

Does meaning protect against loneliness?

Exploring empirical studies and theory

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Does meaning protect against loneliness? Exploring empirical studies and theory

Summary

Research indicates that meaning in life is a protective factor for physical and mental health. Although loneliness is increasingly recognized as an important public health concern, no studies have investigated the potential of meaning in life to protect against loneliness. Based on an explorative interdisciplinary research strategy that comprises data from a cohort study, a strategic review of empirical literature and a conceptual analysis of the concept of meaning in life we explore the support for potential links between meaning in life and the protection against loneliness. We propose three different explanatory mechanisms; (i) that meaning in life promotes a positive orientation towards others, (ii) that meaning in life enhances interpersonal appeal, and (iii) that meaning in life promotes a better ability to cope with loneliness. Theoretically, we explore the idea that the value of meaning in life ultimately concerns a social need to contribute to the realization of value that, at least in principle, can be shared and recognized by others. When people realize the value of meaning in life, they partake in a community of shared values, which links them to a social world in a way that may protect against the feeling of loneliness. Jointly the analyses point to the need for prospective studies on the role of meaning in life as a protective factor against loneliness and a potential novel focus for loneliness interventions.

Key words

Meaning in life; Loneliness; Theory; Public Mental Health; Exploring empirical studies

Introduction

Meaning in life

In recent years, the concept of meaning in life has gained increasing attention within health and psychology research. This is mainly due to evidence that links meaning in life with physical health (Pinquart, 2002,

Boyle et al., 2009, Boyle et al., 2010) and indicators of well-being, psychological distress, and symptoms of depression (Steger et al., 2009b, Van der Heyden et al., 2015, Battersby and Phillips, 2016, Pinquart, 2002).

So far, meaning in life has been conceptualized and measured in various ways with no established consensus on the core conceptual dimensions. However, according to Steger and colleagues, there is an emergent consensus that meaning in life is a psychological experience referring to people's coherent comprehension of their selves and their lives including their actions and commitments, as well as their possession of a lifelong purpose (Steger et al., 2015). In addition, it has recently been proposed that meaning in life should be conceptualized with a third dimension of significance – alongside coherence and purpose - to capture the experience of the worthwhileness and value of one's life (Martela and Steger, 2016). While coherence and purpose refer to subjective qualities of meaning, the dimension of significance can be seen as an intersubjective dimension of meaning referring to values that can be recognized as valuable from various perspectives.

The three dimensions of meaning resonate with Antonovsky's groundbreaking work on "Sense of Coherence" who has inspired the health promotion community for decades. Sense of Coherence is a matter of (i) feeling confident that one's environment is structured and predictable, (ii) having the necessary resources to cope with the environment, and (iii) feeling that the challenges ahead are worthy of one's investment (Antonovsky, 1996). Hence, according to Antonovsky, the essence of the experience of meaning in life is to make sense of the world.

Public health research has investigated the role of meaning in life as a protective factor for physical and mental health. It has been found that those who report having more meaning in life express better self-rated health and higher quality of life than others (Battersby and Phillips, 2016, Brassai et al., 2012, Krause, 2007, Steger et al., 2009b). Prospective studies have shown that older adults who experience meaning in life live longer lives with a reduced risk of all-cause mortality (Boyle et al., 2009, Steptoe et al., 2015). They have also been found to demonstrate slower rates of cognitive decline and Alzheimer disease progression as well as a reduced risk of developing impairment in basic and instrumental activities and daily living (Pinquart, 2002, Boyle et al., 2010).

Studies among adolescents have found that meaning in life might be a protective factor against certain health risk behaviors and poor psychological health (Brassai et al., 2011). It has been shown that meaning in life is a stronger predictor for healthy eating and physical activity among adolescents than quality of life and self-rated health (Brassai et al., 2015). Adolescents high in meaning engage less often in behaviors such as smoking cigarettes or abusing substances, thereby reducing their risk to overall health, particularly over time (Steger et al., 2009a, Steger et al., 2015). The presence of meaning in life among adolescents has also been found to predict decreased suicidal thoughts and lower lifetime odds of suicide attempts (Kleiman and Beaver, 2013).

Loneliness

According to recent studies loneliness poses a significant public health problem with increased risk in terms of distress (depression and anxiety), suicidal thoughts, unhealthy behavior and increased health care utilization (Beutel et al., 2017). Chronic or persistent loneliness has been found to entail an increased risk of hypertension, high cholesterol levels, heart disease, fatigue, pain, sleep disorders and depression (Jaremka et al., 2014, Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010).

In the general population, the prevalence of frequent loneliness seems to be highest among adolescents and older adults (+75), although some variation in this pattern between nations has been demonstrated (Yang and Victor, 2011, Victor and Yang, 2012, Fokkema et al., 2012, Pinguart and Sorensen, 2001, Heinrich and Gullone, 2006). Within subgroups of a population the prevalence of loneliness has also been found to vary considerably with much higher levels among refugees, psychiatric patients and people who are unemployed (Meltzer et al., 2013, Strijk et al., 2011). Even though loneliness is a common emotional distress syndrome, which is associated with an increased risk of early mortality and a broad variety of physical and mental health issues, it still gets little attention in the training of health- and social care professionals and in public health more generally (Cacioppo et al., 2015).

Conceptually, loneliness has been defined as a negative emotional state that stems from a perceived mismatch between an individual's social needs and the quality of his or her social relations (Svendsen, 2017). On this conception, the experience of loneliness should be separated from social isolation. Empirical

studies have found that loneliness and social isolation are distinct categories which may occur independently, e.g. it is possible to feel lonely in a group of people and to be socially isolated without feeling lonely (Svendsen, 2017). Current research on loneliness emphasizes the significance of loneliness to our very nature as a social species (Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2012, Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010). The typical characteristics of loneliness, have been described as a strong sense of social pain (i.e. pain as a result of interpersonal rejection or loss), emptiness, unimportance and worthlessness (Weiss, 1973). Quantitative analyses have revealed three basic dimensions underlying loneliness, reflecting the degree of connection in three domains: intimate attachments (emotional loneliness), face-to-face relations (social loneliness), and social identities (lack of connection with a group or social entity beyond the level of particular individuals) (Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2012, Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010). These three dimensions are correlated, but statistically and functionally separable. Hence it is possible to demonstrate loneliness in one or two dimensions without the other(s). They have been identified in men as well as women; African Americans, Euro Americans, and Latino Americans; and in young adults as well as older adults in the USA (Hawkley et al., 2005) and in China (Hawkley et al., 2012).

Meaning in life and loneliness

Despite the emerging focus within public health on the role of meaning in life as a protective factor for health and well-being there has been virtually no attention to the role of meaning in life as a protection against loneliness. Previous research has almost exclusively focused on social relationships as one of the central causes of a sense of meaning in life (Lambert et al., 2013, Krause, 2007, Stillman et al., 2009, King and Geise, 2011). In several experimental studies, social support and closeness with others have been shown to be positively related to the sense of meaning in life. Using four studies, Lambert et al. (2013) showed that a relatively strong sense of belonging predicts people's perception of high levels of meaning in life (Lambert et al., 2013). Data from a longitudinal survey of older adults have suggested that greater anticipated help (i.e., the belief that others will provide assistance in the future if needed) and emotional support received from family members and close friends are associated with a deeper sense of meaning over time (Krause, 2007, Stavrova and Luhmann, 2016).

Conversely, in a few experimental studies, social exclusion has been found to lead to the loss of meaning in life. Using four studies, Stillman et al. (2009) found that social exclusion results in a perception of one's life as meaningless, and that the influence of exclusion on meaning is mediated by purpose, system of value, and positive self-worth (Stillman et al., 2009). In two studies it was found that being forgotten by friends and relatives results in lower meaning in life, and that being forgotten and deliberately being excluded had similar negative impacts on meaning in life (King and Geise, 2011, Stavrova and Luhmann, 2016).

Aim of this paper

While most previous studies have considered social relationships as a source of meaning in life, either positively or negatively, in this paper we explore the hypothesis that meaning in life can affect social relationships the other way around. Hence, we explore the idea that the relation between meaning and sociality is bidirectional such that deprivations in belonging not only result in low meaning, but also that low meaning may result in impaired social interactions or a feeling of loneliness. So far, empirical evidence for the latter is extremely scarce. To our knowledge, only one longitudinal study has specifically investigated the role of meaning in life as a predictor of social connectedness (Stavrova and Luhmann, 2016). In this study of 4963 middle-aged men and women it was found that individuals who evaluated their life as meaningful felt more connected to their community, family members, friends, and spouse or partner 10 years later, over and above the effects of life satisfaction (Stavrova and Luhmann, 2016). However, while the study investigated the effect of meaning in life on various aspects of social connectedness and social isolation (i.e. integration into local community, support from family and friends) it did not specifically explore the relation between meaning in life and perceived loneliness.

The aim of this paper is to explore and to substantiate the hypothesis that the presence of meaning in life may serve to protect against loneliness either through various mechanisms (instrumentally) or in its own right (intrinsically). The paper aims to develop a theoretical underpinning for future prospective studies on the role of meaning in life as a predictor of loneliness and a theoretical background for the development of novel interventions to protect against loneliness. A qualitative review has identified the main intervention strategies for the prevention of loneliness. These are all premised on the number and quality of social relations, i.e. the

enhancement of social support, the increase of opportunities for social contact, and the improvement of social skills and social cognition (Masi et al., 2011). However, if meaning in life protects against loneliness, interventions to prevent loneliness could also be premised on participants' sources of meaning in life as well as the promotion of social and structural determinants of meaning in life such as mechanisms for inclusion in societal activities and functions that can be recognized as valuable from various perspectives. Although such sources and determinants need further exploration, they are likely to vary according to social background, personality, level of education, life experience, as well as cultural and political context.

The paper uses a pluralistic, interdisciplinary research strategy that comprises data from a cohort study, a strategic review of empirical literature and a conceptual analysis of the concept of meaning in life. The paper is organized in three logically independent parts. In the first part we investigate the cross-sectional association between meaning in life and loneliness based on data from a prospective cohort study of 1672 middle-aged men and women. Based on a categorization of relevant studies, in the second part, we explore available empirical data for the idea that meaning in life through various mechanisms is *instrumental* in the protection against loneliness. In the third part of the paper we discuss the theoretical idea that meaning in life *intrinsically* protects against loneliness, i.e. that the presence of meaning in life *in itself* protects against loneliness because of the very nature of the value of meaning in life. The pluralistic research strategy has been adopted as the most adequate response to the present stage of our understanding of the relation between meaning in life and loneliness. As the aim of the paper is exploratory, we have found that it is important to use different research traditions to open the concepts and to identify avenues for more specific investigations in the future.

The association between meaning in life and loneliness

As a starting point we investigated the cross-sectional association between meaning in life and loneliness. Data were derived from all live-born singletons from the Copenhagen Perinatal Cohort (CPC), who participated in a 50-year follow-up examination (CAMP) in 2009 to 2011 (for a detailed description of CPC and CAMP, please refer to Lund et al., 2016 (Lund et al., 2016)). 1672 men and women (31.7 %)

participated in the follow-up examination and completed a questionnaire (median age 50.1) with information on meaning in life and loneliness (Lund et al., 2016).

Figure 1 presents the proportion of individuals with low, medium and high loneliness according to self-reported meaning in life. We found a weak, but significant negative correlation between meaning and loneliness (Spearman's rho: -0.25, $p < 0.001$) - i.e. the lower meaningfulness, the higher loneliness. Thus, 46% of individuals with a low meaning in life were found to have a high level of loneliness compared to only 9% of individuals with a high meaning in life. Conversely, 32% of individuals with a low meaning in life were found to have a low level of loneliness compared to 65% of individuals with a high meaning in life. Hence, the results of the empirical investigation showed that higher meaning in life was associated with lower levels of loneliness. Although the correlation between meaning and loneliness was weak, it was still significant.

[Insert Figure 1]

Descriptive results for meaningfulness showed that men and women did not differ significantly with regard to self-reported meaning in life. Individuals who reported low meaning in life were, however, significantly more likely than individuals who reported high meaning in life to have a shorter education, a lower occupational social class, a lower cognitive function and to have no children (data not shown).

Exploring instrumental links between meaning in life and loneliness

We turn now to explore available empirical data for the idea that meaning in life through various mechanisms is *instrumental* in the protection against loneliness. The analysis is not intended to represent a strict systematic review of the literature on this topic, although we have conducted our search of literature in a reasonably organized and logical fashion. In February 2019 we conducted Google Scholar, PubMed and Web of Science searches to explore the literature on “meaning in life” and “loneliness”, “social relations”, “social connectedness” and “social isolation”. In the search we combined “meaning in life” with each of the other terms (i.e. meaning in life and (loneliness or social relations or social connectedness or social isolation)). After removing irrelevant citations and those not in English, 28 citations remained. We then

excluded studies on social relations or social inclusion as a predictor of meaning in life in order to concentrate on studies on the social implications of meaning in life. 8 studies remained (Krause, 2007, Hawkey et al., 2005, Stavrova and Luhmann, 2016, Baumeister et al., 2013, Martos and Kopp, 2012, Stillman et al., 2011, Steger et al., 2008b, Steger et al., 2015). We analyzed these studies in terms of explanatory mechanisms between the presence of meaning in life and loneliness. This resulted in a categorization of the studies in three different mechanisms that might explain a possible link between the presence of meaning in life and the protection against loneliness; (i) that meaning in life promotes a positive orientation towards others, (ii) that meaning in life enhances interpersonal appeal, and (iii) that meaning in life promotes a better ability to cope with loneliness.

Positive orientation towards others

In previous studies, meaning in life has been found to promote a positive orientation towards others, which in turn may have loneliness-reducing implications. In the following we will discuss findings of previous studies in relation to the three dimensions underlying the typical characteristics of loneliness presented earlier; (i) intimate attachments (the perceived presence of someone in your life who serves as a nurturing confidant), (ii) face-to-face relations (the perceived presence of quality friendships or family connections), and (iii) social identities (the perceived presence of a meaningful connection with a group or social entity beyond the level of individuals, e.g. school, team, organization or nation) (Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2012, Hawkey and Cacioppo, 2010). A prospective study among 4963 middle-aged men and women found that meaning in life predicts a subjective sense of belonging to one's community (social identity) (Stavrova and Luhmann, 2016). The study also found that meaning in life predicts a willingness to contribute to one's community by actively participating in voluntary associations, such as neighborhood watch, voluntary services groups, or any other voluntary or civic associations (social identity and face-to-face relations). Individuals with a strong sense of meaning in life had a higher likelihood of getting married (intimate attachments) and a lower risk of marital separation, if they were satisfied with their marriages (Stavrova and Luhmann, 2016). This may be explained by a more frequent marital maintenance behavior among people with higher meaning in life. This could be related to a stronger sense of agency, future orientation, and approach motivation (i.e. the tendency to

approach and maintain contact with others) which has been shown to be typical for individuals who score high in the presence of meaning in life (Stavrova and Luhmann, 2016, Baumeister et al., 2013, Steger et al., 2008b).

Individuals who find life meaningful might also be more likely to set goals related to social relationships thereby making social relationships gain in importance relative to other goals (Stavrova and Luhmann, 2016, Martos and Kopp, 2012). The stronger approach motivation found to be typical of people with a strong sense of meaning in life might facilitate acting on these goals and engaging in behaviors aimed at increasing social connectedness such as approaching new people, maintaining existing connections, starting a romantic relationship, or joining larger groups or associations (Steger et al., 2008b). Studies have shown that people who scored high on meaning in life put forth more time and effort into maintaining close relationships (intimate attachments) relative to those with low meaning in life scores (Stillman et al., 2011, Steger et al., 2008a). It has also been proposed that the presence of meaning in life provides the impetus to take care of one's self – including one's social relations - because one has a life worth taking care of (Steger et al., 2015, Ryff and Singer, 1998).

If we connect the results of existing empirical studies with the three dimensions underlying the typical expression of loneliness, there seems to be some evidence for a link between meaning in life and the protection against loneliness through the various social effects of having a strong sense of meaning in life. E.g. a higher likelihood of getting married (i.e. to form intimate attachments), a higher likelihood of approaching new people and maintaining existing connections (i.e. to have face-to-face relations), and a higher likelihood of contributing to one's community (i.e. to have a social identity). Interestingly, a population-based study of middle-aged and older adults found that the best predictor of intimate attachment was indeed marital status: married participants were, on average, lower in intimate or emotional loneliness than participants who were unmarried (Hawkley et al., 2005). It was also found that the best predictor of face-to-face relations was the frequency of contact with friends and family, while the best predictor of social identity was found to be the number of voluntary groups or associations to which participants belonged (Hawkley et al., 2005).

Interpersonal appeal

A different mechanism that might explain a possible link between the presence of meaning in life and the protection against loneliness concerns the connection between meaning in life and interpersonal appeal. The term interpersonal appeal or *magnetic personality* refers to individuals with whom others seek affiliation and social interaction. Hence, if individuals who find their life meaningful attract other people because they are perceived as more attractive and more appealing, this may in turn improve their chances of intimate attachments, face-to-face relations, and perhaps also social identities, thereby providing protection against the three typical characteristics of loneliness (Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2012).

In several experiments Stillman et al. demonstrated that people who find life meaningful were rated as more likeable and more desirable as interaction partners than people who scored low in meaning (Stillman et al., 2011). Those who reported a strong sense of meaning in life were also rated as more likeable and better potential friends. Moreover, the influence of meaning in life was beyond that of several other potentially relevant variables, including self-esteem, happiness, and the personality traits of extraversion and agreeableness. Interestingly, in the study the presence of meaning in life was particularly found to contribute to greater interpersonal appeal for those of low and average physical attractiveness. Although these results have not been replicated elsewhere the findings indicate that meaning in life is a powerful and independent predictor of interpersonal appeal, and that people seek interpersonal connections with those who have found meaning in life (Stillman et al., 2011).

Ability to cope with loneliness

Finally, a third mechanism that might explain a possible link between the presence of meaning in life and the protection against loneliness concerns the idea that meaning promotes a better ability to cope with loneliness. The idea is that the presence of meaning in life may act as a kind of buffer against the experience of loneliness – even under conditions with a higher likelihood of loneliness e.g. absence of intimate attachments, lack of face-to-face relations or the absence of a meaningful connection with a group or social entity. So far, this idea has very little empirical support. It is derived by extrapolation from previous studies which have shown that meaning in life strengthens the ability to cope with stress and other health threats

(Krause, 2007, Steger et al., 2008b, Steger et al., 2015). So far, it has not been investigated whether meaning in life also strengthens the ability to cope with conditions that facilitate loneliness.

To sum up, we have examined three different mechanisms that might explain a possible instrumental link between the presence of meaning in life and the protection against loneliness; i.e. that meaning in life might influence how individuals act around others (whether they seek others' companionship or not), that it might influence how others act around them (seek to affiliate with them or not), and finally that it might influence their ability to cope with loneliness or to cope with conditions that otherwise would be likely to provoke a feeling of loneliness. As a final step, we will now investigate the theoretical idea that the presence of meaning in life protects against loneliness because of *intrinsic* properties related to the *constitutive nature* of the value of meaning in life.

A theoretical link between meaning in life and loneliness

Over time philosophers and theologians have mainly been concerned about the metaphysical question about the meaning *of* life. Philosophers have mainly considered the question of meaning (or lack of meaning) of life in existentialist and structural terms (Sartre, 2014, Nietzsche, 2015, Schopenhauer, 2012, Marx, 2008, Hegel, 2017). Theologians have mainly explored meaning of life in spiritual, religious terms (Cottingham, 2003, Emmons, 2005, Meraviglia, 1999). One significant exception is the contemporary philosopher Susan Wolf who discusses the value of meaning *in* life. She argues that meaning in life has an intrinsic value, which can neither be reduced to the value of happiness (self-interest) nor to the value of morality (doing what is morally good) (Wolf, 2010, Wolf, 1997, Wolf, 2016). According to Wolf, meaning in life consists of actively engaging in projects of worth e.g. taking care of others, writing a poem, fighting injustice etc. For someone to have a meaningful life they must be subjectively engaged in projects or activities that positively contribute to something, the value of which has its source outside the subject, and is (at least in part) independent of the subject's attitude to it (Wolf, 2010, Wolf, 2016). Hence, on this conception the value of meaning in life requires that a subjective and an objective condition are met.

In considering this definition, it is important to bear in mind that the philosophical objective differs from the objective of theorists like Antonovsky whose important work on “Sense of Coherence” links the idea of meaning in life to the experience that the world makes sense, i.e. that it is comprehensible and coherent (Antonovsky, 1987, Antonovsky, 1996). Hence, what Antonovsky provides is a description of the experience of meaning in life, i.e. what the psychological experience of meaning in life consists of and what it takes to obtain this experience (feeling confident that one’s environment is structured and predictable, having the necessary resources to cope with the environment, and feeling that the challenges ahead are worthy of one’s investment).

In contrast, Wolf’s objective is evaluative, i.e. it is not to describe *the psychological state* of meaning in life but to capture *the value* of meaning in life, and to do this in a way that justifies the role and importance meaningfulness typically plays in our lives. Hence Wolf’s focus is not on the *experience of* meaning in life but on the *realization of the value of* meaning in life (Wolf, 2010):

“Our interest in living a meaningful life is not an interest in a life feeling a certain way, but rather an interest that it be a certain way. [...] That it be a life that contributes to or realizes or connects in some positive way with independent value. We do not satisfy those interests simply by thinking or feeling that they are satisfied any more than we can satisfy our interest in not being alone by thinking or feeling that we are not alone.” (p. 32).

Wolf’s referral to objectivity of value has been met with criticism for being elitist (Wolf, 2016). In clarifying her view, she has argued that there is no such thing as an authority who has the expertise to determine what has objective value and how to apply this idea. One can recognize the objectivity of value while remaining humble about one’s limited ability to point out what has value and while also recognizing that our attempts to define things or activities of objective worth will always be timebound, partial and tentative (Wolf, 2010). We bring attention to Wolf’s work because it provides an understanding of the value of meaning in life, which not only explains why the experience of meaning in life seems so important to many of us, but also provides a theoretical link between the value of meaning in life and the concept of loneliness. As observed before, people have a social need to find meaning in life (Frankl, 2014, Frankl, 1985, Stavrova and

Luhmann, 2016, Hicks et al., 2010, Stillman et al., 2011, Antonovsky, 1987). We know from empirical studies that people are likely to fulfil their need for meaning through their relationships with other people (Baumeister, 2005, Stillman et al., 2011). The philosophical analysis of meaning adds further perspective through the understanding of the need for meaning as a desire not to be alone in a more fundamental sense, i.e. a need to contribute to the realization of value that, at least in principle, can be shared and recognized by others. When we are engaged in projects of value in this sense, e.g. taking care of others, educating children, preserving nature etc., then presumably others will be able to appreciate what we are doing too, or they may at least appreciate the same values as the ones that motivate us.

According to Wolf, the strength of that need and the strong feeling that can accompany it is deeply related to our social natures and fulfils a somewhat abstract, existential desire not to be alone in the world (Wolf, 2010). Wolf's referral to meaning as a fundamental social need comes close to research on loneliness, presented earlier, that emphasizes the significance of loneliness to our very nature as a social species – especially the dimension of loneliness referred to as “social identity”, i.e. the perceived presence of a meaningful connection with a group or social entity beyond the level of particular individuals (Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2012, Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010). To realize the value of meaning in life may qualify as an instance of social identity, i.e. to identify with a social community that share the same values and commitments.

Hence, on Wolf's conception the value of meaning in life can be seen as intrinsically linked to one of the three dimensions of the concept of loneliness. When people truly realize the value of meaning in life they are protected against at least one dimension of loneliness because they partake in a social identity, i.e. a social community of shared values that can be recognized from an external point of view.

This is very different from the idea discussed earlier that meaning in life promotes a better ability to cope with loneliness. On this idea meaning in life is *instrumental* in that it promotes an ability to cope that makes it easier to stand loneliness. Imagine a dedicated and famous pianist who, because of fierce competition, needs to practice long hours every day. She is lonely because her career does not allow for intimate social relations. However, the importance of her music and the meaning she attaches to it compensates her

loneliness – it promotes her ability to cope with the lonely conditions of her life. The theoretical idea about the value of meaning in life is markedly different. On this conception, meaning in life protects against at least one dimension of loneliness because of *intrinsic* properties. The dedicated pianist may not feel lonely - withstand her solitude – because she, *through the realization of the value of meaning in life*, takes part in a social community who shares the value she attaches to the creation of music.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have found a significant association between meaning in life and loneliness among a representative sample of middle-aged men and women. Although causality cannot be inferred from the analysis, the finding is interesting because it invites prospective studies on the role of meaning in life as a predictor of loneliness.

We have also proposed three different mechanisms that might explain a possible link between the presence of meaning in life and the protection against loneliness; (i) that meaning in life promotes a positive orientation towards others, (ii) that meaning in life enhances interpersonal appeal, and (iii) that meaning in life promotes a better ability to cope with loneliness. As indicated, the three mechanisms have only been sparsely investigated – indeed they may all be true (or false). Hence, it would be interesting with further empirical studies to explore the relation between the three dimensions of meaning in life (coherence, purpose and significance) and the typical characteristics of loneliness.

Theoretically, we have examined the idea that the value of meaning in life ultimately concerns a social need to see one's life as valuable in a way that can be recognized from an external point of view. When people realize the value of meaning in life, they are part of a community of shared values, which links them to a social world in a way that intrinsically may protect against the feeling of loneliness.

Thus, our analyses indicate that meaning in life may serve to protect against loneliness through various mechanisms. The article points to a novel focus for loneliness intervention. Our theoretical analysis suggests that loneliness preventing interventions should not only be premised on the number and quality of social

relations but also on participants' sources of meaning in life as well as the promotion of the social and structural determinants of meaning in life.

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