

## Religiosity, Personal Meaning, and Psychological Well-being: A Study among Muslim Students in England

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Religion has been considered as a framework for the sense of meaning and purpose. The aim of the present study was to explore the perception of Muslim students who practice their religion towards meaning of life and to investigate the association between religiosity, personal meaning, and psychological well-being. Respondents were 60 Muslim students studying at University of Southampton and Birmingham in England. The participants were administered Life Attitude Profile-Revised Scale (Reker, 1999), Sources of Meaning Profile-Revised Scale (Reker, 1996), Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff, 1989), and Strength of Spiritual Belief Scale (King, Speck, & Thomas, 2001). Findings of this study showed that Muslim students perceived their life meaningful. They derived and experienced meaning from various sources and the most important sources of meaning were taking part in religious activities and engaging in personal relationships with family/friends and the least important sources of meaning were participation in hedonistic activities and acquiring material possession. Furthermore, there was a positive association between various dimensions of personal meaning and different components of psychological well-being, spirituality and religiosity. This study has implications for religious scholars and psychologists working on religion.

*Keywords:* religiosity, personal meaning, psychological well-being, Muslim students

Religion has been considered as a potential source of existential meaning that has a significant impact on psychological well-being. Religion may contribute directly to people's well-being or indirectly by giving a sense of meaning and purposeful direction in life (Wong, 1989). A number of theorists believe that a sense of meaningfulness in life is essential to mental health (Frankl, 1976; Yalom, 1980). Contemporary research has shown that religiosity and existential meaning are important constructs in prevention of illness, promotion of wellness, and successful adaptation to life's changing circumstances (Emmons, 2003; Pargament, Magyar, & Murray, 2005). Meaninglessness or existential vacuum, on the other hand, lies at the very root of psychopathology including neurosis, depression, suicidal behaviour, drug abuse, and alcohol dependence (Reker & Chamberlain, 2000).

Religion is well suited to provide answers to some of the questions about life's meaning. Baumeister (2005) postulated that part of the appeal of religion has been rooted in control and indeed, it is the control over life that offers. Similarly, Jung (1961) stated that "it is the role of religion to give meaning to life of a man" (p. 89). There have been a number of studies examining the relationship between existential meaning in life and religiosity. Most of these studies indicate a positive relationship between them. For example, Yalom (1980) reported that a positive sense of meaning in life was associated with both self-transcendent values and deeply held religious beliefs.

Research has demonstrated that meaning in life is a significant cognitive construct that affects mental well-being and helps in effective adaptation to difficulties in life. Personal meaning has been regarded as a protective factor in adaptation to life-threatening illness such as AIDS (Fife, 2005). Meaning in life has also been found to be positively correlated with higher self-esteem (Steger, 2006), control (Krause & Shaw, 2004), life satisfaction (Steger & Kashdan, 2006), coping (Sherman & Simonton 2011), hope (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005), positive functioning (Diener & Seligman, 2004), positive well-being (Scannell, Allen, & Burton, 2002), and has been found to have a buffering effect against depression (Pinquart, 2002).

There is an emphasis within Islamic literature on religious beliefs and practices being used as resources for dealing with life difficulties. Islamic teachings encourage people to be patient, to perform prayers, have trust in Allah, and turn to Allah for guidance and in times of need. Islamic beliefs also give individuals a meaningful interpretation of difficult events. The Quran clearly emphasizes that the difficulties in this world are to test the believers and also guides people to have patience in facing their problems. Several studies on religiosity and mental health among Muslim populations have been reported (Amer, Hovey, Fox, & RezcAllah, 2008; Husain, 1998; Loewenthal Cinnirella, Evdoka, & Morphy, 2001). In a qualitative study on elderly Malay Muslims, Mehta (1997) reported that elderly attributed their aging process and its accompanying decrements to the Will of Allah. Similarly, some respondents also mentioned reciting verses of the Holy Quran to overcome their headache. Hussain and Cochrane (2003) in a study on Muslim women with depression found that coping with their condition through religion was the most common strategy where they prayed for help and many offered prayers and read verses from the Holy Quran specifically to ask for protection from illness and symptoms. Some of them also simply resumed the obligatory five daily prayers that they had either stopped performing or did not have a feeling indicating a sincere need for help. Loewenthal et al. (2001) conducted a study on depressed people among Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, followers of other religions and non-religious people living in the UK and reported that Muslims believed more strongly than other faith groups in the efficacy of every form of religious activity in coping with depression. An overview of the related literature shows that most researches have been conducted on the relationship between religiosity, personal meaning, and mental health among people who live in the West particularly in the North America. With regards to lack of research on Muslims perception of personal meaning, the present study tries to enhance our knowledge about the perception of life meaning in a group of Muslims.

### *Objectives*

The aim of this research is to explore the perception towards life meaning of a group of practising Muslim students studying in England. The study also explores the relationship between the sense of personal meaning, psychological well-being, spirituality, and religiosity.

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## Hypothesis

It was hypothesized that a positive relationship would exist among personal meaning, psychological well-being, spirituality, and religiosity in practising Muslim students of England.

## Method

### Participants

Sixty Muslim students (39 men and 21 women) were recruited from the Prayer Room at the Universities of Southampton and Birmingham in the UK. Majority of the students had come from Islamic countries and were studying at the university. Their age ranged from 18 to 28 years with an average age of 22 years. Most participants were undergraduates.

### Measures

1. *Life Attitude Profile-Revised (LAP-R; Reker, 1999)*. This scale is intended to assess both the degree of meaning and purpose and the strength of motivation to find meaning and purpose in life. The LAP-R comprises 48 items, each subscale has 8 items and each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale of agreement, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Sub-scale scores range from 8 to 56. The scale consists of six sub-scales including Purpose (PU), Coherence (CO), Choice/Responsibility (C/R), Death Acceptance (DA), Existential Vacuum (EV), and Goal Seeking (GS). It also has two composite scales including Personal Meaning Index (PMI) and Existential Transcendence (ET). Reker (1999) has reported a Cronbach alpha ranging from 0.77 to 0.91 for different subscales. In addition, test-retest reliability has been reported to range from 0.77 to 0.90 for different subscales. The scale also have good concurrent validity with other valid personal meaning scales such as Purpose in Life (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964) ranging from .24 to .75.

2. *Sources of Meaning Profile-Revised scale (SOMP-R; Reker, 1996)*. This scale is designed to measure sources of meaning in life. This scale focuses on the various sources of meaning that individuals derive from their daily lives. It comprises 16 items and each source is rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all meaningful) to 7 (extremely meaningful). The scores of the scale range from 16 to 112 with a higher total score indicating that the person has a variety of meaningful sources in his/her life. The scale is divided into four meaning orientations (levels) including Self-Transcendence, Collectivism, Self-Preoccupation, and Individualism. Each subscale contains four items and their scores range from 4 to 28. The results of psychometric testing have shown an internal consistency ranging from .71 to .80 and test-retest reliability coefficient of .70 in Canada and Australia. The concurrent validity of the scale has been reported to be .34 (Prager, 1996; Reker, 1996).

3. *The Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff, 1989)*. This scale is used to assess the positive level of psychological well-being. A recent conceptualization of psychological well-being is the multi-dimensional model proposed by Ryff and Singer (1998). This scale includes six dimensions: Self-acceptance, Positive Relations with Others, Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Purpose in Life, and Personal Growth and has three different versions. For this study, 54-item scale was used and responses were made on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 6 (very strongly agree). Possible scores for each subscale ranges from 9 to 54. A high internal consistency ranging from .86 to .93 is reported for different dimensions of the scale (Ryff, 1989). Many studies have used this

scale and have reported a good validity (Kafka & Kozma, 2002; Van Dierendonck, 2004).

4. *Strength of Spiritual Belief Scale (King et al., 2001)*. This scale measures the degree to which a person holds strong spiritual beliefs. It is composed of 6 items on a 10-point Likert scale and scores range from 0 to 60. High scores in this measure indicate that a person holds strongly to his beliefs and these beliefs play a crucial role in his lives. The authors claim that this scale has been designed specifically to assess a wide range of spiritual beliefs not specific to any religion. King et al has reported Cronbach alpha of .89 and validity of .66 for this scale. In Iranian sample Cronbach alpha has been reported to be .84 and concurrent validity to be .76 (Aflakseir, 2007). A single-item scale was also used to assess the religiosity of the sample. The participant responded to item, "How important is religion in your daily life" and the answers ranged from 1 (nothing) to 6 (very important).

### Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed at the prayer room of the Universities and Muslim students were asked to complete the consent form and research measures. They were asked to send them back by post to the researchers using pre-paid envelopes. Nearly all students returned their completed questionnaires, but a few were excluded from the study because of missing data.

## Results

### Descriptive Findings

Mean and standard deviation on the six dimensions and two composite scales of LAP-R are presented in Table 1. Participants scored highest on Coherence ( $M = 45.07$ ,  $SD = 6.57$ ) followed by Goal Seeking ( $M = 42.0$ ,  $SD = 6.75$ ) and Purpose ( $M = 41.01$ ,  $SD = 6.35$ ) as they are near the upper limit of the scale, i.e., 56 and the lowest on Existential Vacuum ( $M = 27.08$ ,  $SD = 9.54$ ) followed by Death Acceptance ( $M = 30.17$ ,  $SD = 8.61$ ) and Choice/Responsibility ( $M = 37.03$ ,  $SD = 7.35$ ).

Table 2 presents mean and standard deviation of SOMP-R items. Taking part in religious activities ( $M = 6.45$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ) and engaging in personal relationships with family/friends ( $M = 6.42$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ) were ranked as the most important sources of personal meaning as their scores are near 7 which was the highest point in 7-point Likert scale. The least important sources of personal meaning were participation in hedonistic activities ( $M = 1.63$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) and acquiring material possession in order to enjoy good life ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ). In case of different levels of personal goals or meaning orientation the results indicated students to score highest on Self-transcendent ( $M = 24.84$ ,  $SD = 2.28$ ) and lowest on Self-preoccupation ( $M = 15.64$ ,  $SD = 2.88$ ) (Table 3).

The results of different subscales of Psychological Well-being Scale are presented in Table 4. The highest score is on Personal Gro-

Table 1  
*Mean and Standard Deviation of the Life Attitude Profile-Revised (N = 60)*

Dimensions	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Purpose	41.01	6.35
Coherence	45.07	6.57
Choice/Responsibility	37.05	7.35
Death Acceptance	30.17	8.61
Existential Vacuum	27.08	9.54
Goal Seeking	42.00	6.75
Personal Meaning Index	86.57	10.96
Existential Transcendence	86.25	23.11

Table 2  
Mean and Standard Deviation of Sources of Meaning Profile-Revised Items ( $N = 60$ )

Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Taking part in religious activities	6.45	0.97
Engaging in personal relationships with family/friends	6.42	0.79
Being of service to others	6.03	1.10
Preserving human values and ideals	5.93	0.96
Experiencing personal growth	5.93	1.08
Meeting basic, everyday needs	5.66	1.10
Interest in human rights (humanistic concerns)	5.57	1.03
Feeling financially secure	5.39	1.27
Interest in social causes	5.36	1.38
Leaving a legacy for the next generation	5.27	1.28
Taking part in creative needs	5.03	1.38
Preservation of culture and tradition	5.03	1.59
Being acknowledged for personal achievements	4.84	1.27
Participation in leisure activities	4.57	1.63
Acquiring material possession in order to enjoy the good life	3.00	1.63
Participation in "hedonistic" activities	1.63	1.27

Table 3  
Mean and Standard Deviation of Different Levels of Personal Goals ( $N = 60$ )

Levels of Personal Meaning	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Self-transcendence	24.84	2.28
Collectivism	21.16	3.62
Individualism	20.52	3.48
Self-preoccupation	15.64	2.88

Table 4  
Mean and Standard Deviation of Psychological Well-Being Scale ( $N = 60$ )

Subscales	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Positive Relation with Others	42.21	8.25
Autonomy	38.21	6.53
Environmental Mastery	37.45	5.93
Personal Growth	43.21	5.67
Self Acceptance	41.30	6.03

with ( $M = 43.21$ ,  $SD = 5.67$ ) followed by Positive Relation with Others ( $M = 42.21$ ,  $SD = 8.25$ ), Self-acceptance ( $M = 41.30$ ,  $SD = 6.03$ ), Autonomy ( $M = 38.21$ ,  $SD = 6.53$ ), and Environmental Mastery ( $M = 37.45$ ,  $SD = 5.93$ ). Participants mean on Strength of Spiritual Belief Scale was 54.6 ( $SD = 6.50$ ) which is a high score as it is near the upper limit of the scale, i.e., 69 and their mean on the

Table 5  
Correlation between Subscales of Life Attitude Profile-Revised, Psychological Well-Being Scale, Spirituality and Religiosity ( $N = 60$ )

	Environmental Mastery	Autonomy	Positive Relation	Self acceptance	Personal Growth	Spirituality	Religiosity
Purpose	.38*	.13	.42**	.40*	.40*	.32*	.35*
Coherence	.39*	.26	.68**	.20	.34*	.40*	.42**
Choice/Responsibility	.29	.03	.29	.18	.35*	.06	.09
Death Acceptance	.01	-.03	-.09	-.14	-.21	-.06	-.08
Existential vacuum	-.42**	-.62**	-.54**	-.63**	-.42**	-.45**	-.48**
Goal seeking	-.15	-.11	-.16	-.45**	.07	.13	.10
Personal Meaning	.43**	.18	.55**	.34*	.42**	.35*	.37*
Existential Transcendence	.54**	.50**	.66**	.59**	.53**	.47**	.45**

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

single-item scale (the importance of religion) was also high ( $M = 5.7$ ,  $SD = .76$ ).

#### Relationship between Personal Meaning, Psychological Well-being, Spirituality, and religiosity

Pearson product-moment correlation between subscales of Life Attitude Profile-Revised, Psychological Well-being, and Spirituality and Religiosity is given in Table 5. The results indicate significant positive correlation of Purpose with Environmental Mastery ( $r = .38$ ,  $p < .05$ ), Positive Relation with Others ( $r = .42$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Self-acceptance ( $r = .40$ ,  $p < .05$ ), Personal Growth ( $r = .40$ ,  $p < .05$ ), Spirituality ( $r = .32$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and Religiosity ( $r = .35$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Coherence is significantly positively correlated with Environmental Mastery ( $r = .39$ ,  $p < .05$ ), Positive Relation with Others ( $r = .68$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Personal Growth ( $r = .34$ ,  $p < .05$ ), Spirituality ( $r = .40$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and Religiosity ( $r = .42$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Choice/Responsibility only has significant positive correlation with Personal Growth ( $r = .35$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Existential Vacuum is significantly negatively correlated with all subscales of psychological well-being ranging from  $-.42$  to  $-.63$ . Goal seeking has significant negative correlation only with Self-acceptance ( $r = -.45$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Personal meaning index is significantly positively correlated with Environmental Mastery ( $r = .43$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Positive Relation with Others ( $r = .55$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Self-acceptance ( $r = .40$ ,  $p < .05$ ), Personal Growth ( $r = .42$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Spirituality ( $r = .35$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and Religiosity ( $r = .37$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Existential Transcendence has significant positive correlation with all subscales of psychological well-being and spirituality and religiosity ranging from  $.45$  to  $.66$ . Death acceptance has no significant relation with subscales of psychological well-being, spirituality and religiosity.

#### Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore the sense of life meaning among Muslim students living and studying in England and to see the relationship between personal meaning, psychological well-being, spirituality, and religiosity. The results of this study demonstrated that Muslim students who practiced their religion perceived their life meaningful. An interesting finding of this study was that Muslim students scored higher on Coherence component than Purpose dimension in the LAP-R. The items of this dimension (Coherence), e.g., "I have a clear understanding of the ultimate meaning of life" seems to be more related to existential meaning while the Purpose dimension, e.g., "in my life I have very clear goals and aims" is more related to situational meaning. Therefore, Muslim students seem to perceive their existential meaning. With regard to Death Acceptance respondents obtained lower scores. The reason for it is that some items of this subscale are in conflict with

Islamic teachings therefore, participants' scores on these items were lowest in the scale, e.g., death makes little difference to me one way or another, the thought of death seldom enters my mind. Islamic principles teach followers to think about death to avoid materialism and indifference towards death (Motahari, 1994). Therefore, low score on these items does not essentially mean they do not accept death as respondents mean on some of the items in Death Acceptance subscale was high. The lower score of students on Choice/Responsibility dimension may be also because some of its items do not correspond with Islamic teachings, e.g., "I know where my life is going in the future", "my life is in my hands and I am in control of it", "I determine what happens in my life". According to Islamic teachings, life is in Allah's hand and Allah determines our life.

With regard to the sources of personal meaning, the results were significantly different from the previous studies (Prager, 2001). Muslim students perceived Self-transcendence sources (sources that transcend the self and go beyond ego to encompass cosmic or ultimate meaning) to be more important than other sources of meaning such as Self-preoccupation. These results reflect that religious teachings may have a significant impact on the perception of Muslim students as there is an emphasis within Islamic literature on transcending sources of meaning. For example, many verses of Quran mention remembrance and patience. A research has shown that Muslim students practicing their religion have more personal meaning than Iranian students in UK (Aflakseir, 2007).

The results of the present study showed significant association between some dimensions of personal meaning, psychological well-being, spirituality, and religiosity. Therefore, the results support the research hypothesis. It was found that the dimensions Purpose, Coherence, Existential Vacuum, Personal Meaning Index, and Existential Transcendence of personal meaning were significantly associated with most components of psychological well-being (Environmental Mastery, Positive Relations, Self-acceptance, and Personal Growth) suggesting that if a person perceives his or her life to be meaningful then he or she would feel more psychologically well as compared to those who do not perceive their life meaningful which is consistent with previous researches (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Scannell et al., 2002; Steger & Kashdan, 2006). The reason that above mentioned dimensions of LAP-R are associated with most of the components of Psychological Well-being Scale may be that these dimensions are more interrelated constructs and they are considered as a part of the concept of meaning in most theories and they are also measured which assessing personal meaning, while the dimensions of Choice/Responsibility, Death Acceptance, and Goal Seeking seem to be less related to the concept of meaning (Antonovsky, 1994; Reker, 1999). Regarding the relation between some dimensions of personal meaning (Purpose, Coherence, Existential Vacuum, Personal Meaning Index, and Existential Transcendence), spirituality and religiosity, this study showed a significant positive association between them and Existential Vacuum had negative association with spirituality and religiosity. Previous researches have also indicated a positive relationship between personal meaning, spirituality and religiosity (Baumeister, 2005; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). The current study indicated that religion enhances meaning of life by providing unifying philosophy of life and serves as an integrating and stabilizing force that provides a framework for interpreting life's challenges and provides a resolution to difficult conditions. Furthermore, religion enhances meaning by offering more direct opportunities for control over life. The believer who is able to accept otherwise inexplicable events as being, "God's willing" may be satisfied with this form of interpretive control. Having a sense of meaning has an important impact on physical and psychological well-being as a coping mechanism particularly when individuals suffer and face challenging life events. Furthermore, meaning in life is a significant

cognitive construct and affects mental well-being and helps in effective adaptation to difficulties in life. The results of this study support previous research indicating a positive association between religiosity, personal meaning and mental health (Emmon, 2002). The findings of this study reflect the issue that Islamic teachings play an effective role in promotion of self-growth, self-acceptance, and other positive psychological well-being and that Muslims mainly drive personal meaning through religion and that Islamic belief system may provide a philosophical framework for followers to perceive the world and their life meaningful. Such research could provide a foundation for development of interventions based on religious beliefs targeted for individuals facing mental health problems.

### Limitations and Suggestions

There were several limitations in the current study. First one is concerned with the sample size of the study. A limited sample of 60 students is not sufficient for any generalization on Muslims. Furthermore, the sample was drawn from two universities, while it would be more acceptable and representative if the samples are recruited from numerous universities with students of diverse backgrounds. Future studies may consider comparing religiosity and sense of personal meaning between Muslims living in Western and in Islamic countries and gender can also be taken into account.

### Conclusion

The present study examined personal meaning among a group of Muslim students studying at the universities of UK. This preliminary study indicated that Muslim students practicing their religion had high sense of existential meaning. The participants also perceived self-transcendence sources of meaning as more important than other sources of meaning, e.g., self-preoccupation). This study also highlighted that participants with higher level of personal meaning had higher scores on different dimensions of psychological well-being such as Self-acceptance, Positive Relation with Others, Personal Growth, and Environmental Mastery. Furthermore, the results indicated that spirituality and religious beliefs were important components in constructing life meaning among this group.

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