

Meaning Sextet Questionnaire

Reference: Vos, J. (2022). The Meaning Sextet: A Systematic Literature Review and Further Validation of a Universal Typology of Meaning in Life. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*. Based on the initial version in: Joel Vos 2018. *Meaning in life: an evidence-based handbook for practitioners*. Bloomsbury.

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Instructions

This questionnaire aims to help you better understand what you experience as meaningful in life. It also aims to help you discover which meaningful activities you are already doing and which ones you would like to do more of.

Some suggestions

We will show you 31 statements, and for each statement, we will ask you two questions. First, we ask you how important this statement is in your life. For example, 'playing soccer' can be important in your life. However, not every statement will be equally important for you, and in that case you can click on the answer that is saying that this is less important for you. Second, we ask you how much you are doing or experiencing this at this moment in your life. For example, if you often play soccer you answer 'often', but if you seldom play soccer you answer 'seldom'. You will see that for some statements, you are actually doing and experiencing now in your life what is important to you. But for other statements, you may be doing them not that often as you want them to do.

For each of the 31 statements, we give multiple examples, but only one of these examples need apply to you; for example, if you experience only one example 'often' and the other examples 'seldom', then you score 'often'. Ignore examples you do not understand.

Try not to think too long about the items and try to give the scores intuitively. If you do not know which score to give, do what feels best.

	Meaningful experience	How important is this for you in your life? (this is about your ideal, regardless of whether you make this happen in reality)	How much are you doing or experiencing this now? (this is about what you do in reality)
		1 = totally unimportant 2 = somewhat unimportant 3 = neither unimportant, nor important 4 = somewhat important 5 = totally important	1 = seldom 2 = not often 3 = sometimes 4 = often 5 = very often
1	Being in a good, safe or enjoyable material situation E.g. good finances, good house, nice possessions, not needing to fight for physical survival	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
2	Having success E.g. being generally successful in life, having a successful career, being successful in school/education, having high social status or power	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
3	Enjoying nice physical experiences E.g. hedonism, fun, leisure, joyful activities, enjoying beauty (music, art, eating, drinking, etc.), sex, nature, animals, peak experiences	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
4	Enjoying good health E.g. being healthy, healthy lifestyle, sports	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
5	Coping successfully with difficult life situations E.g. being flexible, resilient, perseverance, hardiness, accepting challenges, effective coping skills, knowing what to do in stressful situations	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
6	Being effective in achieving daily life activities or goals E.g. being effective in setting specific activities or goals, planning, organising, discipline, evaluating and adjusting, being in control	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
7	Knowing myself E.g. self-insight	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
8	Knowing myself and/or accepting myself for who I am	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5

	E.g. self-acceptance, self-worth, self-esteem		
9	Being autonomous or self-reliant	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
10	Expressing myself in creative ways E.g. speaking, writing, art	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
11	Taking good care of myself E.g. self-care	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
12	Feeling socially connected E.g. having good social skills, good connections with friends, family, intimate relationships or partner	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
13	Belonging to a specific community E.g. feeling that I am part of my family, community, history, society	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
14	Following social expectations E.g. doing what is socially expected, following social virtues, being conformist	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
15	Being altruistic E.g. helping other people, improving the well-being of others, being selfless or generous	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
16	Giving birth to and/or taking care of children and young people	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
17	Following larger purposes E.g. trying to achieve specific higher goals, purposes, aims or dreams in my life	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
18	Trying to get the best out of myself E.g. personal growth, self-development, fulfilling my potential, self-transcendence, self-realisation, trying to become authentic or wise	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
19	Focusing on the future E.g. future-oriented, leaving a positive legacy to people who will live after my death, focusing on an afterlife, heaven or hell.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
20	Trying to overcome the past E.g. reflecting on the past, making something better of the background that I grew up in, solving mistakes in my past	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
21	Living in the here and now E.g. mindfulness	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
22	Being ethical and just	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5

	E.g. following high ethical standards, being treated in a just way, contributing to a more just world		
23	Being spiritual or religious E.g. spirituality, religion, beliefs, worship or religious practices, insight in cosmic meaning, spiritual union, peace harmony and balance, belief in Absolute Beauty, Platonic Idea or Highest Good	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
24	Feeling alive	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
25	Being aware that I will die one day E.g. mortality, finitude, knowing that everything in life is temporal and can change	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
26	Being a unique individual: E.g. being unique as a person, having my own unique experiences, my own life and world around me	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
27	Being fundamentally connected with the world and people around me E.g. I am always in the world, in social relationships; I am always influenced by the larger context and I always influence a larger context	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
28	Being individually free: E.g. I am free to make decisions, free to decide my attitude towards problems in life; I am able to leave a legacy to people who will live after my death	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
29	Being grateful for being alive: E.g. experiencing the mere fact that I am born and that I am still alive as a gift or a miracle; although I did not ask to be born, I see being-born as highly precious and special, for which I need to be grateful	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
30	Being individually responsible E.g. I and only I am responsible to make something from my life, no one else can do this for me; I am responsible for living up to my highest values	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
31	Other meaningful experiences (write down your own examples)	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5

How to calculate the sum scores:

Importance of meaning sub-scales

These items can be found in the left column of the questionnaire.

The scores on these subscales explain how important each type of meaning is.

Importance of materialistic type of meaning: sum of items 1 + 2; divide by 2 to get the average score

Importance of hedonistic type of meaning: sum of items 3 + 4; divide by 2 to get the average score

Importance of self-oriented type of meaning: sum of items 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 + 9 + 10 + 11; divide by 7 to get the average score

Importance of social type of meaning: sum of items 12 + 13 + 14 + 15 + 16; divide by 5 to get the average score

Importance of larger type of meaning: sum of items 17 + 18 + 19 + 20 + 21 + 22 + 23; divide by 7 to get the average score

Importance of existential-philosophical type of meaning: sum of items 24 + 25 + 26 + 27 + 28 + 29 + 30; divide by 7 to get the average score

Importance of other types of meaning: item 31

Importance of superficial types of meaning: sum of materialistic + hedonistic + self-oriented types of meaning; divide by three

Importance of deeper types of meaning: sum of social + larger types of meaning; divide by two

Realisation of meaning sub-scales

These items can be found in the right column of the questionnaire.

The scores on the subscales explain to which extent each type of meaning is realised.

Realisation of materialistic type of meaning: sum of items 1 + 2; divide by 2 to get the average score

Realisation of hedonistic type of meaning: sum of items 3 + 4; divide by 2 to get the average score

Realisation of self-oriented type of meaning: sum of items 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 + 9 + 10 + 11; divide by 7 to get the average score

Realisation of social type of meaning: sum of items 12 + 13 + 14 + 15 + 16; divide by 5 to get the average score

Realisation of larger type of meaning: sum of items 17 + 18 + 19 + 20 + 21 + 22 + 23; divide by 7 to get the average score

Realisation of existential-philosophical type of meaning: sum of items 24 + 25 + 26 + 27 + 28 + 29 + 30; divide by 7 to get the average score

Realisation of other types of meaning: item 31

Realisation of superficial types of meaning: sum of materialistic + hedonistic + self-oriented types of meaning; divide by three

Realisation of deeper types of meaning: sum of social + larger types of meaning; divide by two

Notes for interpretation

- Look at the individual items of the importance sub-scales. Are there at least between three and six important meanings in life?
- Put the importance of meaning sub-scales on a range from least important to most important meanings; what are the most important meanings?; what are the least important meanings?
- Are all scores on the importance sub-scales the same (horizontal meaning profile) or are there clear differences between the scores (pyramidal meaning profile). Note that individuals seem to benefit from having a pyramidal meaning profile, as this can for example make it simpler to make priorities and make decisions in life.
- If all scores on all importance of meaning subscales are low, create and test hypotheses why this may be the case. For example, could the client be severely depressed or use radical scientific scepticism?
- Does the client find more importance in superficial or in deep types of meaning? Note that a dominant focus on superficial meanings is associated with lower mental and physical health, and that a dominant focus on deeper meanings is associated with better mental and physical health.
- Does the client totally deny or avoid superficial types of meaning (that is, extremely low scores on all items)? Note that clients benefit from having some superficial meanings in life, albeit that this should not be the dominant focus.
- Check for the most important types of meaning in life (both the subscales-scores as well as the individual items) whether the individual also realises these types of meaning. It is understandable that the individual is frustrated and/or sad if a meaning is important to them but they cannot realise this in daily life. If one specific important meaning is not realised, are there other important meanings that the client can focus on? Ask the individual whether the frustration of meaning is temporary or structural, and which emotions this trigger in them; if important meanings in life are frustrated for a long term in life, this may create different responses (see next point).
- Check whether the client is sufficiently realising deep types of meaning in life. If the client is not realising deep types of meaning, this will likely have an impact on their emotions. Short term frustration in realising their meaning is associated with feelings of stress, anxiety, anger and some sadness; long term frustration is associated with feelings of deep depression, learned helplessness and hopelessness.

Meaning Attitude Scale (MAS-45)

Vos, J. (2023). The development and validation of the Meaning Approach Scale: Traditional, functionalistic and critical-intuitive approaches to meaning in life. Under review.

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The following questions ask how you have developed your ideas about what is meaningful in life. Please answer to which extent you agree with each statement:

(1) Totally disagree

(2) Somewhat disagree

(3) Neither disagree nor agree

(4) Somewhat agree

(5) Totally agree

1. I follow traditional ways to know what is meaningful for me in life. (T)

2. I am in control of the meaning in my life. (F)

3. I try to have an open mind for whatever shows to be meaningful in my life. (CI)

4. I try to discover my pre-given meaning in life.(T)
5. People can make their own meaning in life.(F)
6. My intuition tells me what is meaningful and what is not meaningful.(CI)
7. Each individual has one unique destination in life.(T)
8. If you try hard enough, you can achieve anything in life.(F)
9. I listen deeply to myself to discover what is meaningful for me.(CI)
10. God or a Higher Power has a plan for me.(T)
11. I decide what is meaningful in my life.(F)
12. I try not to let my life be influenced by the expectations that others have of me.(CI)
13. Religion or spirituality helps me to find out what is meaningful in life.(T)
14. When I cannot achieve one goal in life, I simply replace that with another goal.(F)
15. What is truly meaningful in life will show itself.(CI)
16. I am part of a bigger plan in the universe.(T)
17. I can change my direction in life if I want.(F)
18. I try to have an open attitude towards new experiences in life.(CI)
19. My aim in life is to play my role in society well.(T)

20. People can randomly pick any goals in life.(F)
21. Creativity, dreams or art inspire me in how I live my life.(CI)
22. There is only one right path in life.(T)
23. I live from kick to kick.(F)
24. My feelings help me to find out what is meaningful in life.(CI)
25. What needs to happen in life, will happen.(T)
26. I make my own meaningful experiences in life.(F)
27. I see a clear difference between what is meaningful and what is less meaningful in life.(CI)
28. I try to follow the traditions of my community.(T)
29. I try to achieve the maximum in everything I do.(F)
30. Being in the here-and-now helps me to find out what is meaningful in life.(CI)
31. When you search carefully, you can find your true calling in life.(T)
32. I like to follow the latest fashions and trends in how people live their lives.(F)
33. I try to be as authentic as possible in how I live my life.(CI)
34. Certain virtues are universally good, in all times and places.(T)
35. I just do whatever I like in life.(F)

36. Meditation or mindfulness help me to discover what is meaningful.(CI)
37. I set clear goals in life.(T)
38. There is no final destination in life.(F)
39. The destination in life is often less important than the way to the destination.(CI)
40. I try to go in the most straight line towards my goals in life.(T)
41. It is not important for me to achieve goals in life.(F)
42. I am critical of popular trends in how people live their lives.(CI)
43. In my life, I try to follow the example of a saint, hero or another role model.(T)
44. I set my own examples in life.(F)
45. Others can inspire me, but ultimately I need to find out my own meaning in life.(CI)

Instruction:

Step 1. Calculate subscales

MAS-45 consists of three sub-scales: (T) Traditional, (F) Functionalistic and (IC) Intuitive-critical/functionalistic approaches to meaning in life. Calculate the sumscores for each scale and divide this by 15:

Traditional approach to meaning in life: sumscore =

divided by 15 = average score =

Functionalistic approach to meaning in life: sumscore =

divided by 15 = average score =

Critical-intuitive/phenomenological approach to meaning in life: sumscore =

divided by 15 = average score =

Step 2. Interpret average scores

The average score for each subscale may be loosely interpreted as follows:

Score 1-1.5: Totally disagree with the approach

Score 1.5-2.5: Somewhat disagree with the approach

Score 2.5-3.5: Neither disagree nor agree with the approach

Score 3.5-4.5: Somewhat agree with the approach

Scores larger than 4.5: Totally agree with the approach

Step 3. Compare average scores of scales.

Compare the scores with each other. Are any scales much stronger than others? What would this say about the dominant approach to meaning in life?

Step 4. Check extreme scores on single items

Check scores of '1' or '5' on single items in the MAS: what could these strong answers mean for the individual?

Step 5. Check the description of traditional, functionalistic and phenomenological/critical-intuitive approaches to meaning in life below.

Traditional approach

The word 'meaning' comes from the Old-German word 'Meinung' or 'meniti'. The oldest texts in which the word 'Meinung' was used date to the 11th century. 'Meinung' initially referred to a message being communicated through oneself, such as being-communicated-to, being-given-an-opinion, being-signified, being-given directions (Vos, 2017). This word was used to describe a traditional approach about how God's will was 'communicated' ('ge-meint') through people's work, and by being in service to the community. During the Reformation, the word 'Meinung' transformed from implying a traditional attitude to a functionalistic attitude(see below).

The traditional approach also appeared in other medieval words for meaning in life: 'Betekenis'(Dutch), 'Bedytning'(Danish), 'Bezeichnung'(German) and 'token'(English). These words are derived from the word 'teikan' which referred to an omen or message from God. Associated with tokens is the Old-French 'Sign' and Old-English 'Segn', which have been derived from the

Latin root 'signum' which also originally described a message from above such as a Higher Deity; many languages have similar words, such as 'Signification'(French), 'Significance'(English), 'Significado'(Spanish), and 'Signifiato'(Italian). In poststructuralism/postmodernism, the words 'sign' and 'token' lost their reference to an authority or Deity communicating a transcendent meaning from above, and started to refer to the process of humans 'signifying' and constructing immanent meanings in intersubjective dialogues and narratives (DeSaussure, 2011). Thus, similar to the word 'Meinung', 'Sign' was no longer dominantly used traditionally and more often functionalistically.

During the Renaissance, a new word emerged in Indo-European languages to describe a traditional approach: 'vocation', derived from the Latin root 'vocare' which means being-called, like being called by God. Luther used a visual metaphor to explain how an individual's vocation was about being called by God: God is milking the cows through the vocation of the milkmaid (Billing, 1964). Several Indo-European languages have similar words: 'vocation'(English, French), 'Vocacion'(Spanish) and 'Vocazione'(Italian). Other languages use the same metaphor of being-called, although etymologically derived from other roots, such as 'Berufung'(German) and 'roeping'(Dutch).

In sum, the traditional approach to meaning that seems revealed in these words may be defined as 'following what other people or Higher Powers communicate, signify or expect about your meaning in life'. This may include following a religion or religious calling, or conforming to social expectations. This may also include following a pre-assigned socio-economic-political meaning at birth, like in the Hindu Cast-system, or in Medieval Europe when the place where you were born determined your meaning, like a peasant's son was expected to experience meaning in

becoming a peasant (Taylor,2007). The resulting meaning from a traditional approach may be called 'traditional meaning' (Vos,2017).

Functionalistic approach

Whereas the word 'meaning' initially referred to a traditional approach, during the Reformation its common use transformed into a more functionalistic approach, possibly due to criticisms from reformers such as Luther and Calvin and Enlightenment authors such as Voltaire and Erasmus. In most languages, words derived from 'Meinung' nowadays have mundane connotations, such as an individual's subjective random opinion, vulgarity, childish desires and so on: 'Meinung'(German), 'Mening'(Dutch). However, in several languages these terms still refer to meaning in life, albeit often in a functionalistic way, such as 'meaning'(English), 'Mening'(Swedish) and possibly 'Mahna'(Arabic), 'Maaba'(Swahili) and Maai(Thai). Meaning does not refer to a transcendent phenomenon like in the traditional or critical-intuitive/phenomenological approach, but to a subjective opinion and an immanent/non-transcendent phenomenon (Vos, 2017).

Alongside the modern functionalistic use of the word 'Meinung', since the 1800's several Indo-European languages started to evolve new words for meaning in life as specified goals, such as the English 'purpose' and the Spanish/Italian/Portuguese 'proposito' which are derived from the Latin terms 'pro-ponere', to pose/put/place forth. The new goal-oriented words may also reflect the individualistic trend in society, whereby an individual's meaning was no longer communicated by a higher power, but individuals pro-pose their own purposes. The term 'goal' may also reflect the increased societal focus on goal-orientedness/technological-efficiency (Heidegger, 1995). Phenomenologists have criticized the goal-orientation for ignoring the possibility that meaning may not merely be found in the destination, but also in the road-towards-

the-destination, the journey-experience and the social/existential context through which the road goes (Vos, 2020,2017).

In sum, the functionalistic approach to meaning that seems revealed in these words may be defined as ‘determine your own meaning in life, like a mathematical function: do behaviour X, and you will get meaning Y’(ibidem). This approach of a mechanistic self-direction in life seems to include the following assumptions (see details in Vos, 2017):

(1)individuals rationally and consciously decide their meaning in life(i.e.,self-direction);

(2)individuals often define meaning in terms of specific well-defined and well-operationalised goals;

(3)individuals often set large goals(e.g.,‘live life to the max’);

(4)individuals often try to move towards their goals in a linear line, i.e. trying to maximise every activity to achieve their goals in the most efficient way;

(5)individuals may randomly select and replace any types of meanings because there are no transcendent/hierarchic meanings;

(6)individuals may need to compete and fight for the survival of their personal meaning

Meanings resulting from a functionalistic approach have been called ‘functional meanings’(or colloquially ‘McMeanings’, approaching meaning like ordering fast-food; Vos, 2020).

Critical-intuitive/phenomenological approach

At the end of the Middle Ages, several words evolved in Indo-European languages that neither seemed to reflect traditional nor functionalistic approaches. These words have been derived from the Latin ‘sentire’, which means ‘to perceive with all senses’, a perceptive/receptive

approach. These words are: 'Sinn'(German), 'Zin'(Dutch), 'Sens'(French), 'Senso'(Italian), 'Sentido'(Spanish), 'Smesl'(Russian) and 'Smisla'(Macedonian). Although in English the word 'sense' emerged(e.g. 'to make sense of something'), this word rarely refers to meaning in contemporary language. The Old-Dutch/German 'Sinn' also often referred to going on a journey in a particular direction.

Several late-medieval authors, such as Luther and Meister Eckhart, explicitly differentiated the words 'Meinung' and 'Sinn' (Vos, 2017). According to them, Sinn involves a process whereby a perceiver understands their life with all their senses, which goes beyond both rational goal-setting and blind conformism. 'Sinn' implies an attitude of being perceptive/receptive towards meaning that already exists in our daily-life, given in our experiences, and neither functionalistically created by us nor given in a traditional message by a larger power.

Formulated in epistemological terms, 'Sinn' is not created by a person, like a knower/subject imposing their ideas on an object/known such as functionalistically imposing our goals onto our life. The individual is already phenomenologically engaged in their lifeworld, embedded in countless meaningful relationships that do not require a conscious act of 'knowing' (Husserl,2012; Jaspers,1971). Before we reflect and use words, we already exist in many meaningful ways in our life-world (Sartre,1967, summarised this with his famous adage 'existence precedes essence'). Merleau-Ponty (1968) wrote that we 'sense' our meaning in life, not as a passive outsider-perceiver of our life as an external reality but in a dynamic embodied act of mutual-meaning-construction between perceiving and perceived, a process which other philosophers may refer to as 'signification'(Lacan, 2001). Thus, perceiving/receiving our meaning

in life is like intuitively sensing how we already live a meaningful life in our daily-life-world, and intuitively understanding the difference between what is more-meaningful and less-meaningful. That is, if we look closely at our experiences of our life, meaning will reveal itself like a 'phainomenon', as the Ancient Greek word 'phainomenon' means etymologically 'that which shows itself'. Heidegger(1961) wrote that this phenomenological approach to life is like the Ancient Greek word for truth as a-letheia, which means without-covers: meaning will show itself in our daily-life experiences when we remove its covers, for example by getting rid of our traditional or functionalistic approaches (Vos,2021a;Wrathall, 2010).

In phenomenological philosophy, this approach to meaning has been described with the term 'understanding' in contrast with the positivist term 'explaining' (Dilthey, 2010). However, in modern language, we often prefer the word 'intuition' which comes from the Latin 'intuitionem', which refers to perceiving or considering. The word 'critical-intuition' seems the most appropriate, to differentiate this phenomenological approach from connotations of intuiting a traditional meaning, blind-intuition or esoteric-intuition. That is, to let meaning reveal itself, we need to be critical, by continuously removing its covers in a phenomenological process, for example by systematically examining our experiences and critically reflecting on ourselves (Vos, 2021,2017).

The critical-intuitive/phenomenological approach to meaning in life was initially described in mystic-spiritual texts, which was later taken over by existential-philosophers who removed the traditional-religious connotations. For example, the medieval Christian-mystic Meister Eckhart (1955) told his followers to stop their traditional focus on 'Meinung' and their functionalistic focus on goals: instead he told his followers to develop an attitude of letting-go('Gelassenheit').

Eckhart's mystic steps(formally called 'purgatio'/'illuminatio'/'unio') seem to have inspired the evolution of the phenomenological method of bracketing, via Eckhart-inspired philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Heidegger(Visser, 2008). Whereas the Indo-European word 'Sinn' is only eight centuries old, other languages have older words with different etymological roots, for similar critical-intuitive approaches of meaning revealing itself, such as the Vedic 'Dharma' (Agarwal, 2015), Chinese 'Yijing', Taoist 'wu-wei'(Sigurðsson, 2016) and Japanese 'Igi' (Kotera, 2021).

In sum, the phenomenological approach to meaning in life that seems revealed in words associated with 'Sinn' may be defined as 'listen critically to your intuition'. On the one hand, a critically-intuitive individual accepts the meanings that they intuitively perceive in their flow of experiences (e.g. perceiving what is meaningful via mindful, focused observing their daily-life, or via experiential exercises). On the other hand, a critically-intuitive individual uses their critical thinking skills to differentiate the more-meaningful from the less-meaningful (e.g. being-aware-of and critiqueing inauthenticity and social-economic or political conformism). The result may be called an intuited or phenomenological meaning (Vos,2017).