



Research Paper: Two Studies on the Meaning of Life and Aspirations from the Perspective of the Elderly



Sara Yousefi\*<sup>1</sup>, Milad SabzehAra Langaroudi<sup>2</sup>, Masoume Maleki Pirbazari<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> M. A. in Personality Psychology, Department of Psychology, Rahman Institute of Higher Education, Ramsar, Iran

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Rahman Institute of Higher Education, Ramsar, Iran

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**Abstract**

**Objective:** The present study was conducted in two studies with the aim of investigating the meaning of life and aspirations from the perspective of the elderly.

**Methods:** The first study was conducted with a qualitative approach and phenomenological method, and the second study was conducted with a quantitative approach and descriptive-survey method. The participants in both studies were the elderly in Rasht in 2024. In the first study, 10 of them were selected based on theoretical saturation of data and by a purposeful method and underwent semi-structured interviews. In the second study, 100 of them were selected by a convenience sampling method and responded to the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) and the Aspiration Index (AI).

**Finding:** In the first study, the analysis of the interviews using the Colaizzi's method indicated three main themes of safety, self-transcendence, and love and affection, and nine sub-themes. The main theme of safety included the sub-themes of physical health, recreation and mental vitality, security, peace, and financial independence. The main theme of self-transcendence included sub-themes of satisfaction and personal growth. The main theme of love and affection included sub-themes of constructive interaction with others and happiness of others. Also, in the second study, consistent with the findings of the first study, it was observed that the elderly tend towards intrinsic aspirations and self-transcendence, such as maintaining health, seeking connection, spirituality, and social cooperation. No difference was observed between the two groups in terms of gender in the meaning of life and desires ( $P > 0.05$ ).

**Conclusion:** Based on the findings, it can be concluded that it seems that with increasing age and entering the old age period, having a sense of inner satisfaction and wishing for the happiness of others takes priority.

\* Corresponding author:

Sara Yousefi

Address: Psychology Department, Rahman Institute of Higher Education, Ramsar, Iran

Tel: +98 (938) 7353152

E-mail: [yoosefi.saara@gmail.com](mailto:yoosefi.saara@gmail.com)



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## 1. Introduction

Old age is one of the fundamental periods in life that is accompanied by a decrease in physical and mental capacity (Novak, 2018). During this period, social relationships become more limited and the elderly participate in fewer social activities than before, as a result, the possibility of using social support is also lost (Eskelinen et al., 2016). In this regard, Akhter-Khan et al. (2023) studied the concept of loneliness among the elderly and showed that social availability, contact, receiving care and support, intimacy and understanding, shared pleasure and interests, productivity and participation and respect are very important from the perspective of the elderly. Bereavement, retirement, loss of a life partner and a decrease in physical ability lead the elderly to isolation, which is very painful (Whelen et al., 2016). The occurrence of these unfortunate events exposes the elderly to psychological distress (Bergmana et al., 2018).

The greatest feeling a human being can experience is that life has meaning or purpose (Yalom, 2020). Meaning in life is a cognitive system that includes physical, psychological, social, and religious dimensions and is formed individually (Krause and Rainville, 2020). Meaning in life influences the choice of activities and goals and gives life a sense of purpose, personal value, and fulfillment (Wnuk et al., 2012). Meaning in life varies across the lifespan, with some suggesting that life events and increasing age change a person's understanding of the meaning of life, while others believe that older age increases a person's sense of the meaning of

life (Schnell, 2009). Although meaning in life is essential at all stages of life, Erikson's theory of psychosocial development emphasizes the importance of meaning in life during old age and assumes that in the eighth stage, older people face an integration crisis versus despair about whether their lives are meaningful (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022).

Today's societies have stereotypical images of loneliness and meaninglessness in old age, which cause older people to have a negative view of the future (Laceulle & Baars, 2014). Physical, social, and psychological impairments in old age also deprive older people of important sources of meaning in their lives (Baumeister, 1991). In addition, loneliness caused by age also causes a loss of meaning in life (Derckx et al., 2019; Sjöberg et al., 2018). Meaning in life is a protective factor in promoting resilience to the adversities that older adults face (Ryff & Singer, 1998). The search for meaning in life allows older adults to cope with the challenges that have come their way over the years, to transform adversities into moments of human growth and disappointments into well-being, and ultimately to contribute to the transformation of their personal lives. Positive relationships, such as family, romantic partners, and friends, have been shown to be the most important source of meaning in life for older adults (Machielse, 2024).

In general, the developmental characteristics of aging make this period of life a distinct period in the field of meaning of life. We need to know from what sources the sense of meaning of life is provided and, in other words, what areas and factors give

meaning to an individual's life in the aging period (Ahmadi et al., 2017). Studies conducted in this field have shown a correlation between meaning of life and physical health, emotional adjustment (Isaia et al., 1999), and depression (Zhang et al., 2024; Volkert et al., 2019) in the elderly. Also, meaning of life leads to greater participation of the elderly in physical activities (Ju, 2017) and has consequences for the quality of life of the elderly, such as longevity and well-being (Takkinen & Ruoppila, 2001). In studies, the meaning of life has been associated with physical health, positive attitudes towards others, physical activity, interaction with others, high socioeconomic level, personal relationships, activities and a sense of control, a sense of coherence and enthusiasm for life (Ju, 2017; Takkinen & Ruoppila, 2001; Zhao & Yin, 2024). Therefore, considering the limitations of old age, the presence of meaning in the lives of the elderly is an important factor for continuing to live.

On the other hand, aspiration is a conscious or unconscious tendency to obtain a desired object (Kasser & Ryan, 2001). Human aspirations to some extent reflect the cultural and economic conditions of society and also reflect the thoughts of individuals in society and their mindset towards the future. Therefore, understanding aspirations helps to understand today's society and predict the future (Brdar et al., 2009). As the elderly age, they withdraw from some activities and their physical capacities decrease, which leads to the individual's incompatibility with the situation and even with themselves. Having a lifelong aspiration and goal is positively

related to mental health, because it makes the present and past life meaningful and strengthens the ability to cope with sources of stress (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 2001). One of the characteristics of healthy people is having goals, plans, and aspirations for their future and trying to achieve these goals and aspirations. It has been shown that people's aspirations and values change over time. For example, Ab Hamid et al. (2021) and Morgan and Robinson (2013) showed that most elderly people have strong family values and prefer relationships with family members and helping others over other aspirations.

Considering the above-mentioned material and the limited amount of domestic and foreign research on the meaning of life and aspirations from the perspective of the elderly, the present study was conducted in two studies with the aim of investigating the meaning of life and aspirations from the perspective of the elderly.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Statistical Population, Sample, and Sampling Method

The research method in the first study was qualitative and phenomenological, and in the second study, quantitative and descriptive-survey. The participants in the first study were ten elderly people from Rasht in 2024 who were selected through purposive sampling (taking into account criteria such as being at least 60 years old, willing to participate in the research, living in their own home, and not having severe physical or mental illnesses) and were selected until theoretical saturation of the data. In the second study, 100 elderly people were

selected through convenience sampling. In the first study, semi-structured interviews were used.

## 2.2. Instrument

**Semi-Structured interview:** A semi-structured interview is a method that combines a set of open-ended and predetermined questions that encourage discussion. The interviews lasted between 38 and 94 minutes. Some of the interview questions were: What do you see as the meaning of life? In your opinion, what is life for? What gives meaning to your life? What values and aspirations are you looking for? What aspirations are worth living for? What values should young people look for in life? The following questionnaires were used in the second study:

**Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006):** The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006) measures two dimensions of meaning in life, namely the presence of meaning and the search for meaning, using 10 items based on a seven-point Likert scale from completely false (1) to completely true (7). The questionnaire takes approximately 3-5 minutes to complete. Research indicates the reliability and stability of the questionnaire scores and its convergent and convergent validity (Steger & Kashdan, 2007; Steger et al., 2006; Steger et al., 2008). For example, both subscales have been reported to have very good internal consistency (alpha coefficients between 82% and 87%) (Steger et al., 2006) and have achieved good test-retest reliability (70% for the presence subscale and 0.73 for the search subscale) at a one-month interval (Steger et

al., 2006). The scoring key for the questionnaire is that items 1, 5, 4, 6, and 9 are assigned to the presence subscale. To score this subscale, subtract the rating for item 9 from the rating for item 8 and then add it to the ratings for items 1, 5, 4, and 6. The range of scores is from 5 to 35. Items 2, 3, 7, 8, and 10 are assigned to the search subscale. To score this subscale, add the ratings for these items together. The range of scores is from 5 to 35. It is up to 35.

**Aspiration Index (AI; Grouzet et al., 2005):** The initial version of the Aspiration Index had 105 items and was developed by Kasser and Ryan (1996). This index consists of two second-level factors (intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations), the intrinsic aspirations factor consisting of four first-order factors (personal growth, intimate and committed relationships with others, social cooperation and collaboration, and maintaining physical health) and the extrinsic aspirations factor consisting of three first-order factors (wealth, fame, and image). Respondents were asked to answer questions related to these seven desires on a 7-point Likert scale (1=not at all, 7=very much). Kasser and Ryan (1996) found internal consistency for the importance and likelihood of achieving intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations to be 0.59, 0.87, 0.68, and 0.86 in two studies. In the study of SabzehAra Langaroudi et al. (2014), in addition to examining the factor structure and convergent and divergent validity of the index in Iranian culture, the internal

consistency of the importance, probability of achievement, and degree of achievement of intrinsic aspirations was reported to be 0.86, 0.87, and 0.88, respectively, and the importance, probability of achievement, and degree of achievement of extrinsic aspirations were reported to be 0.87, 0.84, and 0.84, respectively. Grouzet et al. (2005) studied 1,854 students from 15 different cultures, examining 7 previous desires that were in the two intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions, along with 4 new goals, with the goals of further generalizing intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations in cultures with different social and economic characteristics, identifying further distinctions between intrinsic and extrinsic goals, and identifying goals and dimensions beyond the 7 aspirations and 2 intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions presented in the Aspirations Index (1996). In the Aspirations Index (2005), which consists of 47 items, the respondent is presented with 11 aspirations in two bipolar dimensions, intrinsic-extrinsic and self-self-transcendence, and must rate the importance of each goal on a 9-point scale (1 = not at all, 9 = extremely). 8 aspirations are adapted from previous studies and measure the domains of financial success (4 items), image (5 items), fame (4 items), self-acceptance (8 items), affiliation (6 items), social feeling (4 items), physical health (5 items), and spirituality (6 items). However, 3 new goals have also been created, which

include conformity (5 items), security (5 items), and hedonism (5 items). In the study by Grouzet et al (2005), in addition to confirming the internal consistency of the factors, it was shown by extracting 47 items that the previous 7 aspirations were still placed in the two intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions, although the aspiration for social cooperation, in addition to being placed in the intrinsic dimension, showed a tendency towards the self-transcendence dimension. While the two aspirations for health and financial success, in addition to being placed in the intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions, showed a tendency towards the physical-self dimension. Among the 4 new aspirations, the spirituality was placed in the self-transcendence dimension and the hedonism was placed in the physical-self dimension, the security also showed a tendency towards the intrinsic and physical-self dimensions, and the conformity also showed a tendency towards the external and self-transcendence dimensions. In the study by SabzehAra Langaroudi et al. (2015), the internal consistency of the importance and probability of achieving extrinsic aspirations was 0.87 and 0.88, the importance and probability of achieving intrinsic aspirations was 0.90 and 0.90, the importance and probability of achieving physical-self aspirations was 0.84 and 0.83, and the importance and probability of achieving self-transcendence aspirations was 0.92 and 0.91.

### 3. Results

The information of the participants in the first study is presented in [Table 1](#).

Table 1

*Demographic information of the participants in the first study*

Rank	Gender	Age	Marital status	Education level
1	Male	67	Married	Master's degree
2	Male	64	Married	Ph.D.
3	Female	65	Widowed	Ph.D.
4	Female	66	Married	Bachelor's degree
5	Female	66	Married	Master's degree
6	Female	71	Widowed	Diploma
7	Male	70	Married	Bachelor's degree
8	Female	64	Married	Bachelor's degree
9	Female	65	Married	Bachelor's degree
10	Male	88	Widowed	Below diploma

The mean age of the sample members in the second study was 67.52 with a standard deviation of 4.21. The frequency and

percentage frequency of the sample members by gender are presented in [Table 2](#).

Table 2

*Frequency and percentage of gender of sample members in the second study*

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	79	79
Male	21	21
Total	100	100

The findings from the coding of the interviews using the Colaizzi's method indicated three main themes of health, self-transcendence, and love and affection, and nine sub-themes. The main theme of being safe included the sub-themes of physical health, recreation and mental vitality, security, peace, and financial independence.

The main theme of self-transcendence included the sub-themes of satisfaction and personal growth. The main theme of love and affection included the sub-themes of constructive interaction with others and the happiness of others. The main and sub-themes are presented in [Table 3](#).

Table 3

*Main and sub-themes derived from the analysis of interviews in the first study*

Main themes	Sub-themes				
Safety	Physical health	Recreation and mental vitality	Security	Peace	Financial independence
Self-transcendence	satisfaction	personal growth			
Love and affection	Constructive interaction with others	Happiness of others			

The following are some of the statements that the participants made as examples.

#### *Safety*

Physical health: Participant number 4 said: “To be calm and to take great care of my health.”

recreation and mental vitality: Participant number 1 said: “The wish for a better and happier future and a more comfortable life.”

Security: Participant number 3 said: “The meaning of life for me is to have a sense of peace and mental security.”

Peace: Participant number 4 said: “Success, happiness, health and peace of my loved ones.”

Financial Independence: Participant No. 5 said: “To have financial independence.”

Participant No. 6 said: “I wish everyone health and wealth...”

#### *Self-transcendence*

Satisfaction: Participant No. 1 said: “We must satisfy ourselves to the extent of our needs. Perhaps those who have achieved their desires and wishes overnight have perished.”

Personal Growth: Participant No. 1 said: “Seeking knowledge and freedom from materialistic regrets and being satisfied.”

#### *Love and Affection*

Constructive Interaction with Others: Participant No. 5 said: “The meaning of life depends on the way people look at and experience it. For me, life with new experiences, communication and constructive interaction with other people is meaningful. That with the help of others we can build a better world and also gain a sense of satisfaction.”

Happiness of Others: Participant No. 2 said: “Currently, my wish includes my family and society. My children’s increasing success in their academic, career, and personal lives. I wish the best, health and happiness to the people and youth of my country. May prosperity and security be provided in all areas.”

The mean and standard deviation of the meaning of life and aspirations are presented in [Table 4](#).

Table 4

*Mean and standard deviation of meaning of life and desires in the second study*

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Meaning in life	65.08	3.48
Financial success	19.02	0.89
Image	14.06	1.67
Fame	11.05	0.96
Self-acceptance	28.03	1.47
Affiliation	29.06	0.85
Social feeling	31.01	0.87
Physical health	33.07	1.76
Spirituality	30.02	0.91
Conformity	13.06	1.60
Security	24.04	0.85
Hedonism	15.01	1.76
Extrinsic aspirations	35.04	4.30
Intrinsic aspirations	82.02	2.58
Physical-self aspirations	41.98	3.74
Self-transcendence aspirations	93.50	2.46

As can be seen in Table 4, the mean of meaning in life in the elderly is above average. Among the aspirations, the mean of the aspirations for self-acceptance, affiliation, social feeling, physical health, spirituality and security, and the category of Intrinsic aspirations and self-transcendence are also above average. This shows that the elderly are looking for meaning in life and tend more towards aspirations that are in line

with personal growth, spirituality and supporting others. These quantitative findings are in line with the qualitative findings obtained in the first study.

The two-sample t-test to examine the differences between male and female elderly in the meaning of life and aspirations is presented in Table 5.

Table 5

*Two-sample t-test to examine the differences between male and female elderly people in the meaning in life and aspirations*

Variable	Group	Mean	T	Significance level
Meaning in life	Women	67.08	0.39	0.21
	Men	64.01		
Financial success	Women	20.86	0.42	0.19
	Men	27.18		
image	Women	20.67	1.27	0.10
	Men	11.02		
Fame	Women	10.34	0.86	0.15
	Men	15.67		
Self-acceptance	Women	29.41	0.49	0.17

Affiliation	Men	26.49	0.34	0.23
	Women	31.43		
Social feeling	Men	24.26	0.40	0.18
	Women	35.14		
Physical health	Men	29.07	1/17	0.13
	Women	35.93		
spirituality	Men	34.46	0.09	0.37
	Women	31.11		
Conformity	Men	29.71	0.17	0.33
	Women	17.01		
security	Men	14.38	0.36	0.21
	Women	25.69		
Hedonism	Men	23.52	1.15	0.13
	Women	10.87		
Extrinsic aspirations	Men	16.37	0.50	0.16
	Women	36.15		
Intrinsic aspirations	Men	34.27	1.43	0.08
	Women	84.23		
Physical-self aspirations	Men	81.47	1.94	0.06
	Women	47.29		
Self-transcendence aspirations	Men	40.55	0.75	0.12
	Women	94.359		
	Men	98.37		

As can be seen in Table 5, there is no significant difference between the two genders in terms of meaning of life and aspirations.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings obtained in the first study indicated three main themes of health, self-transcendence, and love and affection, and nine sub-themes. The main theme of safety included the sub-themes of physical health, recreation and mental vitality, security, peace, and financial independence. The main theme of self-transcendence included the sub-themes of satisfaction and personal growth. The main theme of love and affection included the sub-themes of constructive interaction with others and the happiness of others. In the second study, it was also

observed that the average of the meaning in life in the elderly is higher than the average. Among the aspirations, the average of the aspirations for self-acceptance, affiliation, social feeling, physical health, spirituality, and security, and the category of intrinsic aspirations and self-transcendence are higher than the average. This indicates that the elderly are looking for the meaning in life and are more inclined towards aspirations that are in line with personal growth, spirituality, and support for others. These quantitative findings are in accordance with the qualitative findings obtained in the first study.

This finding is consistent with the research of [Abedi et al. \(2016\)](#), [SabzehAra Langaroudi et al. \(2014\)](#), [Ahmadi et al.](#)

(2017), Orang et al. (2018), Ghadampour et al. (2018), Mohamadpour et al. (2019), Tayefi Nasrabadi et al. (2020), Mohammadpour et al. (2019), Hassanzadeh (2020), Romero et al. (2012), Visser and Pozzebon (2013), Takuma and Takashi (2015), Musich et al. (2018), Krause and Rainville (2020), Vanessa Alonso et al. (2023), Ayhan (2023), Shi et al. (2023), Ayunin and Putri (2024), and Zhang et al. (2024). For example, Orang et al. (2018) studied the meaning of life and psychological well-being in three groups: youth, adults, and the elderly, and showed that age can increase the meaning of life and psychological well-being. These researchers concluded that old age can be considered a period of self-reflection and self-evaluation, and that it can be considered a continuation of life, a time of growth, prosperity, and peace. Mohamadpour et al. (2019) studied the analysis of the components of meaning of life in the elderly and came to 4 final themes: spiritual transcendence, attention and importance to oneself, exchange of love, and social dynamics. Tayefi Nasrabadi et al. (2019) studied the meaning of life of elderly people living in nursing homes and came to 11 main categories: belief in God and the afterlife, entertainment, life before marriage, life after marriage, communication, pleasures, dealing with the new generation, concerns, hopes, health, and definition of life. Mohammadpour et al. (2019) analyzed the meaning of life in the elderly and found four main themes: spiritual elevation, self-care, love exchange, and social dynamics. Musich et al. (2018) found that elderly people with high purposefulness were significantly less

likely to need to spend money on health care and also had a higher quality of life. Purposefulness in life was also strongly associated with physical and mental health in older adults. Krause and Rainville (2020) showed that for Muslims, social support acts as a mediating variable between aging and meaning in life, and finding a sense of meaning in life can be facilitated by the presence of social networks supporting older people. Ayhan (2023) showed that there was no significant difference between hopelessness, self-efficacy, and meaning in life in the perspectives of elderly women and men. There was also a negative relationship and a significant difference between hopelessness of the elderly and their perception of the meaning of life. Ayunin and Putri (2024) conducted a qualitative study to examine the concept of meaning in life among the elderly in Indonesia and showed that the elderly have a meaningful life. Zhang et al. (2024) also showed in their study that the meaning of life among the elderly is at a medium to high level.

In explaining these findings, it can be said that the elderly seem to have reached a sense of meaning and for them at this age, the feeling of satisfaction and happiness of others is more important. All the elderly participating in this study also sought the happiness and happiness of family members and other members of society. In accordance with Erikson's theory, an individual goes beyond personal concerns over the course of life and moves towards being productive for society and a sense of integration and coherence (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). Therefore, for other elderly people, achieving

extrinsic or physical aspirations, such as fame or hedonism, becomes less important, and personal growth, self-acceptance, and helping others become more important. These aspirations to strengthen social relationships can also be due to a decrease in physical and intellectual abilities. Because with age, changes such as hearing and vision loss, memory loss, disability, difficulty in getting around, and the loss of family and friends can make it difficult to maintain social connections. This makes older people more socially isolated or lonely (Hupkens et al., 2018). Therefore, all study participants were also observed to seek to strengthen their social relationships. The socio-emotional selectivity theory states that older people strive to satisfy emotional needs through work and deeper interpersonal relationships with others. Studies have also shown that meaningful work is vital for older workers, which is associated with higher motivation, increased meaningful relationships, and overall well-being. Conversely, losing a job due to retirement may have adverse effects on meaning in life (Froidevaux & Hirschi, 2015).

This study was conducted on older people in Rasht, and caution should be exercised in generalizing its findings to other groups. In a qualitative study, the subjective judgments of the researcher have been influential in reaching the findings. In addition, the non-random sampling method in both studies can create bias in the selection of participants. Given this finding in the qualitative study, which showed that the elderly emphasize concepts such as health, self-transcendence, and love and affection, it is suggested that

these main concerns of the elderly period be considered by families or managers of organizations and centers related to the elderly. In addition, given this finding in the quantitative study, which showed that the meaning of life and the importance of intrinsic aspirations and self-transcendence in the elderly are above average, it is suggested that the formation of therapeutic groups based on the meaning of life and aspirations can help improve the quality of life of the elderly.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that with increasing age and entering the old age period, having a sense of inner satisfaction and aspiration for the happiness of others takes priority.

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## Conflicts of Interest

No conflict of interest has been reported.

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