psychology, theorists have adopted a variety of approaches to defining meaning. Wong (1998) argues that two types of personal meaning exist: “the ultimate meaning of human existence can be discovered through religious beliefs, philosophical reflections, and psychological integration, whereas specific meanings in everyday living can be created through engagement, commitment, and the pursuit of life goals” (p. 405).

According to Victor Frankl (1992, p. 115), meaning in life can be discovered by the three distinct ways: “(a) by creating a work or doing a deed; (b) by experiencing something or encountering someone; and (c) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering”. Frankl (1984, p.134) remarks that “meaning in life can only be found when individuals integrate what they have learned about themselves into the world, moving away selfishness”. Thus, he asserts that individuals must strive themselves to find meaning in life by connecting themselves to the external world.

Moreover, Frankl (1967) argues that people need for having a goal, values or ideals, and in the absence of them, one might experience distress. It is called as “existential vacuum” characterized by ennui, apathy, and vacuity (Frankl, 1967; Ruffin, 1984; Yalom, 1980). Frankl also estimates that approximately 20% of the psychological and psychiatric patients suffer from boredom and existential vacuum. Frankl develops a therapeutic approach for individuals who seek to find purpose in their lives. He calls this approach as “Logotherapy” which is based on the presumption that human beings are able to find a reason for living, and by doing this they can overcome negative states and live more fulfilling lives (Crumbaugh & Henrion, 2001). Logotherapy is based on several key assumptions. The first assumption is “freedom of will” which focuses on that people may not control what happens to them, but they can always control how to respond the events in their lives (Crumbaugh, 1971; Melton & Schulenberg, 2008). The second assumption is “will to meaning” which emphasizes that main motivation of people is having the desire

to find meaning and purpose in their lives (Crumbaugh, 1971; Frankl, 1984). The final assumption is that life is meaningful in all conditions, even under unavoidable torture and suffering (Frankl, 1984). Frankl asserts that one can find meaning in his or her life even in helpless or hopeless situations by choosing to live with honor and dignity.

As a matter of fact, following the publication of the Purpose in Life test (PIL; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964) in the mid of 1960s, empirical research reveal that meaning in life can be experienced by purposeful life; and existential frustration is related with a lack of purpose in life. Frankl asserts that purposelessness is related with antisocial behavior (Shek, Ma, & Cheung, 1994), and people who have no purpose in life are more likely to run into troubles, blame others and experience high levels of negative affect and anger (Sappington & Kelly, 1995).

In a similar manner, Nozick (1989) proposes that purposeful life which includes creating, parenting and loving is a source of meaning. According to Yalom (1980) serving others, attending in charitable work, spending times to make the world better place are powerful sources of meaning. Another activity that Yalom (1980) asserts as developing the sense of meaning is expressing creativity. Since creativity is also another form of expressing full potential; Yalom posits that self-reflection and self-discovery facilitate meaningfulness.

2.2. Meaningful Work

Meaningfulness is a subjective perception that is defined as “the value of a work goal, or purpose, judged to the individual’s own ideals or standards” (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004: 11). According to Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski (2010)’s model, meaningful work has two psychological dimensions: (a) the direction of an action (i.e., toward others or self), and (b) underlying motives (i.e., communion or agency). While the direction of action emphasizes the target toward that the effort to create meaningfulness is directed, the communion/agency dimension underlines motives of people to create meaningfulness diversifies those with communion motives who want to connect with friends or share social goals and values from those with agency motives who desire to create or assert elements.

Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012) conceptualize meaningful work under the seven dimensions: (a) Unity with others describes the meaningfulness of working together with other people. It also refers to the sense of belonging and shared values. The word of “unity” does not reflect uniformity, but it necessitates the balancing between other dimensions of the framework to reach unity in diversity. (b) Serving others refers to the meaningfulness of contribution of products and services that enhance the well-being of others or the environment we live in. (c) Expressing full potential refers to the meaningfulness creating and applying new concepts and having the sense of achievement. It is differentiated from developing the inner self in that it is active and external directed, whereas expressing full potential is reflective and internal directed. (d) Developing inner self emphasizes desiring to be a good person or the best that one can be. It also refers to being true to self, having qualities such as patience or becoming one’s higher self. (e) Reality emphasizes that people are aware of the realities of their environment. They know that life is messy but do not make it a problem. When they are grounded in reality in their life and work, meaningfulness is perceived. (f) Inspiration refers to the inspirational vision, leadership or individual resources. People who are inspired by their work are likely to experience the sense of spiritual connection with their work. (g) Balancing tensions between “being” and “doing” describes that “being” is the examining one’s own work and finding it meaningful. It is often considered as “silence”, “patience”. “Doing” is a more world-oriented concept which emphasizes the making contribution. The tensions between them force people to requestion about meaning. Balancing tensions between “self” and “others” refers to the challenge to cover the needs of self and needs of others. When there is an imbalance between them people start to interpret the world meaningless. In this study, the meaningful work conceptualization of Lip-Wiersma and Wright (2012) will be embraced.

2.3. The Argument for the Contribution of Meaningful Work on Meaning in Life

Meaningful work is positively related to work and organization related variables such as job satisfaction (Kamdron, 2005), work centrality (Nord, Brief, Atieh, & Doherty, 1990), work motivation (Hackman & Oldham,

1980), work engagement (May et al., 2004), and organizational identification (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). Besides, it is also related to overall well-being (Arnold, Turner, Barling, Kelloway, & McKee, 2007).

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) suggests that people have a motivational mechanism that energizes and directs their behaviors. This motivational mechanism can be activated by the attempt for the satisfaction of psychological needs. According to Deci and Ryan (2000) psychological need satisfaction is as the necessary nutriment for people' functioning as water, minerals, and sunshine are necessary to be in flower. In Self-determination theory, three fundamental needs: the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness should be satisfied. The need for autonomy refers that individuals have an innate desire to will and experience a sense of freedom and choice when performing an activity (De Charms, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 2000). The need for competence emphasizes that individuals have inherent will to feel effective in interacting with the environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It also means engaging in challenging activities and widening skills and abilities. The need for relatedness refers to individual's inherent tendency to be connected to others, which is to be loved, cared and be a member of a group (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

A work which develops the inner self helps individuals to express full potential, unity with others and service to others (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012) might motivate individuals internally which is a form of intrinsic motivation. Studies (Rosso et al., 2010) suggest that intrinsic motivation is one of the indicators for the perceiving work as meaningful. As Frankl (1955, 1976) points out meaning in life is a process of discovery within a world which is intrinsically meaningful. Since meaning in life can be experienced through creative, experiential and attitudinal values, a work which inspires individuals to produce or create; helps individuals to express full potential and developing and becoming self or service to other people might contribute the experiencing of life as meaningful..

Hypothesis 1: Meaningful work has a positive contribution on meaning in life.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

A total of 237 employees participated in the study by answering the complete questionnaire. Of the respondents, 42% (n = 100) were women and the average age was 41 years (ranges from 24 to 71). 68% (n = 160) of the respondents reported that they work in the public sector and 32% (n = 76) in the private sector. With respect to marital status, 72% (n = 171) were married. The majority of the respondents (%96, n = 224) had a diploma or degree of master and Ph.D.

3.2. Procedure

Respondents were reached by convenience sampling method. Reaching a considerable number of respondents was achieved by web-based questionnaire as a survey form. The filling time of the questionnaire ranged from ten to fifteen minutes. In total, 237 completed surveys were returned out of approximately 850 within a month. This indicates a response rate of 27.88 per cent. The first page of the questionnaire provided assurance of anonymity, confidentiality and purpose of the study.

3.3. Measures

Meaning in Life was measured through the Purpose in Life (PIL) test which was developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick (1969). 20-item unidimensional attitude scale was constructed on the basis of Frankl's logotherapy approach. PIL measures "existential vacuum". In the original test, each item is rated on a 7-point semantic differential scale. A high score (6 to 7) shows clear meaning and purpose in life, an intermediate score (3 to 5) indicates indecision in life and a low score (1 to 2) shows the lack of clear meaning and purpose in life. Scores range from 20

to 140 which represent existential vacuum or meaning in life. However, in this study, in order to avoid respondents' middle-point tendency, the 6-point semantic differential scale was used. Therefore, scores range from 20 to 120.

Meaningful work was measured using Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale (CMWS) which was developed by Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012). CMWS includes 28 items and seven sub-dimensions- *developing inner self, unity with others, serving others, expressing full potential, balancing tensions between "being versus doing" and "self versus others", inspiration and reality*. Items were rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*always*).

PIL and CMWS were translated into Turkish by authors. To control the meaning unity with respect to English-Turkish, the items have been reviewed by two colleagues who are competent both in Turkish and English languages and necessary changes have been made. The two scales were piloted on a sample of 33 respondents and high reliability levels were achieved (alpha for PIL = .93; alpha for CMWS = .95).

4. Findings

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Variables

Descriptive statistics, correlations among study's variables, and Cronbach's alpha reliability levels are displayed in Table 1. Initially, high reliability levels were achieved for both main scales and sub-dimensions of meaningful work scale (alphas range from .79 to .96). The mean score of meaning in life (mean = 4.45) and meaningful work (mean = 4.22) indicate that respondents find reasonable meaning both in life and work. Moreover, among the sub-dimensions of meaningful work, the highest mean score is in developing and becoming self (mean = 4.60) and the lowest mean score is in balancing tensions (mean = 3.93).

The correlation among variables revealed that the higher the experience of meaningful work by respondents the higher the meaning in life they experienced ($r = .59, p < .01$). Furthermore, meaning in life has the moderate level of positive relationships with the sub-dimensions of meaningful work (ranging from .44 to .53). The results also showed significant relationships between sub-dimensions of meaningful work supporting the findings of Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012).

Table 1.

Means, standard deviations, reliabilities and correlations among variables.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Meaning in Life	4.45	0.91	.95 ^a								
2. Meaningful Work	4.22	0.88	.59**	.96 ^a							
3. Unity with others	4.33	1.19	.49**	.81**	.93 ^a						
4. Serving others	4.33	1.06	.49**	.84**	.66**	.87 ^a					
5. Exp. F. Pot.	4.11	1.05	.46**	.84**	.54**	.69**	.86 ^a				
6. D.&B. Self	4.60	1.01	.44**	.81**	.51**	.62**	.78**	.85 ^a			
7. Reality	4.25	1.02	.47**	.81**	.60**	.63**	.63**	.65**	.79 ^a		
8. Inspiration	4.06	1.13	.53**	.83**	.51**	.67**	.69**	.66**	.60**	.87 ^a	
9. Bal. Tens.	3.93	0.98	.51**	.79**	.54**	.55**	.61**	.60**	.65**	.66**	.80 ^a

Notes: a: Cronbach's alpha; Exp. F. Pot.: Expressing full potential; D.&B. Self: Developing and becoming self; Bal. Tens.: Balancing tensions

** $p < .01$

Multiple regression analysis with forward inclusion, as shown in Table 2, indicates that the three of the seven sub-dimensions of meaningful work significantly explain the variances of the meaning in life. Accordingly, inspiration contributed most to the meaning in life ($\beta = .28, p < .001$) followed by unity with others ($\beta = .24, p < .001$), and balancing tensions ($\beta = .19, p < .01$). However, serving others, expressing full potential, developing and becoming self, and reality did not predict the meaning in life. This finding partially supported the study hypothesis.

5. Conclusion, Discussions and Suggestions

The hypothesis stating the contribution of meaningful work on meaning in life was partially supported. Results of multiple regression analysis confirmed that three of the seven sub-dimensions of meaningful work, unity with others, inspiration and balancing tensions (being/doing, self/others) significantly explain the variances in meaning in life. However, inspiration has more explanatory power in experiencing meaning in life.

Inspiration occurs with the existence of hope and ideals. Human needs for vision, hope and inspiration (O'Connell, Hickerson, & Pillutla, 2011). In a word, individuals who experience inspiration are inspired at work, the work they are doing makes them hopeful about future, and they also experience a sense of spiritual connection with the work. These kinds of experiences might lead people to see their existence as purposeful and meaningful or their daily tasks as a source of pleasure and satisfaction.

Unity with others which emphasizes the belonging, sharing values or working supportively together creates meaning in life. Similar findings highlighted that sense of belonging (Lambert, Stillman, Hicks, Kamble, Baumeister, & Fincham, 2013), and social support (Krause, 2007) enhance meaning in life. Since the need to belong is a fundamental need for the human being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) satisfaction of the need creates the feeling that life is worthwhile and meaningful (Lambert et al., 2013).

Table 2.

The contributions of sub-dimensions of meaningful work on meaning in life

Independents	Dependent Variable:	Meaning in Life	
		β	<i>t</i>
Inspiration		.28***	3.881
Unity with others		.24***	3.727
Balancing tensions		.19**	2.572
<i>Excluded variables</i>			
Serving others		.09	1.063
Reality		.07	.895
Exp. Full Potential		.04	.557
D.& B. Self		.04	.535
<i>F</i>	43.914***		
<i>R</i> ²	.36		
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.35		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

A work which creates balance for the needs of self and others, being and doing might lead to experience meaning in life. In other words, employees who create enough space for themselves, have the time and space to think, and have good balance the need of others and own needs might perceive life in their hands and in control of it or have progression to complete fulfillment in achieving life goals. Because when there is balance between "being and doing" and "needs of self and others" people start to interpret the world as meaningful (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012).

It can be concluded that will to meaning is a basic human drive to find meaning in life (Frankl, 1988) and it plays a crucial role to mean the existence. Meaningful work is one of the sources for creating meaning in life. Specifically, an employee who believes that her/his contributions make the world a better place or experiences a sense of spiritual connection with the work perceives her/his life more meaningful. An employee who experiences sense of belongingness, supportive work environment, creates trust or enjoys working with her/his colleagues establishes meaning in life. Additionally, an employee who creates the balance between the needs of self and others and being and doing experiences meaning in her/his life.

The results of this study suggest that organizations should create opportunities for employees to interpret their work as meaningful by creating vision, hope or inspiration, by fostering sense of belonging (which is a form of being loved, accepted, valued) and by creating balance to cover the needs of self and others also by creating balance between person's occupational needs (i.e., finding work meaningful through examining one's own work) and what

is offered to fulfill her/his needs (i.e. to make a contribution). These kinds of investments would likely to result in employees, who are more enthusiastic, are running over with exciting things, have a worthwhile life, and perceive their personal existence as purposeful and meaningful.

6. Limitations

The sample characteristics of this study were predominantly higher education, professional or semi-professional jobs and public sector in Türkiye. Therefore, the study results cannot be generalized for other populations with different characteristics, cultures or countries. Hence, replication is needed with diverse and larger samples that allow higher representation of other groups to make generalizations.

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