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The Meaning Sextet: A Systematic Literature Review and Further Validation of a Universal Typology of Meaning in Life


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ABSTRACT

Many researchers have asked what individuals experience as meaningful, valuable, purposeful, or important in life. However, there seems little consensus about a world-wide typology of meaning. This project aimed to identify a comprehensive universal typology of meaning in life in the empirical literature, and to find additional support for this typology. Study 1 included a systematic literature review on all studies on meaning in life, to identify types and sub-types of meaning via thematic analysis. Study 2 conceptually compared these findings with other published meaning typologies. Study 3 operationalized this typology in the “Meaning Sextet Questionnaire” (MSQ). The MSQ was developed in a sequential mixed-methods study design, consisting of the sub-studies of Item-development, Three-Step-Test-Interview, an informal feasibility study and a formal survey. The literature review identified 6 types and 29 sub-types of meaning in 107 studies in 45,710 participants, which integrated and extended other published typologies: *materialistic types of meaning* (material conditions, professional-educational success), *hedonistic types* (hedonistic/embodied experiences), *self-oriented types* (resilience, self-efficacy, self-acceptance, autonomy, creative self-expression, self-care), *social types* (social connections, belonging, conformism, altruism, and children), *larger types* (purposes, personal growth, temporality, justice/ethics, and spirituality/religion), *existential-philosophical types* (being-alive, unique, free, grateful, and responsible). The MSQ confirmed the universality of this meaning sextet in 1281 participants in 49 countries, with factor-structure and correlations as expected with other questionnaires. Materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented meanings correlate with low psychological well-being, and social and larger meanings with large psychological well-being. In sum, the meaning sextet seems to be a comprehensive valid typology of meaning in life which may be used in psychological therapies, counseling, coaching and education.

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Introduction

What types of meaning do individuals experience in their lives? Traditionally, the answer to this question was provided by clergy and philosophers (Vos, 2016). The answer was for instance formulated in metaphysical terms of “The Meaning of Life,” “Calling,” or “Vocation.” In daily life, this often meant that individuals fulfilled their societal role in the collectivist system, they were born into (Taylor, 2007; Berman, 2009). This started to change for the intellectual elite with the Enlightenment in the 16th century and for the general population with the social empowerment movements and postmodernist and neoliberal philosophies amid the 20th century (Vos, 2020, 2017). Nowadays, many individuals seem to determine their own answers to the human quest for meaning. Researchers have identified some general trends in what people experience as meaningful in life. For example, Sigmund Freud suggested that people find meaning in love and work (Troyat, 1967). Viktor Frankl (1948/1985) claimed that individuals experience meaning via activities in which they can realize their values of productivity-creativity, positive experiences, or inner attitude, such as their job, relationships, and perseverance. Other researchers have developed other meaning typologies (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Brandstätter et al. (2012) have reviewed a selection of psychometric instruments operationalizing meaning in life, such as the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, 2012). Thus, there seems to be a divergence over time, between cultures and between researchers regarding the types of meaning that individuals may experience.

How can meaning in life be defined? Meaning in life is a non-religious term to describe a set of psychological experiences which can be empirically distinguished from phenomena such as happiness, meaninglessness, and ordinary daily life (see reviews in Vos, 2016; Vos & Vitali, 2018). Psychological research has shown that individuals do not necessarily experience One Absolute Ultimate Meaning of Life but can experience multiple simultaneous meanings in life which can change over time and which does not need to be religious or spiritual. The experience of meaning can involve smaller as well as larger events, for example, experiencing meaning in listening to a bird in a park as well as getting married; in all situations, meaning involves an experience of transcendence and significance that deviates from mundane daily life. The experience of meaning also seems to require individuals to take up their personal responsibility to discover what is meaningful *for them*, and often seems to involve a subjective hierarchy of smaller and larger meanings in life (Vos, 2016; Vos & Vitali, 2018). Although philosophers seem to differ in their theoretical definitions of meaning in life, a review of 37 empirical studies identified seven components to the definition of meaning in life (Vos, 2016, 2017). These components are like different facets of a diamond which can only be seen when light is cast from different angles; thus, although different researchers have looked at the experience of meaning from slightly different research paradigms, the facets they identified seemed strongly related to each other and seemed to be about the same phenomenon (as for example indicated by large correlations between scales that operationalized these facets) (Vos, 2021).

1. An individual's motivation is an important component of meaning in life; this describes that an individual moves (the word “motivation” is etymologically derived from “movere,” to move) toward directions, goals, or purposes in life.

2. Individuals often move in life according to values, which are subjective principles about the process of moving toward the one's goals, such as being ethical.
3. The experience of meaning often involves an understanding of self and world, such as a sense of coherence of the one's own life history and life situation.
4. A sense of meaningfulness is often associated with a sense of self-worth and significance of the one's own meaning.
5. Whereas individuals may theoretically know these previous components of meaning in life, individuals also need to be able to translate their sense of meaning into specific steps, actions, and goals; therefore, goal management and self-regulation have shown to be an important aspect of living a meaningful life.
6. Individuals may need to use existential competences to cope with the life's challenges and limits, such as mortality, freedom, and responsibility.
7. Several studies have shown that the experience of meaningfulness in life requires a commitment to actually striving toward realizing meaning in their daily life.

In sum, the general experience of meaning in life may be defined as the subjective experience of being motivated and committed to moving in a self-regulated and existentially-competent way toward specific directions, goals, or purposes in life, in line with the one's values and understanding of the world and significance of oneself. This definition of the overall experience of meaning in life describes the general form of an individual's subjective sense of the life's meaningfulness, but this does not describe *what* specific type of meaning individuals experience, such as finding meaning in materialistic or social activities. A type of meaning describes *what* group or pattern of frequent activities or experiences give an individual an overall sense of meaningfulness in life (cf. Baumeister, 1991). For example, when individuals say that they orient themselves around "social types of meaning," they mean that their intentions and actions in many life situations focus on finding meaning in relationships with other people, such as altruism and belonging to a community

However, the question *what types of meanings an individual experiences only answers one question about the multi-faceted experience of meaning in life*. For example, individuals differ in *how* they approach each type of meaning in life: they could use a traditional approach by following religions or societal expectations to discover what type of meaning they want to follow; they could use a functionalistic approach by randomly creating their own meanings, or they may apply a phenomenological approach by using their critically intuit what is meaningful to them (Vos, 2017, 2020, 2021). Thus, this article merely focuses on the question *what* types of meaning individuals experience as important in life, whereas we could ask many more questions about the multi-faceted experience of meaning, such as how, where, when, who, whose, why, which and ontological status (Vos, 2021).

Naturally, different individuals and different cultures focus on different types/sub-types of meaning in life. For example, individuals in neoliberal countries report a stronger focus on materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning and a smaller focus on social and larger types of meaning compared with individuals in less neoliberal countries (Vos, 2020). Despite this cross-cultural and individual diversity of types of meaning, it has been suggested that there may be some universal trends in what individuals commonly experience as meaningful (Baumeister, 1991). Therefore,

this article aims to develop and further validate a universal typology of meaning in life, which means identifying the common denominator amongst the diverse meanings reported by individuals across the globe. Like a typology of species in biology, a meaning typology is any overarching model, theory, or schema, which categorizes experiences of meaning into types and sub-types of meaning in life. Whereas the previous researchers have suggested their own typologies of meaning based on theory or a limited selection of empirical evidence, this study will bring all empirical studies together, to formulate an overarching typology.

Developing a comprehensive universal typology of meaning has multiple possible benefits. Like a typology of animal species, a meaning typology can help to understand the collective evolution and individual, sub-cultural and cultural development of meaning in life. This typology could also be used in psychological therapies and education. The logo-therapist Frankl (“logo” meaning “meaning”) introduced the idea that individuals could benefit from exploring multiple types of meaning in life to identify what is meaningful for them. Research confirms that psychological therapies that systematically explore a broad range of meanings are more effective than therapies that only explore a small number of possible meanings; therefore, it could be helpful for therapists to have a comprehensive typology of meaning which they could explore with clients (Vos, 2017; Vos & Vitali, 2018). This typology could also guide further research into individual and cultural differences in meaning in life, and test the effectiveness of interventions.

To achieve the aim of identifying and validating a comprehensive universal typology of meaning in life, this article describes three studies (see [Figure 1](#)). Study 1 included a systematic literature review on all studies on meaning in life, to identify types and sub-types of meaning via thematic analysis. Study 2 conceptually compared this with other published meaning typologies. Study 3 included the development of a questionnaire via a sequential mixed-methods study design, consisting of the sub-studies of Item-development, Three-Step-Test-Interview, an informal feasibility study and a formal survey. It was decided to describe all studies and sub-studies in this one article because the studies build on each other; the individual studies can only be understood from the totality, and the totality can only be understood via the individual studies (i.e., concept of the hermeneutic cycle; Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010).

Method

Study 1. Systematic literature review

The systematic literature review was conducted in consecutive rounds, as [Figure 2](#) shows, in line with PRISMA and MOOSE-guidelines (Page et al., 2021; Stroup, Berlin, Morton, Williamson, Rennie et al., 2000).

First, database-included Pubmed, Web-of-Knowledge, PsycInfo, PsycTest, Medline, Embase, scholar.google.com, and Scopus, as these search engines were available to the researchers and are frequently used in reviews. Search terms included: “source of meaning*” or “sources of meaning” or “meaning in life” or “type of meaning” or “types of meaning” or “kind of meaning” or “kinds of meaning” or “ways of meaning” or “way of meaning” or “meaningful life” or “living meaningful*” or “search for meaning”

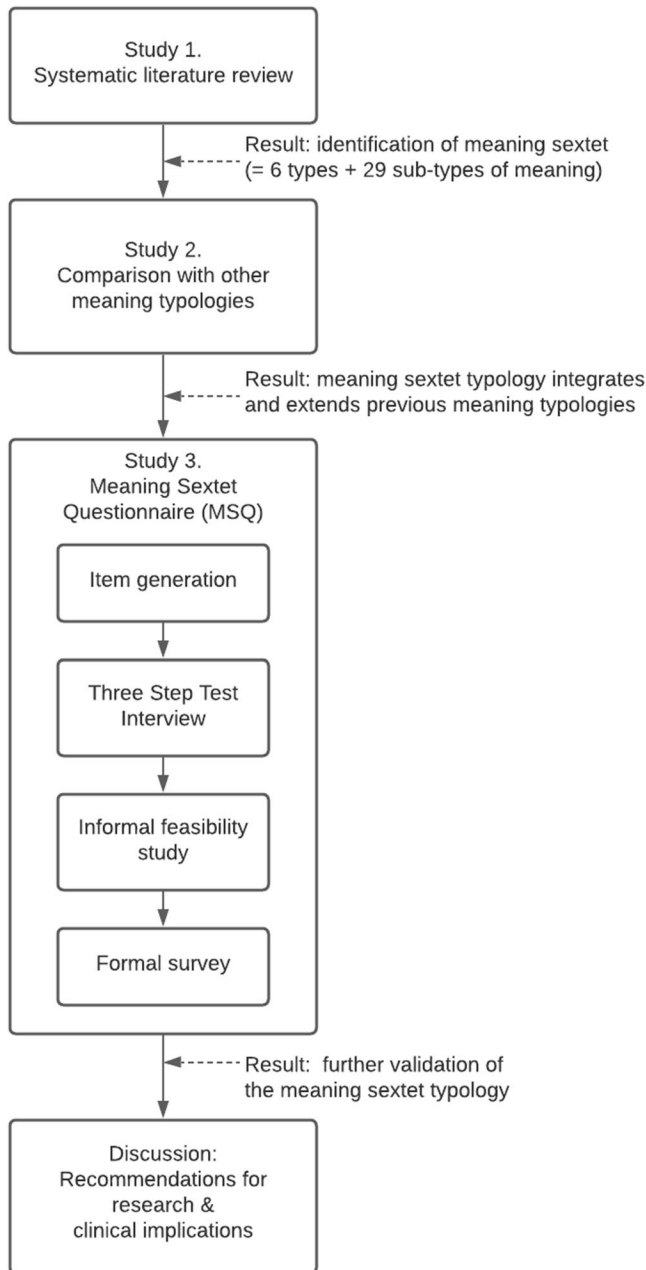


Figure 1. Overview of studies and sub-studies described in this article.

or noetic or “purpose in life” or “purpose of life” or “life purpose” or “purposes in life” or “purposes of life” or “life’s purpose” or “goal in life” or “goal of life” or “goals of life” or “goals in life” or “life’s goal*” or “value* in life” or “life’s value*” or “significance of life” or “life destiny” or “destiny in life” or “destiny of life” or “life* essence” or “essence of life” or “sense of life” or “aims in life” or “aims of life” or “life* aims” or noetic or “meaning-making” (an asterisk means any variations to beginning/

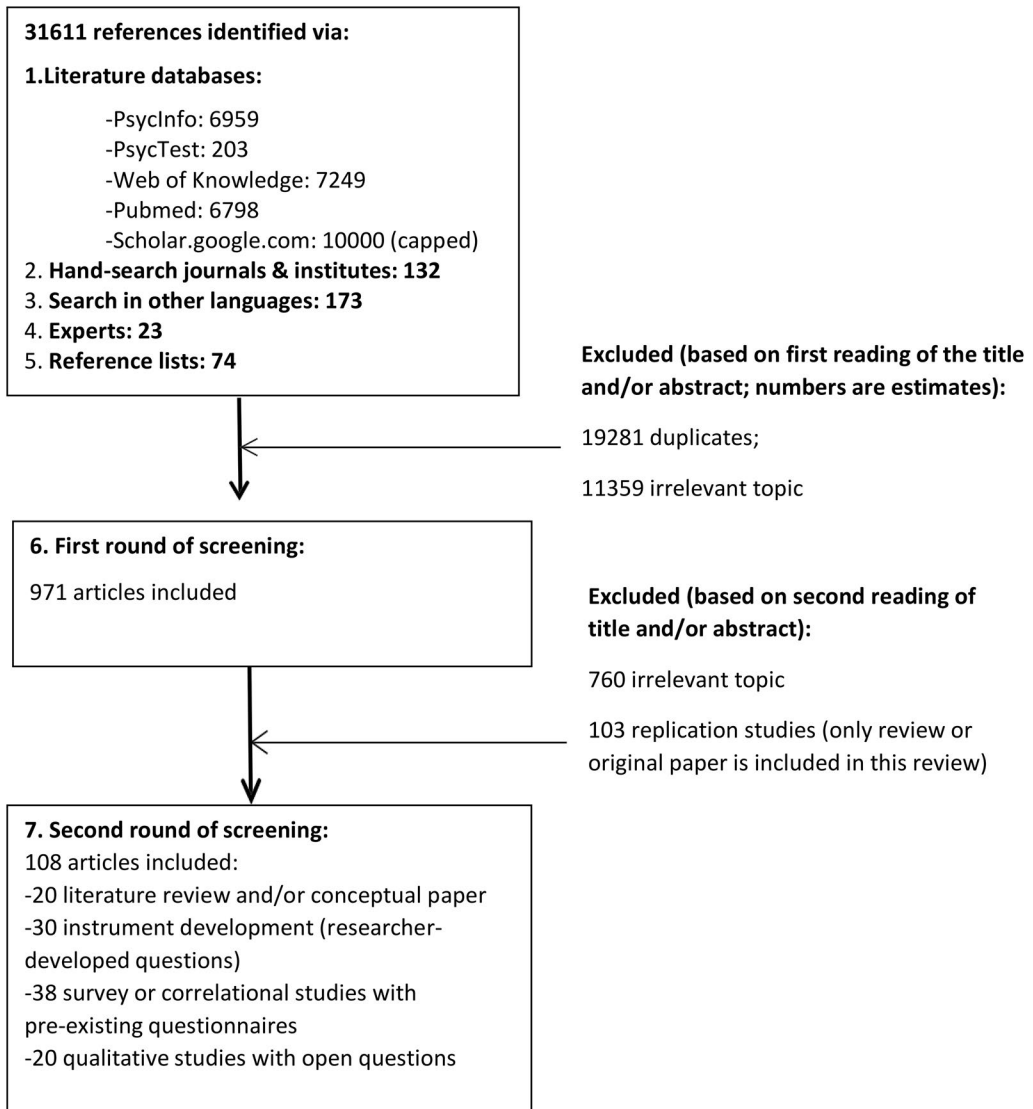


Figure 2. Flowchart of included and excluded studies.

ending of a word). Given the large number of findings, we added PubMed Mesh terms ([counseling] OR [psychotherapy] OR [psychology]) and capped scholar.google.com results at 10,000 hits (the number of findings in other search engines were smaller and remained uncapped).

Second, the researchers hand-searched the journals *International Forum For Logotherapy* and *Existential Analysis*, the journal of the *British Society of Existential Analysis*, as these journals explicitly focus on meaning and existential topics; other journals were not hand-searched. The websites of all known existential therapy institutes were screened for any relevant references, via the comprehensive list of institutes

from Correia et al. (2016). Third, international existential therapists translated all search terms, searched, and translated references in Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, Farsi, French, German, Indonesian, Italian, Korean, Portuguese, and Spanish (covering some of the largest—but not all—languages). Fourth, additional studies were identified via reference lists of included publications.

Fifth, all titles and abstracts were initially screened for eligibility. Sixth, studies were initially excluded through thorough reading of the abstracts. Seventh, studies were excluded on basis of full-text manuscripts. Studies were eligible when describing any type of meaning with the following criteria:

1. Any type of qualitative, quantitative, or conceptual method, including reviews (i.e., this review aimed to be comprehensive and not focus on any a specific method),
2. Describing specific meaningful activities and experiences and not only an overall sense of meaningfulness in life (i.e., this review aimed to answer the question “what types of frequent activities or experiences do individuals experience as meaningful in life” and not “how meaningful is life”);
3. Explicitly using the term meaning, value, purpose, or importance in life to describe the construct (i.e., this review only focused on these constructs).

Eighth, the types of meaning were categorized via an adjusted version of thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006): 1. In each article, each unique type of meaning was identified and recorded in an EXCEL-spreadsheet; 2. Similar types of meaning across articles were preliminary categorized on the basis of their general content and were given a preliminary name; each category contained types of meaning from at least three articles; 3. The preliminary categories were combined with each other until multiple levels of categorization were created with each between three and six sub-categories. Six overarching categories were found (materialistic, hedonistic, self-oriented, social, larger and existential-philosophical types), with each multiple sub-categories. A second researcher validated the categories by conducting an independent categorization of all types of meaning (good inter-rater reliability was found: Kappa for selection of articles=.92, Kappa for categorization= .82). Differences were debated until agreement was achieved. A third neutral researcher read all the discussions and decisions and concluded that the process had been neutral with a negligible risk of bias.

Study 2. Comparison of meaning typologies

For further construct validation, we compared the types of meaning from study 1 with any meaning typology that we had found in the literature. A typology is any overarching model, theory or schema that shows differences between at least three different types of meaning in life. We compared the typologies by comparing the types of meaning and examples in each of the models, via a table and conceptual description.

Study 3. Meaning Sextet Questionnaire

The aim of Study 3 was to further validate the meaning typology found in studies 1 and 2 via the operationalization of a new questionnaire: “The Meaning Sextet Questionnaire” (MSQ). As recommended by researchers on questionnaire development (Devellis, 2016; Mokkink et al., 2012) we developed the MSQ via a sequential mixed-methods study design (Ivankova et al., 2006), consisting of four sub-studies: item-development, Three-Step-Test-Interview, Informal Feasibility, and Formal survey sub-studies.

Item-development sub-study

Eight research-active and clinically-active existential therapists from different countries (two Europe, two North-America, two Latin/South-America, and two Australasia) were invited, via professional networking, to generate at least one item in English to operationalize each sub-type of meaning. The number of therapists was based on data saturation: the addition of each new therapist had to lead to substantially different formulations of the items (this was assessed by asking the other therapists how different the new formulations by the new therapist were, on a rating scale of 1, no different formulation at all, to 7, totally different formulations); after the eighth therapist it was decided that no extra therapists were needed (scores: 6 for therapist 2, 4 for therapist 3, 5 for therapist 4, 4 for therapist 5, 5 for therapist 6, 3 for therapist 7, and 2 for therapist 8). This resulted in 312 items. To examine the face validity of each item, the therapists subsequently rated each of the 312 items both on the appropriateness of its content (“how appropriate is this item to measure the underlying construct”), and on the appropriateness for inclusion in a questionnaire for the general audience (i.e., “how appropriate is this item to use in a questionnaire for the general audience”) (1, totally inappropriate to 7, totally appropriate). This led to the selection of the 102 most appropriate questions with scores larger than 4 (this questionnaire can be found in: Vos, 2017).

Three-step-test-interview sub-study

A standardized procedure examined the feasibility of the questionnaire (Hak et al., 2004). The three-step-test-interview is frequently used in questionnaire development, and requires an in-depth study in a small non-representative sample to test the feasibility. We recruited eight individuals from the general public via social media; to prevent bias, they were not allowed to have an educational or professional background in psychology, philosophy or therapies/counseling/coaching. A thinking-aloud protocol was used: the participants were asked to say aloud what they were thinking while filling-in the MSQ. Subsequently, we asked them about their general experience of filling-in, we asked them which items were difficult or ambiguous, and we asked them for suggestions. This led to adjustments in the formulation of 13 ambiguous items. All participants said that filling-in the MSQ was overall a positive experience, which stimulated self-reflection. Three participants mentioned that the questionnaire was long and intensive, albeit acceptable. Detailed findings can be requested from the author.

Informal feasibility study

To examine whether it is feasible to use the MSQ in a larger study, an informal feasibility study was conducted in which the MSQ was administered together with other scales (see instruments in Step 4). This was a relatively informal study, with a convenience sample, as participants were recruited via the personal social networks and students of the author. Data analyses included the following:

1. Preliminary data analyses: To prevent missing variables and values, participants were forced to give an answer to each question before they could continue to the next question. For each of the questions, skewness, kurtosis and standard deviations were calculated. It was decided not to discard any outliers because of the exploratory aims of this study.
2. Structural validity analyses: To examine the factor structure of the MSQ, Principal Component Analyses were conducted on the MSQ items. It was decided to conduct exploratory factor analysis and not confirmatory factor analyses, as the aim was to generate factors from the empirical data, and not to merely limit our analyses to preexisting hypotheses as confirmatory factor analysis may overlook unexpected factors (unreported findings from confirmatory factor analyses indicated relatively similar factors with good fit characteristics; the overall conclusions from exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were the same). As customary, the number of factors was decided on the basis of Eigenvalues > 1 , scree plot, factor loadings larger than .30, and interpretability of factors after Varimax rotation.
3. Reliability analyses: To examine the reliability of the MSQ, we calculated Cronbach's alpha for each sub-scale of the MSQ. Cronbach's alpha interpreted as follows: $\alpha < .50$ unacceptable, between .50 and .60 poor, between .60 and .70 questionable, between .70 and .80 acceptable, between .80 and .90 good, and larger than .90 excellent (Cronbach, 1951).

Formal survey sub-study

Similar to the feasibility study, we conducted a formal survey study (entitled "World-wide Survey of Meaning in Life") which included the MSQ and other scales (Vos, 2020). Participants were recruited in multiple ways: via social media of the researchers and their academic institute (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and ResearchGate), public lectures by the researcher, snow-balling via emails to colleagues and friends, and research websites (e.g., U.K. Psychology Network). Ethical approval was provided by the Ethics Research Committee of the Metanoia Institute in London. Data analyses included the following:

1. Preliminary data analyses: see informal feasibility study.
2. Structural validity analyses: see informal feasibility study.
3. Reliability analyses: see informal feasibility study.
4. Construct validity: To examine the convergent validity of the MSQ, we added other meaning questionnaires, and calculated Pearson's correlations with the MSQ. We selected the most frequently used questionnaires with proven validity

and reliability to measure types of meaning, and that were available to the researchers (see overview of the most frequently used meaning questionnaires: Vos & Vitali, 2018). The Personal Meaning Profile (PMP) included the sub-scales: Achievement, Relationship, Self-transcendence, Self-acceptance, Intimacy, and Fairness. The Psychological Well-Being Scale included Self-acceptance, Mastery, Autonomy, Relationships, Personal growth, and Purpose in life (Ryff, 1989). Schwartz' Value Survey measured: Achievement, Benevolence, Conformity, Hedonism, Power, Security, Self-Direction, Stimulation, Spirituality, Tradition, and Universalism (Spini, 2003). As these scales did not measure materialistic and existential-philosophical types of meaning, we added the Materialist Values Scale (MVS) (Richins & Dawson, 1992) and the Free Will and Determinism Scale which has the sub-scales Free Will, Scientific determinism, fatalistic determinism and randomness (Vohs & Schooler, 2008). We considered Pearson's correlations larger than .70 as strong, larger than .40 as relatively strong, larger than .20 as moderate, and below .20 as weak.

5. Predictive validity: We added questionnaires to explore how different types of meaning predict well-being. The questionnaires were selected to cover different domains of well-being, be frequently used (to increase comparability with other studies), be cross-culturally valid, and be sensitive to detect change over time. To measure a broad spectrum of emotions, it was decided to use a scale that measures both positive and negative emotions: PANAS Positive Affect/Negative Affect Scale with the subscales of positive affect and negative affect (Thompson, 2007). To measure quality-of-life, the SF-6D was administered (Whitehurst, Bryan & Lewis, 2011). To measure a construct that is often correlated but different to the construct of overall meaningfulness in life, we selected the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, Griffin, 1985). We tested correlations between these scales and the six types of meaning. We hypothesized that psychological well-being and quality-in-life were not significantly correlated with scores on the scales for materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented meanings, but had positive correlations with large scores on social and larger types of meaning (these hypotheses are derived from the general literature; see Vos, 2017).
6. Cross-cultural validity: To understand the generalizability across cultures and socio-demographic subgroups, we added the following measures: Financial Well Being Scale (CFPB, 2019), Individual Cultural Values Scale which tested Hofstede's cultural dimensions of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, collectivism, long-term orientation, and masculinity (Yoo, Donthu, & Lenartowicz, 2011). Sociodemographic variables were measured with Vos' Sociodemographics & Living Situation Questionnaire (Vos, 2021, based on Vos, 2011), which included questions about: Country, Region, Housing, Age, Gender, Sexual orientation, Years of education, Work type, Sense of ethnic belonging, Religion, Active in religion, Relationship status, Children number, Number of large life changes in the last year, and Income in USD. We hypothesized that there would not be any significant correlations between these cultural/socio-economic variables and the six types of meaning.
7. Interpretability: After individuals filled-in the questionnaire, we sent a free automated report of the overall scores with an interpretation to the individual.

This interpretation was based on a general description of the type of meaning in Study 1. For example, a report could say: "You have an overall score of [X] on the scale of Materialistic Types of Meaning. This seems to mean that overall, you find [very little/little/somewhat/much/very much] meaning in your material situation (e.g., secure finances, good housing, possessions, practical activities, physical survival), your professional or educational success (e.g., general success, professional success, educational success, social status, power). Be aware that this is only a general interpretation, and you may not experience each of these examples equally meaningful." For each of the sub-scales, participants were asked to rate to which extent they agreed with this interpretation, on a scale ranging from 1, "totally agree", to 7, "totally disagree".

Results

Study 1. Systematic literature review

We found 31.611 references. After the first reading of the titles and abstracts, we excluded 19.281 duplicate publications and 11.359 publications on irrelevant topics. After the second reading of the titles and abstracts, we excluded 103 replication studies and 760 irrelevant publications. In the final selection, we included 108 relevant unique studies. Of these, 20 studies were a conceptual paper or literature review (publications with reviews of meaning typologies were included in study 2), 30 studies described the development of an instrument, and 58 studies were general surveys. In total, 45.710 participants from all continents were included in the studies. The real number of eligible studies was larger, as replication studies were not included (see [Figure 2](#) and [Table 1](#)). [Supplementary Table 1](#) and the reference list in the [online supplements](#) provide a detailed overview of all included studies.

All types of meaning that were found in the texts were categorized into six overarching categories ("types") with each multiple sub-categories ("sub-types") (see [Table 2](#)).

Materialist types of meaning describe the value of material possessions, security, and achievements. This includes experiencing meaning in material conditions (e.g., finances, housing, possessions, practical activities, physical survival), and professional-educational success (e.g., general success, professional success, educational success, social status, power).

Hedonistic experiences include hedonistic and experiential activities (e.g., hedonism, fun, leisure and joyful activities, enjoying beauty -music, art, eating, drinking, etc., sex, nature and animals, peak experiences, pain avoidance) and physical health (being healthy, healthy lifestyle, sports).

Self-oriented types of meaning describe the value of the self. This includes experiencing meaning in resilience (i.e. coping successfully with difficult life situations, e.g., flexibility, perseverance and hardiness, accepting challenges, effective coping skills, positive and hopeful perspective), self-efficacy (i.e. effective actions in daily life, e.g., setting specific activities or goals, planning, organizing, discipline, evaluating and adjusting daily life activities or goals, being in control), self-acceptance (e.g., self-insight,

Table 1. Overview of included studies.

Type of study	Number (%) of studies
	108 (100%)
	Instrument development
	28 (26%)
	Correlational
	25 (23%)
	Conceptual or literature review
	20 (19%)
	Survey
	15 (15%)
	Qualitative
	7 (6%)
	Unclear
	6 (5%)
	Mixed methods
	6 (5%)
	Experiment
	1 (1%)
<i>Country</i>	Multiple countries or not applicable
	36 (32%)
	Canada & USA
	33 (30%)
	Europe
	21 (%)
	Africa
	5 (5%)
	Southeast Asia
	4 (4%)
	Middle East
	4 (4%)
	China 2
	(2%)
	Australia
	2 (2%)
	Russia
	1 (1%)
<i>Sample</i>	General population (mixed groups)
	25 (23%)
	Unclear or not applicable
	20 (19%)
	Adults (general)
	19 (18%)
	Students
	16 (15%)
	Physical illness
	13 (11%)
	Seniors
	11 (9%)
	Young people
	7 (5%)
<i>Types of meaning^a</i>	Material
	69 (2 1%)
	Hedonistic
	35 (11%)
	Self –oriented
	63 (19%)
	Social
	71 (2 2%)
	Larger
	58 (18%)
	Existential –philosophical
	23 (7%)

^aOne study can report multiple types of meaning. % of total number of all reported types ($N=319$).

self-acceptance, self-worth, self-esteem, self-compassion), autonomy (e.g., self-reliance, non-selfish balance with social context), creative self-expression, and self-care.

Social types of meaning describe the value of being-connected-with others, belonging to a specific community and improving the well-being of others and children in particular. This includes experiencing meaning in feeling socially connected (e.g., sociability, friends, family, intimate relationships/partner), belonging to a specific community (e.g., family, community, history, and society), following social expectations (i.e., doing what is socially expected, following social virtues, conformism, tradition), altruism, and giving birth and taking care of children.

Larger types of meaning describe values of something bigger than their materialistic-hedonic experiences, themselves and other human beings, merely for the sake of that larger value. This includes experiencing meaning in larger specific purposes in life (e.g., specific larger goals, purposes, aims, or dreams in life), personal growth (e.g., authenticity, true self, self-development, self-transcendence, self-realization, fulfilling the one's potential, authenticity, wisdom), temporality (e.g., sense of coherence, future-oriented, reflection on the past, legacy and after-life), justice & ethics (e.g., following ethical standards, being treated in a just way, contributing to a just world), spirituality and religion (e.g., beliefs, worship and religious practices, insight in cosmic meaning, spiritual union, peace harmony and balance, platonic idea or highest good).

Table 2. Overview of types of meaning in life.

Type of meaning	Underlying value	Sub-type of meaning	Example
I. Materialistic types of meaning	the value of materialized situations, such as owning material goods or having achieved objective success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Material conditions B. Professional-educational success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Finances, housing, possessions, practical activities, physical survival B. General success, professional success, educational success, social status, power
II. Hedonistic types of meaning	the value of the enjoyment and embodied experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Hedonistic and experiential activities B. Health & embodied experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Hedonism, fun, leisure and joyful activities, enjoying beauty (music, art, eating, drinking, etc.), nature and animals, peak experiences, pain avoidance B. Being healthy, healthy lifestyle, sports, sex
III. Self-oriented types of meaning	the value of the self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Resilience (coping successfully with difficult life situations) B. Self-efficacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Flexibility, perseverance and hardness, accepting challenges, effective coping skills, positive and hopeful perspective B. Effective actions in daily life (setting specific activities or goals, planning, organizing, discipline, evaluating and adjusting daily life activities or goals), being in control
IV. Social types of meaning	the value of being-connected-with others, belonging to a specific community and improving the well-being of others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> C. Self-acceptance D. Autonomy E. Creative self-expression F. Self-care A Feeling socially connected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> C. Self-insight, self-acceptance, self-worth, self-esteem D. Self-reliance, non-selfish balance with social context E. Creative self-expression F. Self-care Sociability, friends, family, intimate relationships/partners
V. Larger types of meaning	the value of something bigger than their materialistic-hedonic experiences, themselves and other human beings, merely for the sake of that larger value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> B Belonging to a specific community C Following social expectations D Altruism E Giving birth and taking care of next generations A. Specific life purpose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family, community, history and society Doing what is socially expected, following social virtues, conformism, tradition Altruism Giving birth and taking care of next generations A. Specific larger goals, purposes, aims or dreams in life B. Self-development, self-transcendence, self-realization fulfilling one's potential, wisdom, authenticity

- C. Temporality
 - C. Sense of coherence, future-oriented, reflection on the past, legacy, after-life, position in life-span, awareness of having little time or resources left
 - D. Following ethical standards, being treated in a just way, contributing to a just world
 - E. Spirituality and religion, beliefs, worship and religious practices, insight in cosmic meaning, spiritual union, peace harmony and balance, Platonic Idea or Highest Good
 - A. Being-born, feeling-alive, being-until-death

- D. Justice & ethics
 - E. Spirituality and religion

- A. Being-alive
 - A. Being-born, feeling-alive, being-until-death

- B. Uniqueness
 - B. The unique individuality of one's own experiences, own life, own world and own self
 - C. Being-in-the-world, being-in-context, being-in-relationships
 - D. Freedom of decision, freedom to decide one's attitude toward a limitation situation in life, the possibility to leave a legacy
 - E. Experiencing the mere fact of being-born as a gift or miracle that one did not ask for but that one regards as highly precious and special, and to which one responds with gratitude
 - F. Individual responsibility for oneself to live a meaningful life according to one's highest values

- C. Connectedness with the world and others
 - D. Individual freedom

- E. Gratitude to life as a gift
 - F. Responsibility

the value of life as such. This type of meaning does not have a specific content like the other types of meaning but is more abstract: the mere fact that someone is breathing and is able to make unique decisions within freedom is a gift to which one may feel grateful and may want to respond to with responsible decisions.

VI. Existential-philosophical types of meaning

Existential-philosophical types of meaning describe the value of life as such. This type is more abstract than other types: the mere fact that someone is breathing and is able to make unique decisions within freedom is a gift to which one may feel grateful and may want to respond to with responsible decisions. Most of these meanings are mentioned in conceptual texts by existential philosophers and therapists. This includes experiencing meaning in being-alive (e.g., being-born, feeling-alive, being-until-death), uniqueness (e.g., the unique individuality of the one's own experiences, own life, own world and own self), connectedness with the world and others (e.g., being-in-the-world, being-in-context, being-in-relationships), individual freedom (e.g., freedom of decision, freedom to decide the one's attitude toward a limitation situation in life, the possibility to leave a legacy), gratitude to life as a gift (e.g., experiencing the mere fact of being-born as a gift or miracle that one did not ask for but that one regards as highly precious and special, and to which one responds with gratitude), and responsibility (e.g., individual responsibility for oneself to live a meaningful life according to the one's highest values).

Study 2. Comparison of meaning typologies

In the review, we found nine previously published meaning typologies, as summarized in Table 3 (Fegg, Kramer, L'Hoste & Borasio, 2008; Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, & Valenkamp, 2004; Schwartz, 1994; Binswanger, 1958 and Van Deurzen, 2002; Längle, 2013; Ryff, 2014; Scheler, 1973; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Text 1 in the [supplemental material](#) provides detailed descriptions and comparison of the types of meaning that these authors had identified. Due to lack of space, it suffices here to report that the six types of meaning identified in study 1 seemed overall in line with these nine typologies, albeit those different authors used slightly different terms and did not include all sub-types of meaning. The meaning sextet seems to be the most comprehensive typology model as it integrates and extends all types of meaning that these previous models showed; this conclusion was to be expected, as Study 1 was designed to integrate all previous studies. The largest difference with all other models was that the meaning sextet included hedonistic and existential-philosophical types of meanings, which most other models did not include as separate types of meaning. As will be described in the discussion section, the initial thematic analysis included five types of meaning, with materialistic and hedonistic types of meaning combined; however, we reexamined our thematization on the basis of the typologies of Fegg, Kramer, L'Hoste & Borasio (2008) and Scheler (1973) which seemed to differentiate materialistic from hedonistic types of meaning, and of the findings of our feasibility study.

Study 3. Meaning sextet questionnaire

Item-development and three-step-test-interview sub-studies: see findings in the methods section.

Table 3. Overview of meaning sextet compared with other meaning typology models (see explanation in [supplementary text online](#)).

	Fegg's cluster analysis (2008)	Fundamental motivations (Länge, 2013)	Universal values (Schwartz, 2012)	Franklin value triad (Frankl 1948/1985)	Phenomenological worlds (Van Deurzen, Binswanger, 1958)	Values (Westerhof et al., 2004)	Self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000)	Reker & Wong's (1988) quintet	Phenomenology of values (Scheler, 1973)
Materialistic meanings	Health, work, finances	Life	Hedonism, achievement power	Productivity-creativity	Physical world ('Umwelt')	Health; functioning; physical integrity; daily activities; material possessions	External values: material-hedonic	Self-preoccupation (pleasure, comfort)	
Hedonistic meanings	Leisure		Self-direction, stimulation	Attitude	Self-world ('Eigenwelt')	Within the person	Internal values: self-determining	Self-preoccupation	Sensual values
Self-oriented meanings		Self		Experiential	Social world benevolence	Social relationship	External values: focusing on others; social values	Social service	Mental values (ugly – beautiful)
Social meanings	Relations	World	Social security, conformity, tradition, benevolence	Historical source of meaning & legacy (Breitbart, 2010)	Spiritual world ('Uberwelt')		Internal values: purpose for itself	Realisation of personal potential; transcendent values	Mental values (truth and falsehood)
Large meanings	Culture, spirituality	Meaning	Universalism, spirituality	Freedom, responsibility					Values of the Unholy and Holy

Table 4. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample in the informal feasibility study and the formal survey.

Sociodemographic characteristic	Results	Feasibility study	Survey
Total N		108	1281
Country**	<i>Europe</i>		
	United Kingdom	75	113
	Netherlands	39	57
	Austria	0	32
	Germany	0	25
	France	0	23
	Italy	0	16
	Hungary	0	13
	Poland	0	9
	Spain	0	8
	Iceland	0	8
	Portugal	0	6
	Romania	0	6
	Belgium	0	6
	Luxemburg	0	3
	Switzerland	0	3
	Greece	0	2
	Croatia	0	1
	Serbia	0	1
	<i>North-America</i>	3	
	United States	1	87
	Canada		64
	<i>Latin & South-America</i>		
	Brazil	0	47
	Colombia	0	21
	Chile	0	19
	British Guiana	0	11
	Surinam	0	9
	Trinidad	0	7
	Paraguay	0	1
		0	
	<i>Africa</i>		
	Ghana	0	21
	South-Africa	0	19
	Uganda	0	17
	Tunesia	0	16
	Mozambique	0	13
	Morocco	0	12
	<i>Russia</i>	0	97
	<i>Middle East</i>		
	Israel	0	47
	United Arabic Emirates	0	36
	Palestine	0	23
	Egypt	0	21
	Pakistan	0	9
	Lebanon	0	5
	Syria	0	2
	<i>Southeast-Asia</i>	0	
	India	0	98
	Japan	0	67
	Phillipines	0	32
	Indonesia	0	21
	Malaysia	0	19
	Singapore	0	13
	<i>Australasia</i>		
	Australia	0	53
	New Zealand	0	42
<i>Region type</i>	Large City	67	691
	Small city	32	237
	Village	5	256

(Continued)

Table 4. (Continued).

Sociodemographic characteristic	Results	Feasibility study	Survey	
<i>Housing situation</i>	Countryside	4	97	
	Living with partner	32	362	
	Living with partner and child(ren)	34	321	
	Living alone	40	259	
	Living with extended family	1	183	
	Living with others (non-relatives)	1	156	
<i>Age (mean, st.dev.)</i>		33.5 (13.2)	31.4 (11.2)	
<i>Gender</i>	Female	68	730	
	Male	48	540	
	Non-binary	2	11	
<i>Sexual orientation</i>	Heterosexual	86	1061	
	Homosexual or bisexual	22	217	
<i>Years of education (mean, st.dev.)</i>		12.2 (8.0)	9.7 (6.7)	
<i>Work situation</i>	Employed	20	431	
	Self-employed	9	329	
	Student	57	267	
	Unemployed	20	131	
	Retired or sick	2	123	
	<i>Work type</i>	Vocationally trained crafts-person, technician, IT-specialist, nurse, artist or similar	45	551
Generally trained office worker or secretary		23	231	
Academically trained professional or similar		35	141	
Unskilled or semi-skilled manual worker		2	216	
Manager		4	139	
To a majority group		68	1037	
To a minority group		35	123	
To a very small minority group		5	121	
<i>Religion (multiple possible)</i>		Roman Catholic	32	398
		Protestant	29	267
	Muslim	13	321	
	None	20	298	
	Hindu	1	176	
	Spiritual or Something-ist	1	165	
	Buddhist	7	115	
	Jewish	2	57	
	Daoism, Confucianism, Shinto or Jainism Sikh	1	32	
	Other	2	39	
<i>Relationship status</i>	Married	35	451	
	Single	37	327	
	Relationship	30	324	
	Widowed	6	121	
	Other	0	58	
<i>Children</i>	None	67	499	
	Pregnant	2	127	
	Number of children (mean, standard deviation)	1.2 (0.9)	2.1 (1.7)	
<i>Large life change in last year</i>	None	55	671	
	Yes	53	610	

Informal feasibility study

1. Preliminary data analyses: The feasibility study included 108 participants; see socio-demographics in Table 4. Except for two individuals who had started to fill in the questionnaire but filled in less than 50% of the questions, all other participants had completed the questionnaire; there were no missing variables or values as participants were forced to answer each question (due to limitations of the online questionnaire system, participants could not skip any questions; participants were made aware of this in the information leaflet they received before making the decision to participate in this study; participants in the Three-Step-Test-Interview did not mention any problems or distress caused by the forcing of answers). All items in the MSQ were skewed toward large scores; this means that participants were more inclined to agree with the items than to disagree. This was interpreted as non-problematic as all items still had a good dispersion as indicated by a standard deviation larger than 1.0. The skewness and kurtosis were interpreted as being caused by the nature of the items as participants may recognize some aspects of all types of meaning; this may also indicate the universal applicability of all items.
2. Structural validity analyses: The MSQ consisted of 30 statements (see in [supplemental material](#) supplemental material online), describing examples of meaning in life, and participants were asked to rate on a five-points Likert scale “How important is this for you in your life? (this is about your ideal, regardless of whether you make this happen in reality).” Answer options were: 1 = totally unimportant, 2 = somewhat unimportant, 3 = neither unimportant, nor important, 4 = somewhat important, and 5 = totally important. A second version of the MSQ consisted of the same items but asked “How much are you doing or experiencing this meaning now? (this is about what you do in reality)”; the findings of this second version was not analyzed for this current project, but are described elsewhere (Vos, 2020). Exploratory factor-analyses indicated six factors which explained a total of 64% of the variance. Materialistic meanings had two items (material condition, success) with factor loadings .74 and .71. Hedonistic meanings had two items (enjoyment, physical experiences) with factor loadings .65 and .63. Self-oriented meanings had six items (self-coping, self-control, self-acceptance, autonomy, self-expression, self-care) with factor loading from .47 to 0.96. Social meanings had five items (social connections, belonging, conformism, altruism, care for next generations) with factor loadings from .56 to .76. Larger meanings had seven items (larger purpose, self-growth, future focus, overcoming the past, living in here-and-now, ethics, spirituality/reliogisity) with factor loadings from .47 to .67. Existential-philosophical meanings had seven items (being-alive, awareness of finitude, uniqueness, awareness of connectedness, freedom, gratitude, responsibility) with factor loadings from .42 to .55. There was one open item which was excluded from factor analysis as the findings may be difficult to interpret: “Other meaningful experiences (write down your own examples).”
3. Reliability analyses: Each of the scales had good or very good reliability: materialistic: .81, hedonistic: .75, self-oriented: .86, social: .89, larger: .81, existential-philosophical types of meaning: .76.

Conclusions

These findings were interpreted as indicating the feasibility of the MSQ.

Informal feasibility sub-study

1. Preliminary data analyses: We received 1871 surveys for the World-wide Survey of Meaning in Life, from which 590 surveys had to be discarded as these were filled in for less than 50% of all questions; for the remaining 1281 participants, there were no missing variables and values due to the forced answers. In total, the surveys from 1281 participants from 49 countries from all inhabited continents were included, as Table 4 shows. There were significantly more Europeans and Northern-Americans in the sample than individuals from Africa or Southeast-Asia. Furthermore, this sample seemed slightly biased, as compared to the average population of the included countries, the participants seemed to have studied longer, have a larger income and were more likely to be a student or single (which does not seem uncommon for research surveys). Similar to the feasibility study, all items showed skewness and sufficient dispersion.
2. Structural validity analyses: Factor-analyses revealed six factors with the same items as in the feasibility study which explained a total of 71% of the variance. Materialistic meanings had factor loadings .56 and .61. Hedonistic meanings had factor loadings .67 and .71. Self-oriented meanings had factor loading from .51 to .76. Social meanings had factor loadings from .65 to .75. Larger meanings had factor loadings from .44 to .58. Existential-philosophical meanings had seven items (being-alive, awareness of finitude, uniqueness, awareness of connectedness, freedom, gratitude, responsibility) with factor loadings from .41 to .56.
3. Reliability analyses: Each of the scales had good or very good reliability: materialism: .86, hedonism: .80, self-oriented: .83, social: .88, larger: .79, existential-philosophical: .78.
4. Construct validity: The correlations between the meaning sextet questionnaire and other questionnaires were as hypothesized and thus indicated good construct validity, as Table 5 shows. Materialist types of meaning correlated very strong with materialist values, strong with achievement, security and stimulation, and weak with fairness, power, mastery and hedonism. Hedonist types of meaning correlated very strong with hedonism and moderately with stimulation, self-direction and achievement. Self-oriented types of meaning correlated strong with self-acceptance and autonomy, moderately with mastery, achievement, power, free will and moderately negative with fatalistic determinism. Social types of meaning had strong correlations with relationships and intimacy, and moderately with conformism, tradition and general purpose in life. Larger types of meaning correlated strong with self-transcendence, benevolence, spirituality and universalism, moderately with fairness, purpose in life, and weak with self-acceptance. Existential-philosophical types of meaning correlated strong with free will, moderately with self-acceptance and universalism and moderately negative with determinism and randomness.

Table 5. Correlations between the Meaning Sextet Questionnaire and other questionnaires in the feasibility study / in the Worldwide Survey of Meaning in Life.

Questionnaires		Meaning Sextet Questionnaire						
		Materialistic types of meaning	Hedonistic types of meaning	Self-oriented types of meaning	Social types of meaning	Larger types of meaning	Existential-philosophical types of meaning	
Personal Meaning Profile	Achievement	.51*/.57**	NS/NS	.40*/.43	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	
	Relationship	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	.73**/.81**	NS/NS	NS/NS	
	Self-transcendence	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	.81*/.83**	.33*/.37	
	Self-Acceptance	NS/NS	NS/NS	.69*/.72	NS/NS	.19*/.21*	NS/NS	
	Intimacy	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	.71*/.76**	NS/NS	NS/NS	
Psychologic al Well-Being Scale	Fairness	.19*/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	.50*/.56**	NS/NS	
	Self-Acceptance	NS/NS	NS/NS	.71*/.67*	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	
	Mastery	.23*/.24*	NS/NS	.51*/.55*	NS/NS	NS/NS	.31*/.26*	
	Autonomy	NS/NS	NS/NS	.61*/.63**	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	
	Relationships	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	.77**/.75**	NS/NS	NS/NS	
	Personal growth	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	.87*/.81**	NS/NS	
	Purpose in life	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	.31*/.26	.73*/.72*	NS/NS	
Schwartz' Value Survey	Achievement	.53/.67	.19*/.16*	.33*/.39**	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	
	Benevolence	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	.53*/.48*	NS/NS	
	Conformity	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	.55*/.47**	NS/NS	NS/NS	
	Hedonism	.18*/NS	.83**/.87**	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	
	Power	NS/.21*	NS/NS	.49*/.51**	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	
	Security	.47*/.51**	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	
	Self-Direction	NS/NS	.23*/.22*	.53*/.56**	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	
	Stimulation	.38*/.33*	.38*/.41*	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	
	Spirituality	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	.73*/.75**	NS/NS	
	Tradition	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	.55*/.47*	NS/NS	NS/NS	
	Universalism	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	.69*/.76**	.52*/.47*	
	Materialist Values Scale		.81*/.84*	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS
		Free Will and Determism Scale	Free will	NS/NS	NS/NS	.47*/.49*	NS/NS	NS/NS
Scientific determinism			NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	-.51*/-.53*
Fatalistic determinism			NS/NS	NS/NS	-.32*/-.26*	NS/NS	NS/NS	-.54*/-.51*
Randomness	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	NS/NS	-.30*/-.33*		

Note: Cells present Pearson's Correlations in the Feasibility study / in the Worldwide Survey of Meaning in Life. N/S Not Significant, *Significant at $\alpha < .05$, **significant at $\alpha < .01$. We consider Pearson's correlations larger than .70 as strong, larger than .40 as relatively strong, larger than .20 as moderate, and below .20 as weak.

- Predictive validity: The findings from both the feasibility study and the Worldwide Survey of Meaning indicate that materialistic, hedonistic and self-oriented types of meaning have more negative effects on someone's well-being than social and larger types of meaning. That is, materialistic types of meaning were correlated with less positive affect ($R = -.33, p < .05/R = -.37, p < .01$), more negative affect ($R = .46, p < .01/R = .47, p < .01$), lower quality-of-life ($R = \text{not significant}/R = -.33, p < .05$), and lower life-satisfaction ($R = -.51, p < .01/R = -.48, p < .01$). Hedonistic types of meaning were correlated with less positive affect

- ($R = -.41, p < .05/R = -.42, p < .01$), more negative affect ($R = .33, p < .05/R = .32, p < .05$), lower quality-of-life ($R = -.22, p < .05/R = -.25, p < .05$), and lower life-satisfaction ($R = -.49, p < .01/R = -.45, p < .01$). Self-oriented types of meaning were correlated with less positive affect ($R = -.52, p < .05/R = -.53, p < .01$), more negative affect ($R = .47, p < .05/R = .43, p < .01$), lower quality-of-life ($R = -.33, p < .05/R = -.32, p < .05$), and lower life-satisfaction ($R = -.44, p < .01/R = -.46, p < .01$). Social types of meaning were correlated with more positive affect ($R = .71, p < .05/R = .73, p < .01$), less negative affect ($R = -.36, p < .05/R = -.39, p < .01$), better quality-of-life ($R = .42, p < .05/R = .35, p < .05$), and better life-satisfaction ($R = .72, p < .01/R = -.74, p < .01$). Larger types of meaning were correlated with more positive affect ($R = .82, p < .01/R = .76, p < .01$), less negative affect ($R = -.33, p < .05/R = -.32, p < .01$), better quality-of-life ($R = .38, p < .05/R = .37, p < .01$), and better life-satisfaction ($R = .82, p < .01/R = -.80, p < .01$).
6. Cross-cultural validity: Financial worries were negatively correlated with materialistic types of meaning in both the feasibility study and the formal survey (respectively $R = .44, p < .05; R = .43, p < .05$). The cultural dimensions did not correlate with any types of meaning, although there was a trend in the Worldwide Survey that individuals in collectivist countries had stronger social ($R = .61, p = .07$) and stronger large types of meaning in life ($R = .56, p = .09$). Other sociodemographic variables did not correlate with any types of meaning. Interpretability: The participants rated that they agreed “much” to “very much” with the automated interpretations of their overall MSQ-scores (materialism: $M = 5.4, SD = 1.2$; hedonism: $M = 6.2, SD = 2.0$; self-oriented: $M = 4.8, SD = 2.3$; social: $M = 6.3, SD = 1.0$; larger: $M = 5.9, SD = 1.1$; existential-philosophical: $M = 4.4, SD = 2.8$).

Discussion

To date, this study offers the most comprehensive review of all empirical studies in which individuals were asked what they experience as meaningful in their life. Previous studies have been theoretical in nature or focused only on specific questionnaires or specific populations. The thematic analyses of the literature led to the identification of 6 types and 29 sub-types of meanings: materialistic, hedonistic, self-oriented, social, larger, and existential-philosophical types of meaning. Study 2 showed that this meaning typology is congruent with, integrates and extends the models from previous reviewers. Study 3 provided further support for this typology, as the Meaning Sextet Questionnaire seems to reliably operationalize the six types of meaning, in line with other meaning questionnaires.

In a first round of the thematic analysis of the systematic literature review (not presented here), five types of meaning were identified, as materialistic and hedonistic meanings were combined into one overarching materialistic-hedonistic type of meaning. This initial meaning quintet was also mentioned in previous publications (Vos, 2017; Vos & Vitali 2018). However, when studies 2 and 3 were conducted, it became clear that materialistic meanings need to be differentiated from hedonistic meanings. Firstly, study 2 indicated that other authors seem to differentiate materialistic from hedonistic

meanings (Fegg, Kramer, L'Hoste & Borasio, 2008; Scheler, 1973). Seen from a phenomenological perspective, materialistic types of meaning seem to describe a mode of having external objects or having achieved a certain status (this may be formulated in outcome-oriented terms of “what”), whereas hedonistic types of meaning seem to describe an embodied/sensory flow of experiencing (this may be formulated in process-oriented/experiential terms of “how”) (Vos, 2015). Similarly, Frankl differentiated experiential meanings from productive-creative types of meaning. Secondly, when items were generated for the MSQ and the pilot study was conducted, it became clear that materialistic and hedonistic are different phenomena. Explorative factor analyses in the pilot study and survey clearly confirmed that these are different statistical factors in the experiences of the research participants.

There were some indications of the cross-cultural validity of the meaning sextet typology. For example, the MSQ scores were not significantly influenced by cultural or socio-demographic variables (except for materialistic types of meanings which were understandably correlated with financial worries). All MSQ-items were slightly skewed toward larger scores, which seemed to indicate that the items were experienced as meaningful by most participants, which may suggest world-wide meaningfulness of the items. Despite a possible global meaningfulness of the MSQ-items, not each individual experiences each type of meaning as equally meaningful (i.e., there was variation in answers), which may reflect different individual and social-cultural histories (Vos, 2017). Some individuals may even not focus on meaning at all and may be existentially indifferent (Schnell, 2010). It may be hypothesized that, although all types of meaning could be found in all cultures, how individuals experience meaning is likely to be influenced by culture, context, time, place, language and history (Bermant et al., 2011; Knoop & Delle Fave, 2013; Misra & Gergen, 1993; Steger et al., 2008; Wong, 2011). It has also been suggested that in certain cultures, horizontal meanings such as material and self-oriented meanings are tightly connected with vertical meanings such as social and larger meanings; this intertwining has been described as “interconnectedness-toward-wholeness” (Delle Fave & Soosai-Nathan, 2014). Young and elder individuals may also focus on different types of meaning (Hicks et al., 2012; Reker & Woo, 2011; Steger et al., 2009), as well as individuals in different socio-economic cohorts (Carstensen & Charles, 1999). The literature review was based on studies from all continents, although there were few studies from South/Latin-America and Africa; the sample in the MSQ-studies was also skewed toward western higher-educated individuals. Thus, although there are some indications for the universality of this meaning typology, more research is warranted into cross-cultural and socio-economic differences (see Vos, 2020).

Furthermore, this project showed that psychological well-being does not indistinctively follow from each type of meaning. Materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning are associated with lower well-being, whereas social and larger types of meaning are associated with larger well-being. This finding needs to be interpreted carefully, as this study did not include formal clinical assessments and there were no experimental designs to study causal relationships. However, this finding is in line with studies suggesting that materialistic, hedonistic and self-oriented types of meaning are experienced as less meaningful and satisfying, and are correlated with smaller long-term well-being,

while social and larger values are correlated with larger well-being (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2013; Nielsen, Gantt & Thayne, 2014). To further investigate the effects of meaning types on well-being, subsequent exploratory meta-analyses were conducted on the 26 research publications in the systematic literature review (study 1) that had included well-being instruments. These meta-analyses suggested that materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning are indeed correlated with lower well-being than social and larger meanings (all Cohen's $d > .30$, $p < .01$). However, the heterogeneity between studies and missing data were so large (due to lack of reporting), that it was decided not to present these findings in this article. More research is needed into the relationship between different types of meaning and different types of well-being.

There is no specific information on how many types/subtypes of meanings individuals need to be able to live a fulfilling, satisfying and happy life. It has been suggested to identify whether clients have a pyramidal or a horizontal meaning-system (Kratochvil, in Fabry, 1986). In a pyramidal value system, individuals focus on a small number of idealized values at the top and few other minor values at the basis of the pyramid. In a horizontal value system, an individual has many equally important values and not a specific focus or direction in life to commit to. It has been suggested to help clients develop a parallel value-system in which there are a few important values –for example four or five- which we consider important (Lukas, 1996). Future research should examine the different experiences and psychological effects of pyramidal and horizontal approaches to meaning.

Several sub-types and examples of meaning overlapped in the MSQ. For instance, different aspects of self-development were included in different types: educational success is regarded a materialistic type of meaning, coping skills a self-oriented meaning, and self-growth a larger meaning. This shows the principles of equifinality and multifinality. Equifinality means that every type of meaning can be attained by different means (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). For instance, I can achieve the meaning of intimacy in many ways, with different partners, in different situations. Multifinality means that any means can serve for a range of meanings. For instance, being close with friends can give intimacy but can also be functional for instance to find a job via professional networking. Thus, one activity may have many meanings, and one meaning may be realized in many activities. Research suggests that individuals often strive for multi-finality, that is synergy between different meanings (Chun et al., 2011). More research is needed on the experience and psychological impact of synergetic and conflicting types of meanings.

The MSQ included specific life goals as a larger type of meaning. However, some authors have argued that all types of meaning are goal-oriented: “goals are essential components of a person’s experience of her or his life as meaningful (...) the construct of meaning has no meaning outside of a person’s goals and purposes” (Emmons & McCullough, 2003, p.107; cf. Cooper, 2019; Palfai & Weafer, 2006; McGregor & Little, 1998). However, others have argued that not all meanings are goal-oriented, such as being in the here-and-now and self-care are activities done for the sake of the activity itself and not as goal-oriented behavior (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013). Goal-orientation seems to describe *how* individuals approach meaning (i.e., approach meaning as goals, and not via a traditional or phenomenological approach), whereas types of meaning describe *what* individuals experience as meaningful; the philosopher Martin Heidegger argued that the questions “what” and “how” should not be conflated (Vos, 2021, 2015).

The related concept of self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000) was included in the MSQ as a self-oriented type of meaning as some individuals seem to experience making their own decisions in life as meaningful in itself; however, self-determination also seems to be more than *what* the type of meaning is that an individual experiences, as it also seems to describe *how* an individual generally approaches meaning. More research is needed on the conceptual similarities and dissimilarities between meaning, goals, purpose and self-determination.

What could practitioners do with these findings? A systematic literature review and meta-analyses of 60 clinical trials has indicated that psychotherapy is more effective when more types of meaning are discussed with clients (Vos, 2017). For example, a therapist who only stimulates clients to explore meaning in relationships (i.e., social type of meaning) is less effective than a therapist who invites clients for a systematic exploration of multiple types of meaning in life (e.g., all six types and 29 sub-types of meaning). This could possibly be compared with fishermen who are more likely to catch fish with a broad fishing net than with a small fishing rod; similarly, clients may be more likely to discover their subjective meaning(s) when the therapist systematically explores multiple possible types of meanings instead of focusing only one specific type of meaning. Therefore, existential, meaning-oriented, and Acceptance-and-Commitment therapists may want to systematically explore each of the 6 types and 29 sub-types of meaning with clients, of course in a non-directive way without imposing or expecting clients to find any specific meanings. Furthermore, children and young people may benefit from being exposed to a comprehensive cross-cultural typology of meaning in their education, to learn that there are many ways to live a meaningful life -and not only the ways they were taught by their parents or culture-, which may facilitate their individual existential development, psychological flexibility, and cross-cultural communication. Although all types of meaning can be meaningful and fulfilling, therapists, coaches, counselors, trainers and teachers may want to explain to clients that social and larger types of meaning are more likely to lead to better well-being (see Vos & Vitali, 2018, for a treatment manual based on the meaning sextet). The systematic exploration of multiple types of meaning in life could help to make these therapies more applicable to a wider range of clients and could lead to less dropout and larger therapeutic effects (Vos, 2017).

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