



The meaningful life in Japan and the United States: Levels and correlates of meaning in life [☆]

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Abstract

Culture supplies people with the provisions to derive meaning from life. However, no research has examined cultural variation in the two principal dimensions of meaning in life, presence of meaning and search for meaning. The present investigation adapted theories of self-concept and cognitive styles to develop a dialectical model of meaning in life, which predicted cultural differences in the tendency to experience search for meaning as opposed to, or harmonious with, presence of meaning. Using data from American ($N = 1183$) and Japanese ($N = 982$) young adults, mean levels and correlates of presence of meaning and search for meaning were examined. As predicted, Americans reported greater presence of meaning; Japanese reported greater search for meaning. In accordance with the model, search for meaning was negatively related to presence of meaning and well-being in the United States (opposed) and positively related to these variables in Japan (harmonious). Thus, the search for meaning appears to be influenced by culture, and search for meaning appears to moderate cultural influences on presence of meaning.

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1. Introduction

Life challenges us with a potentially bewildering complexity of ambiguous information, adverse events, and unpredictable circumstances. Yet, most people find this stream of experiences to be sensible, and maintain that they have found meaning in life (Baumeister, 1991). People are aided in their efforts to order and interpret their existence by a robust and flexible tool: culture (Allport, 1961). The purpose of the present study was to provide an investigation of the potential influence of culture in meaning in life, including an examination of cultural variance in levels of the presence of meaning and the search for meaning, as well as relations with well-being. Illuminating the relations among culture, dimensions of meaning, and well-being would deepen our understanding of one of the factors that shape how people think about themselves and their place in the world.

Two important dimensions of meaning in life have emerged in theory and research (e.g., Crumbaugh, 1977; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). The first concerns the degree to which individuals perceive their lives as significant and meaningful, referred to here as presence of meaning in life. The second concerns the degree to which people are engaged in a search for meaning in life. Presence of meaning in life refers to the degree to which people experience their lives as comprehensible and significant, and feel a sense of purpose or mission in their lives that transcends the mundane concerns of daily life (Steger, *in press*). It is a prominent component of several theories of broader human well-being (e.g., King & Napa, 1998; Ryff, 1989), and abundant research has supported associations between self-reported meaning in life and a wide range of other well-being indices (e.g., Reker, 2000). Search for meaning in life pertains to the dynamic, active effort people expend trying to establish and/or augment their comprehension of the meaning, significance, and purpose of their lives (Steger, *in press*; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, *in press*). The search for meaning is related to less presence of meaning, and lower well-being overall (e.g., Crumbaugh, 1977; Steger et al., 2006; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, *in press*). Thus, whereas presence of meaning is concerned with a valued outcome (my life is meaningful), search for meaning is concerned with an important process (how can I make my life more meaningful?). Some have theorized that searching for meaning is a basic human motivation (e.g., Frankl, 1963; Maddi, 1970), which presumably leads to the desired outcome of increased presence of meaning in life. However, correlational, factor analytic, and longitudinal evidence suggests that presence of meaning and search for meaning are only moderately related and are distinct from one another (Steger et al., 2006, *in press*; Steger & Kashdan, 2007). Thus, in addition to presence of meaning and search for meaning, their relationship and potential interactions warrant consideration.

As has been the case with much of psychology, most of the theory-building and empirical investigation relevant to meaning in life has originated within Western cultures. For example, the theories that explicitly identify meaning as an important feature of human functioning largely derive from Aristotelian notions of the good life (e.g., Ryff & Singer, 1998), or experiences intimately associated with Western European history (e.g., Nazi concentration camps, Frankl, 1963). Although there is little controversy about the general value of meaning to human functioning in current, Western well-being research (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006), it is largely unknown whether these meaning dimensions are similarly prominent in non-Western cultures.

2. Culture and dimensions of meaning in life

Culture may be viewed as an important source of individual's values, expectations, and needs (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Culture provides individuals with lay theories about world, including what happiness looks like and how to achieve it (Constantine & Sue, 2006; Uchida, Norasakkunkit, & Kitayama, 2004). Further, culture shapes the specific experiences individuals regard as enriching and meaningful (Kitayama & Markus, 2000). Allport (1961) suggested that culture "is a prearranged design for living... a set of inventions that have arisen in various parts of the world (or with subgroups of populations) to make life efficient and intelligible for mortals who struggle with the same basic problems of life: birth, growth, death, the pursuit of health, welfare, and meaning" (pp. 167–168). If culture supplies individuals with all of these things, including meaning itself, the case for cultural variation in meaning dimensions seems persuasive.

Some research has found that presence of meaning in life is related to higher well-being within specific cultures (e.g., Hong Kong, see Shek, 1992), but there has been no systematic investigation of cross-cultural differences and similarities in meaning in life. Several well-being theories that propose universal psychological needs (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryff & Singer, 1998) suggest that levels of meaning might be consistent across cultures. If dimensions of meaning in life are linked to core psychological needs, these dimensions should be similarly manifest and important across cultures.

However, other research suggests cultural variation. Ryff (1999) referred to her unpublished research in which Americans scored higher than Koreans on her psychological well-being measure, which includes a purpose scale that is similar to other presence of meaning measures. Other research using this same measure showed that Americans scored higher than Swedes (Lindfors, Berntsson, & Lundberg, 2006). Some mean level differences in purpose in life were also observed among racial groups in the United States, as were differential relations with education (Ryff, Keyes, & Hughes, 2003), further suggesting that there might be cultural variation in the levels and correlates of meaning in life. We were unable to locate any research on search for meaning across cultures. Because of the paucity of the literature on meaning in life across cultures, we turned to theories of meaning and theories of culture and well-being to develop a model of meaning and culture, with a particular focus on the self, activity and goal pursuits, and cognitive style.

2.1. *Motivation, culture, and meaning*

The presence of meaning in life is inexorably linked to how people view themselves (e.g., Baumeister, 1991), and cultural influences on the self may likewise influence presence of meaning. Cultures are thought to influence self-concepts along an independent (or individualistic) to interdependent (or collectivistic) continuum (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). Independent cultures emphasize the self as an individual agent and its members may enhance their self-images (Heine, Kitayama, & Lehman, 2001), whereas interdependent cultures emphasize the person as a member of a social and communal network and its members may criticize their self-images (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). People from independent cultures appear motivated to employ strategies that establish and maintain positive feelings about themselves (e.g., Heine et al., 1999; Hetts, Sakuma, & Pelham, 1999). For example, compared to Asian-Americans, European-Americans appear more likely to focus on tasks they are good at (Heine et al., 1999; Oishi &

Diener, 2003). Thus, people from independent cultures may focus on establishing and enhancing the feeling that their lives have meaning.

People from interdependent cultures appear to place higher value on effort and strive for self-improvement, rather than success and self-enhancement, which are valued more in interdependent cultures (e.g., Heine et al., 1999; Oishi & Diener, 2003). The emphasis on process (effort) over outcome (success) implies that those from interdependent cultures might endorse higher levels of the search for meaning (which is also a process). Other research points in this direction as well. Asian-Americans were more likely to be happy when working toward a valued future goal, whereas European-American students were less happy when engaging in this sort of activity (Asakawa & Czikszentmihalyi, 1998). The search for meaning is akin to the goal for having future meaning, and is presumably highly valued by people who are searching. Further, searching for meaning could conceivably be an open and ever-evolving quest. Conceived of in these terms, search for meaning is an important, valued goal requiring prolonged effort. As such, search for meaning appears more consistent with interdependent cultural perspectives on goals, and should be more highly endorsed in these cultures.

3. A dialectical model of meaning in life

Thus far, we have considered cultural implications for levels of presence of meaning and search for meaning. Our interpretation of the literature suggests that presence of meaning would be higher in independent cultures, and search for meaning would be higher in interdependent cultures. Cultural variations in cognitive style hold several implications for the co-occurrence of presence of meaning and search for meaning. Culture influences the way people think about the world around them (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). Independent cultures emphasize distinctions and the self's uniqueness, perhaps leading to oppositional, either/or thinking. In contrast, interdependent cultures stress connectedness, perhaps leading to dialectical, both/and thinking (Bagozzi, Wong, & Yi, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Correspondingly, it has been argued that East Asians have a holistic cognitive style, whereas Americans have an analytic cognitive style (Kitayama, Duffy, Kawamura, & Larsen, 2003). Holistic (dialectical) thinking involves attention to relationships between field and object as explanations for events (Nisbett et al., 2001), including an appreciation for contradictions, and a search for the "Middle Way" between two apparently opposing ideas. Whereas holistic thinking embraces interconnection and minimizes categorization, analytic (oppositional) thinking focuses on distinguishing discrete features, highlighting distinctions, assigning objects to categories, and avoiding contradiction (Nisbett et al., 2001).

The influence of these different cognitive styles appears pervasive, and has been found not only to affect visual information processing (e.g., Kitayama et al., 2003), but also fundamental assumptions about the nature of life itself. For example, Chinese and Americans view change differently, with Chinese generally predicting more change, as well as more changes opposite to the present trend (Ji, Nisbett, & Su, 2001). Americans' predictions seemed to be based on the prospect of stability and consistency. These findings suggested that Chinese individuals might possess the presentiment of cyclical change—that current happiness is likely to become sadness soon. "For the Chinese, life does not become more and more happy or more and more unhappy. Happiness and unhappiness are likely to transform into each other" (Kitayama et al., 2003, p. 454). We suggest that this dialectical

perspective applies to meaning in life as well, and that for members of interdependent cultures life is not expected to become more and more meaningful; rather, presence of meaning unfolds into search for meaning, which in turn transforms into greater meaningfulness.

The dialectical-oppositional framework has been used to predict and explain the positive co-occurrence of positive and negative affect in interdependent cultures (positive and negative affect are *balanced and harmonious with each other*) and the negative co-occurrence of positive and negative affect in independent cultures (positive and negative affect are *opposed to each other*) (Bagozzi et al., 1999). Although findings are somewhat mixed regarding at what level of analysis (momentary to global) cultural differences are most robust, Asians typically report greater co-occurrence of positive and negative affect (Scolon, Diener, Oishi, & Biswas-Diener, 2005). Overall, Asians appear to have a higher tolerance for contradictions than do Americans, and this difference has been surmised to be advantageous in the relational contexts emphasized in interdependent cultures (Choi & Nisbett, 2000). Thus, dialectical thinking may provide members of interdependent cultures with a means of balancing two apparently opposed and contradictory conditions.

We propose a dialectical model of meaning in life that predicts that the nature of the relation between presence of meaning and search for meaning is determined in part by people's cognitive approach to seemingly opposed perspectives. Analytically oriented people are thought to accentuate oppositional aspects, view presence and search as mutually exclusive, and question the rationality of engaging in the effortful process of seeking an outcome someone already has attained. Cross-cultural findings regarding attitudes toward cyclical change (e.g., Ji et al., 2001) further suggest that presence of meaning may be regarded as a stable resource by members of independent cultures, which, once established, can be trusted to persist. Interdependent cultures might encourage the view that meaning is an unstable resource that waxes and wanes, requiring effort to sustain. The prolonged effort of searching for meaning may be united harmoniously with the outcome of greater presence of meaning. Dialectically oriented people are thought to harmonize oppositional aspects, view search and presence as cyclically intertwined, and accept that the effort invested in the process enhances and even constitutes the outcome of presence of meaning. This more open stance toward the search for meaning is partially supported by the finding that the inverse relation between presence and search appears weaker among open-minded people (Steger et al., *in press*). Thus, we would expect that search for meaning would be positively related to presence of meaning (and other well-being indices) in interdependent cultures.

One additional implication of assessing both presence of meaning and search for meaning is that we can examine their interaction. According to previous findings among Americans, those searching for meaning experience lower well-being. However, this relation may exist primarily among people reporting low presence of meaning. After all, this group of people indicates that they are actively and intently searching for meaning but not finding it. In contrast, those high in both search for meaning and presence of meaning might be more concerned with deepening their understanding of a life they already feel is endowed with meaning. Search for meaning may matter less when presence of meaning has been established. Thus, there is reason to expect a significant interaction between search for meaning and presence of meaning with regard to well-being in independent culture samples. Among dialectically oriented, interdependent samples, presence and search should be positively related. Thus, they would have a more additive relation in the sense that both contribute to well-being, with less basis to expect a significant interactive effect.

To examine this possibility, we examined a three-way interaction predicting happiness (search by presence by culture).

4. Hypotheses

The purpose of the present research was to provide a cross-cultural investigation of the levels and correlates of presence of meaning and search for meaning in life in an independent culture (the United States) and an interdependent culture (Japan). Through this investigation, we aim to develop the first known cultural model of meaning, rooted in culturally embedded self-concepts and cognitive styles. In accord with previous research showing that general well-being is often highest in independent cultures (e.g., Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1993; Veenhoven, 1993) (1) we hypothesized that participants in the United States would report higher levels of presence of meaning than those in Japan. In accord with other research (e.g., Deci et al., 2001), (2) we hypothesized that the relations between the presence of meaning and other indices of well-being would be similar in the United States and Japan.

According to our dialectical model of meaning in life, we would predict that search for meaning might be accepted or even encouraged in Japan. Therefore, (3) we hypothesized higher levels of the search for meaning in Japan than in the United States. Further, although search for meaning might be viewed as oppositional to well-being in the United States, it might be viewed as harmonious with well-being in Japan. Therefore, (4) we hypothesized positive relations between search for meaning and both presence of meaning and happiness in Japan, whereas we hypothesized and negative relations in the United States. Finally, (5) we hypothesized a significant three-way interaction among search, presence, and culture, such that only in the United States sample, happiness would be relatively high among those high in both search and presence and relatively low among those high in search and low in presence.

5. Method

We recruited 1183 participants in the United States to match 982 participants recruited in Japan. We sampled college-age adults in both Japan and the United States, and included measures of meaning in life and happiness. We first focused on obtaining data on the Japanese Meaning in Life Questionnaire, along with another measure of meaning in life to assess convergent validity. We also obtained data on a measure of happiness. Finally, to help evaluate the psychometric properties of the Japanese Meaning in Life Questionnaire, we obtained retest data from two subsamples.

5.1. *United States*

5.1.1. *Participants and procedure*

Participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology classes at a large university in the Midwestern United States, as well as a psychology-related internet site (see Table 1 for sample and subsample characteristics). Participants were 20.4 years old on average ($SD = 4.2$) and 68% female. Participants from samples A and C were mostly Caucasian (75%), with less than 4% each of African-American, Asian, Asian-American, Hispanic,

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for measures used in Studies 1 and 2

Nation	Sample	% Female	Measures	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
US	<i>n</i> = 420	68	Purpose in Life Test	102.5	14.2
	<i>n</i> = 556		Subjective Happiness Scale	18.4	5.6
	<i>N</i> = 1183		Meaning in Life Questionnaire—Presence	24.1	6.7
	<i>N</i> = 1183		Meaning in Life Questionnaire—Search	24.5	6.6
Japan	<i>n</i> = 336	52	Purpose in Life Test	85.6	17.9
	<i>N</i> = 982		Meaning in Life Questionnaire—Presence	19.7	6.4
			Meaning in Life Questionnaire—Search	25.8	6.1
			Subjective Happiness Scale	18.0	4.9

and Native American (race/ethnicity data were not available for 556 participants from sample B). Participants from samples A and C completed surveys in small groups.

Participants from sample B consisted of individuals who completed the MLQ and the SHS by accessing a website (www.authentic happiness.org). We restricted our analyses to participants who were from the United States and who indicated their age as belonging to one of the two following categories: 18–20 years (*n* = 234) or 21–24 years (*n* = 322). Thus, this sample consisted of 556 college age Americans (70% female). Visitors to the website were allowed to complete the measures multiple times. We only analyzed scores from participants' first completion of the measures. There were several ways participants could have learned about the website, from Seligman's (2002) book *Authentic Happiness*, by following links from "positive psychology" and other websites, hearing about the website from friends, or from media interviews. Evidence from a large-scale study suggests that internet samples possess generally desirable sampling characteristics, although they are probably not as representative as probability samples (e.g., Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004).

5.1.2. Measures

5.1.2.1. Meaning in life. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006, in press) consists of two five-item subscales, Presence of meaning in life and Search for meaning in life. The Presence subscale measures the extent to which participants perceive their lives as meaningful (e.g., "I understand my life's meaning" and "My life has no clear purpose"). The Search subscale measures the extent to which respondents are actively seeking meaning or purpose in their lives (e.g., "I am searching for meaning in my life" and "I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful"). All items are rated from 1 (Absolutely Untrue) to 7 (Absolutely True). MLQ subscale scores appeared reliable in sample A ($\alpha = .82$ for Presence, $\alpha = .85$ for Search), sample B ($\alpha = .81$ for Presence, $\alpha = .84$ for Search), and sample C ($\alpha = .86$ for Presence, $\alpha = .85$ for Search).

The Purpose in Life Test (PIL; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964) consists of 20 items rated on a seven-point scale with scale anchors that vary according to the content of each item. Some items are unipolar (e.g., "In life I have...no goals or aims at all [1]...very clear aims and goals [7]"), some are bipolar (e.g., "in relation to my life, the world...completely confuses me [1]...fits meaningfully with my life [7]"), and some use an indeterminate continuum (e.g., "If I could choose, I would...prefer never to have been born [1]...like nine more lives just like this one [7]"). The PIL has been the most widely used meaning in life

measure, despite concerns that it is confounded with psychological distress (see Dyck, 1987; Klinger, 1977; Steger, 2006; Yalom, 1980). PIL scores appeared reliable in sample A ($\alpha = .88$).

5.1.2.2. Happiness. The Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) consists of four items (e.g., “In general, I consider myself. . .not a very happy person [1] vs. a very happy person [7]”), which were each rated on a seven-point scale with lower scores indicating less happiness and enjoyment of life. The reliability of the SHS has been supported in previous research on several American university samples (α s between .82 and .88, Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999).

5.2. Japan

5.2.1. Participants and procedure

A total of 982 participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology classes at a college in Japan, and completed survey packets in small groups. Japanese participants were 19.1 years old on average ($SD = 2.3$) and 52% female (see Table 1 for additional descriptive statistics). In order to provide test–retest stability estimates of the Japanese MLQ, participants from sample D were recontacted eight weeks after the original administration of measures, and participants from sample F were recontacted after four weeks.

5.2.2. Measures

5.2.2.1. Japanese Meaning in Life Questionnaire. A Japanese translation of the MLQ (JMLQ; Shimai, Otake, & Steger, in press) was prepared by the third and fourth authors. The second author back-translated it, and the first author examined it for equivalence. The internal consistency of the JMLQ scores was good in sample D, both at Time 1 ($\alpha = .84$ for Presence, $\alpha = .87$ for Search) and 8 weeks later at Time 2 ($\alpha = .79$ for Presence, $\alpha = .82$ for Search); sample E ($\alpha = .85$ for Presence, $\alpha = .88$ for Search); and sample F, both at Time 1 ($\alpha = .86$ for Presence, $\alpha = .85$ for Search) and 4 weeks later at Time 2 ($\alpha = .83$ for Presence, $\alpha = .88$ for Search). Stability coefficients over 8 weeks (sample D) and 4 weeks (sample F) were significant and of large or greater effect sizes ($r = .53$ and $.66$, respectively, for Presence, $r = .63$ and $.73$, respectively, for Search), indicating good temporal stability.

To establish content validity, three experienced Japanese researchers (each with over 20 years of experience as psychologists) were asked to evaluate how well the items assessed the presence of meaning and the search for meaning from a Japanese perspective on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (perfectly). The items were given an average rating of 8.7, corresponding to very good content validity. To establish measurement invariance of the MLQ in Japanese and American samples, we conducted a series of multigroup confirmatory factor analyses (see Byrne, Shavelson & Muthén 1989; Cheung & Rensvold 2002) on the combined data from the United States (Samples A, B, and C, $N = 1183$) and Japan (Samples D, E, and F, $N = 982$) using AMOS 4.01 (Arbuckle, 1999). The first model tested consisted of the two-factor structure of the MLQ, allowing factor loadings to vary across cultural groups. As recommended in previous research, we used the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI), Root Mean Square Approximation of Error (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual (SRMR) to evaluate the fit of the MLQ across cultures (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Little, 1997). According to these indices, the two-factor model fit well in both cultures (CFI = .95, NNFI = .93, RMSEA = .06,

90% confidence interval from .06 to .07, SRMR = .06). With this level of weak, or configural, invariance, comparing correlations using the scale is tenable. We next tested the same model, but with factor loadings constrained to be equal across cultures. This model was also acceptable across cultures (CFI = .93, NNFI = .92, RMSEA = .07, 90% confidence interval from .06 to .07, SRMR = .06). Finally, to establish strong, also known as scalar, invariance we fixed the regression intercepts across cultures. This model was also acceptable (CFI = .97, NNFI = .97, RMSEA = .09, 90% confidence interval from .09 to .10, SRMR = .07), which allows us to assume that any differences in mean levels are due to culture, rather than lack of measurement equivalence.

5.2.2.2. Japanese Purpose in Life Test. A published, Japanese translation of the PIL was used as a second measure of meaning in life, to establish convergent validity. The Japanese PIL (J-PIL; Okado, 1998) was developed to mirror the original PIL. The internal consistency of the J-PIL was good in sample D ($\alpha = .90$).

5.2.2.3. Subjective Happiness Scale. A published, Japanese translation of the SHS was used to measure subjective happiness (J-SHS; Shimai, Otake, Utsuki, Ikemi, & Lyubomirsky, 2004). The internal consistency of the SHS was good in samples D, E, and F (α s = .84, .79, and .83, respectively).¹

6. Results

6.1. Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics for the scales used in this study are included in Table 1. Japanese participants were younger, ($F(1, 2158) = 61.36, p < .0001, d = .34$) and less likely to be female ($F(1, 1601) = 63.56, p < .0001, d = .41$). Because American participants from subsample B indicated age using categories rather than continuous years, their responses were excluded from the age comparison.

6.2. Cross-cultural comparison of levels of meaning dimensions

We first tested whether scores on the MLQ subscales differed according to culture using a Multivariate Analysis of Variance with culture (Japan v. United States) as the IV and the

¹ Although we used previously published Japanese versions of the PIL and SHS, we examined whether the meaning of the items for all three measures was similar in both the US and Japan by backtranslating all three measures. Although the personal meaning of words like *meaning*, *purpose*, and *happiness* almost certainly varies from person to person within cultures and nations, the semantic meaning of these words survived translation and backtranslation. Thus, we are confident that the MLQ and SHS were interpreted similarly within each national context. Some of the items in the PIL are idiosyncratic and the anchors of some of these items did not backtranslate with complete accuracy. Some of these inaccuracies are trivial (i.e., “routine” as “monotonous”; “goals” as “mission”; and “loaf completely the rest of my life” as “spend the rest of my life lazily”). Others are missing certain elements (“If I could, I would. . .like nine more lives just like this one” as “. . .like my life just like this”; “In achieving life goals I have. . .progressed to complete fulfillment” as “. . .like my life just like this”). Despite this, we believe that most of the meaning of the PIL as a measure was retained in translation. However, our feeling is that more straightforward measures, like the MLQ, may be more easily adapted across linguistic and cultural barriers than more complicated, culture-bound measures, like the PIL.

Table 2
Moderation by culture of the relation between the presence of meaning and the search for meaning

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE_b</i>	95% <i>CI_b</i>	β	ΔR^2	ΔF	Adj. R^2
<i>Step 1</i>							
Age	.51	.15	.21, .81	.08**	.12	53.99	.12***
Sex	.45	.31	-.15, 1.06	.03			
Culture	-1.96	.16	-2.27, -1.64	-.29***			
MLQ-Search	.10	.16	-.22, .41	.01			
<i>Step 2</i>							
MLQ-Search \times Culture	1.37	.16	1.06, 1.69	.21***	.04	72.85	.16***

N = 1596.

Note: Sex coded 1 = male; 2 = female; Culture coded -1 = United States, 1 = Japan.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

MLQ subscales, PIL, and SHS scores as the DVs. As predicted, MLQ-Presence scores were higher in the United States than in Japan, with a medium to large effect size ($F(1, 2163) = 239.29, p < .0001, d = .67$), and MLQ-Search scores were significantly higher in Japan, with a small effect size ($F(1, 2163) = 22.36, p < .0001, d = .20$).

Regarding the other measures, Americans scoring substantially higher on the PIL ($F(1, 483) = 103.14, p < .0001, d = 1.00$), and minimally, though significantly, higher on the SHS ($F(1, 1536) = 3.93, p < .05, d = .11$). Thus, cultural differences were consistent with hypotheses that Japanese would report less well-being and higher search for meaning.

6.3. Relations between presence and search

To assess whether culture moderated the relation between the MLQ-Presence and MLQ-Search subscales, we performed a hierarchical multiple regression, with MLQ-Presence scores as the criterion variable. Because the two cultural samples differed in age and sex, these two variables were entered as covariates in the first step, along with MLQ-Search scores and culture. A term for the interaction of culture and MLQ-Search scores was entered in the second step. Age and MLQ-Presence scores were standardized prior to entry in the regression analysis.

Results from this analysis are presented in Table 2. Consistent with the dialectical model of meaning in life, the interaction term was significant ($\beta = .21, p < .001$), and simple slopes analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) indicated that whereas there was a *positive* relation between presence and search in Japan ($\beta = .21$), there was a *negative* relation between presence and search in the United States ($\beta = -.21$). This moderation is depicted graphically in Fig. 1. The results were essentially the same when age and sex were not included as covariates, with the interaction term indicating significant moderation ($\beta = .20, p < .001$).² Thus, whereas search for meaning consistently has been associated with somewhat less well-being in American samples, it appears that search for meaning is related to somewhat more meaning in life in Japan. An alternative view of this interaction is that among people who are high in search for meaning there are a few differences between cultures in presence

² The interaction was slightly, but not significantly, larger when the small number of participants in the American sample who identified their ethnicity as Asian or Asian-American were removed ($\beta = .22, p < .001$).

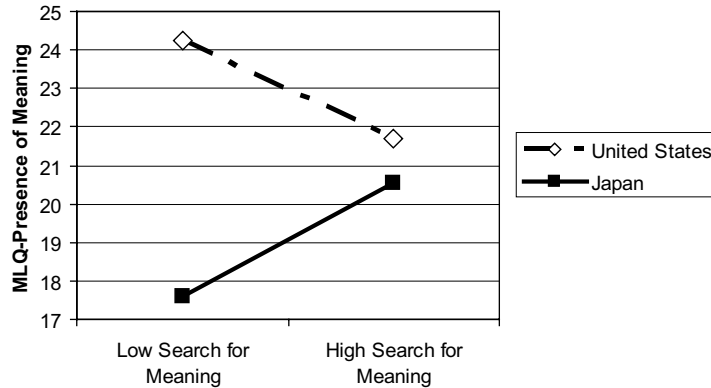


Fig. 1. The relation between presence of meaning and search for meaning as a function of culture.

of meaning, whereas there are large differences between cultures in presence of meaning along people who are low in search for meaning.

6.4. Relations among meaning and other variables

Next, we examined whether relations of presence of meaning and search for meaning and other well-being measures also differed across cultures (Table 3). Presence of meaning, aside from its association with search for meaning, appears to be similarly related to well-

Table 3
Correlations among the MLQ scales and personality and well-being

	MLQ-P	MLQ-S	PIL	SHS
<i>Japan</i>				
MLQ-P				
MLQ-S	.24 ^{***,a}			
PIL	.67 ^{***,b}	.17 ^{**,b}		
SHS	.45 ^{***,a}	.01 ^a	.76 ^{***,b}	
<i>United States</i>				
MLQ-P				
MLQ-S	-.20 ^{***,c}			
PIL	.61 ^{***,d,†}	-.18 ^{*,d}		
SHS	.58 ^{***,e}	-.21 ^{***,e}	—	

Note: MLQ-P = Meaning in Life Questionnaire, Presence of meaning subscale; MLQ-S = Meaning in Life Questionnaire, Search for meaning subscale; PIL = Purpose in Life Test, SHS = Subjective Happiness Scale. † Correlation coefficient previously reported in Steger et al. (2006, in press).

- * $p < .05$.
- ** $p < .01$.
- *** $p < .001$.
- ^a $N = 982$.
- ^b $N = 336$.
- ^c $N = 339$.
- ^d $N = 148$.
- ^e $N = 556$.

being (i.e., another measure of meaning, and happiness).³ However, the pattern of relations for search for meaning appears nearly opposite across the two cultures, with search for meaning being positively related to PIL scores in Japan, and negatively related to PIL and SHS scores in the United States.

Next, we performed several hierarchical multiple regressions looking at culture as a moderator of the relation between the MLQ subscales and well-being. As in the previous regression, age and sex were included in Step 1 along with the MLQ subscale and culture. Because of formatting restrictions in American subsample B, we did not include age as a covariate in the test of whether culture moderated the relation between the MLQ subscales and SHS scores. In these analyses, only sex was included as a covariate. Step 2 contained a term for the interaction of the MLQ subscale and culture. We first examined the relation between the MLQ-Presence subscale and well-being.

Culture did not moderate the relation between presence and PIL scores ($\beta = .06$, $p > .10$), which is unsurprising as they are intended to measure the same construct. However, culture did appear to moderate the relation between presence and SHS scores ($\beta = .15$, $p < .01$), with simple slopes analysis revealing a small negative relation in Japan ($\beta = -.03$) and a small positive relation in the United States ($\beta = .03$). The large sample size probably accounted for the significance of this moderation, however, and it is not clear of what practical significance differences in slopes of this magnitude would make in the experience of well-being in people from Japan and the United States.

Next, we examined whether culture moderated relations between search for meaning and well-being. Culture moderated the relation between search for meaning and PIL scores ($\beta = .15$, $p < .01$), and simple slopes analysis indicated a positive relation between search and the PIL in Japan ($\beta = .20$), in contrast to a negative relation between search and the PIL ($\beta = -.13$) in the United States (see Table 4). This is the same pattern observed for the relation between MLQ-Presence and MLQ-Search. This pattern again emerged for SHS scores, with culture moderating the relation between search and SHS ($\beta = .12$, $p < .001$). Simple slopes analysis revealed a positive relation in Japan ($\beta = .08$), and a negative relation ($\beta = -.12$) in the United States (see Table 4). The consistency of the pattern of moderation suggests potentially important cultural differences in search for meaning in life.

6.5. *The interaction of search and presence across cultures*

The final analysis we conducted focused on understanding the interaction between presence and search in the two cultures under study. We hypothesized that in the United States, search and presence would interact such that those reporting high levels of search for meaning and presence of meaning would also report higher levels of happiness, whereas those reporting high levels of search and low levels of presence would report lower levels of happiness. Using regression with SHS scores as the criterion variable, we entered search and presence scores, culture and sex in Step 1. We entered the following two-way interaction terms in Step 2: search by presence, search by culture, and presence by culture. We entered a three-way, search by presence by culture, interaction term in Step 3. Our

³ The correlation between the MLQ and PIL was included previously as part of a larger study (Steger et al., 2006, in press), and is included in the present study to provide for a comparison of the correlation between the two scales in Japan and the United States.

Table 4
Moderation by culture of the relation between the search for meaning and well-being

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE_b</i>	95% <i>CI_b</i>	β	ΔR^2	ΔF	Adj. <i>R</i> ²
DV = PIL							
<i>Step 1</i>							
Age	.60	.75	–.88, 2.09	.04	.19	26.88	.18***
Sex	2.61	1.54	–.42, 5.64	.07			
Culture	–7.49	.90	–9.26, –5.72	–.37***			
MLQ-Search	.17	.86	–1.52, 1.86	.01			
<i>Step 2</i>							
MLQ-Search × Culture	2.68	.86	.99, 4.37	.15**	.02	9.72	.19**
DV = SHS							
<i>Step 1</i>							
Sex	.14	.24	–.34, .61	.01	.01	5.21	.01***
Culture	–.34	.13	–.58, –.09	–.07**			
MLQ-Search	–.54	.12	–.77, –.30	–.12***			
<i>Step 2</i>							
MLQ-Search × Culture	.57	.12	.33, .81	.12***	.02	22.54	.01***

N = 1596.

Note: Sex coded 1 = male, 2 = female; Culture coded –1 = United States, 1 = Japan; PIL = Purpose in Life test; SHS = Subjective Happiness Scale.

** *p* < .01.

*** *p* < .001.

hypotheses focused on the three-way interaction in Step 3 (see Table 5). The three-way interaction was significant ($\beta = -.05$, $p < .05$). To decompose the interaction, we split the file by country and ran a regression entering search, presence, and sex in Step 1,

Table 5
Interaction of search for meaning, presence of meaning, and culture

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE_b</i>	95% <i>CI_b</i>	β	ΔR^2	ΔF	Adj. <i>R</i> ²
DV = SHS							
<i>Step 1</i>							
Sex	–.22	.21	–.43, .38	–.00	.28	145.15	.27***
Culture	–.35	.11	–.57, –.14	–.07**			
MLQ-Search	–.51	.11	–.72, –.30	–.11***			
MLQ-Presence	2.30	.10	2.11, 2.50	.52***			
<i>Step 2</i>							
MLQ-Search × MLQ-Presence	.24	.08	.08, .40	.07**	.01	6.39	.28***
MLQ-Search × Culture	.09	.11	–.12, .30	.02			
MLQ-Presence × Culture	–.32	.10	–.52, –.12	–.07**			
<i>Step 3</i>							
MLQ-Search × MLQ-Presence × Culture	–.17	.08	–.33, –.01	–.05*	.002	4.37	.28*

N = 1596.

Note: Sex coded 1 = male, 2 = female; Culture coded –1 = United States, 1 = Japan; PIL = Purpose in Life test; SHS = Subjective Happiness Scale.

* *p* < .05.

** *p* < .01.

*** *p* < .001.

and the search by presence interaction term in Step 2. The interaction term was significant in the United States ($\beta = .10, p < .005$), but not in Japan ($\beta = .02, p > .45$). Simple slopes analysis revealed a stronger relation between presence of meaning and happiness among those high in search ($\beta = .63, p < .001$) than among those low in search ($\beta = .46, p < .001$). This interaction is presented graphically in Fig. 2. One way of looking at this interaction is that American students who feel they lead meaningful lives are generally happy, regardless of how much they are searching for meaning. Alternatively, if people searching for meaning also feel their lives are meaningful, they are as happy as those who are not searching. At least in this sample, then, high search-high presence American students appear to have greater well-being than high search-low presence students. Thus, the combination of presence and search provides greater precision in understanding well-being. Simple slopes analysis in the Japanese sample revealed no differences between those high ($\beta = .49, p < .001$) and low ($\beta = .49, p < .001$) in search.

7. Discussion

Psychologists have made rapid progress mapping cultural variation in well-being. Most of these investigations have focused on happiness or subjective well-being, and no previous

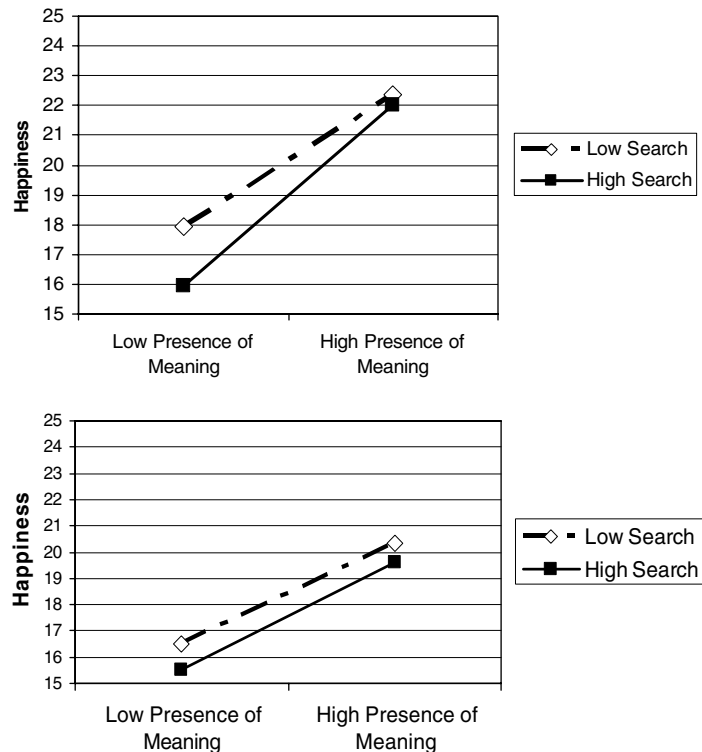


Fig. 2. Interaction of presence of meaning and search for meaning in the United States and Japan, predicting happiness.

research has examined whether dimensions of meaning in life vary in similar ways across cultures. In the present study, levels of presence of meaning in life differed among respondents from an independent culture and an interdependent culture. American participants reported higher levels of presence of meaning than did their Japanese counterparts. This finding is consistent with the idea that presence of meaning is related to positive self-concept, which is generally higher in independent cultures. Those in both countries who reported more presence of meaning in life also reported more happiness. In addition, they reported more presence of meaning on another measure. These findings support the idea that meaning in life is important to human functioning across cultures, although members of independent cultures appear more likely to report their lives are meaningful. This finding extends our knowledge of cultural variation in well-being to include the presence of meaning.

Differences in search for meaning were also observed across the two cultures. In regards to this important dimension of meaning in life, however, Japanese participants reported searching for meaning more. If search for meaning in life was merely the converse of presence of meaning in life, this finding would not be surprising. If Americans report more meaning in life than Japanese, then surely they will report less of its absence. However, search for meaning is clearly not the absence of meaning, as demonstrated by merely small to medium sized correlations between measures of these two dimensions. More importantly, whereas search for meaning was *negatively* related to presence of meaning among Americans, it was *positively* related to presence of meaning among Japanese. Thus, culture must affect how people construe the search for meaning, casting it in a negative light in America and in a positive light in Japan.

A dialectical model of meaning in life allowed us to anticipate these findings. People from independent cultures appear to think about the world in an analytic, or oppositional fashion, whereas people from interdependent cultures appear to think about the world in a holistic, or dialectical fashion (e.g., Bagozzi et al., 1999; Kitayama et al., 2003; Nisbett et al., 2001). One of the consequences of a dialectical mode of thought appears to be heightened comfort with contradiction. We argued that someone acculturated in such a mode of thinking about the world might anticipate that effortful processes (search) and desirable outcomes (presence) would go hand in hand. The data we presented support this framework.

Of course, one alternative explanation for the differences we observed in search for meaning could be that the MLQ measures different things in the two cultures. However, the measure appeared to function well. In addition to demonstrating the JMLQ's content validity and the factorial invariance of MLQ scores across Japanese and American samples, the data from Japan also indicate that the JMLQ scores were stable over 4 and 8 week periods of time. The magnitude of test–retest correlations over 4 weeks in the Japanese sample (.66 and .73 for presence and search, respectively) is very similar to 4-week test–retest correlations previously reported in American samples (.70 and .73 for presence and search, respectively; Steger et al., 2006, *in press*). Eight week test–retest correlations were somewhat lower than that (.53 and .63 for presence and search, respectively). However, these values fall between those for 4-week test–retest and those reported elsewhere for 1-year test–retest in an American sample (.41 and .50 for presence and search, respectively; Steger & Kashdan, 2007), which suggests a reasonable and similar attenuation in stability coefficients. Thus, the measures seem to be equivalent, reliable, and stable in both Japanese and American samples.

What can the present investigation tell us about meaning in life? At its most basic level, this research suggests that one dimension of meaning in life, presence of meaning, appears important to well-being across two cultures; and that another dimension, search for meaning, appears to function differently in two cultures. Alternatively, these findings suggest that cultural differences in presence of meaning in life may be due to search for meaning. People high in search for meaning reported similar levels of presence of meaning, regardless of whether they were from Japan or the United States. It might be that people low in search for meaning adopt the cultural norm of experiencing presence of meaning. We suggested that independent vs. interdependent self-concepts may be one mechanism of cultural influence over the experience of presence of meaning. The role of search for meaning in moderating this influence warrants further scrutiny.

7.1. Limitations

These results should be considered in light of the limitations of this study. One limitation is that the present study relies on cross-sectional data and correlational analyses among college students. This necessarily limits the generalizability of the findings to college students in Japan and the United States, and also prevents any inferences regarding causality. Because of the use of self-report surveys, cultural differences in the ways in which people respond to item formatting and valence conceivably could have influenced our results. This possibility is most relevant the scale mean differences we observed between the United States and Japan. If Japanese typically use moderate response tendencies (closer to the midpoint than the extremes), and Americans use extreme response tendencies, then American responses would be higher for desirable traits and lower for undesirable traits by virtue of the response options chosen. In this case, however, our most compelling findings were that culture moderated the *relations* between search for meaning and other measures. As long as there is variance of responding within cultures, then tending to respond either at the extremes or at the midpoint would not influence moderating effect like the ones we observed. Although unlikely, it could be that differing response tendencies could be rest with differences in how the traits themselves are perceived rather than how the rating scale is utilized. For example, perhaps Japanese participants might use moderate response choices because they are more likely to perceive that they have moderate levels of a trait. Trait measures typically use trait-saturated, or extreme, items. If they used moderate items (e.g., “I search for meaning to a moderate degree”) then, in this example, we would expect Japanese to endorse extreme options. Likewise, we would expect Americans to endorse moderate options. It is not clear how this would produce a moderating effect in which participants from different cultures report correlations of differing *directions*, although it could produce a moderating effect where participants from different cultures report correlations of differing magnitude. Using experimental methods to induce states of meaning or searching for meaning would help ameliorate any effects that culturally influenced response tendencies might produce. We would anticipate that among Americans, inducing a search for meaning would cause lower presence of meaning and well-being, whereas among Japanese, such an induction would cause higher presence of meaning and well-being.

A final limitation is that we were not able to directly assess the constructs we suggested might influence the cultural differences reported here. Although our results are consistent

with a dialectical model of meaning, we do not have a measure of dialectical vs. oppositional cognitive style. Hence, we were not able to evaluate any mechanisms of cultural influence. This includes the commonly held assumptions that American and Japanese samples possess independent and interdependent self-concepts (for discussion see, Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002). Such investigations into the means by which cultures influence their members are strongly recommended for future research.

The principal aim of the present study was to investigate potential cultural variation in the major dimensions of meaning in life. Although efforts are underway to examine meaning in life in other samples and cultures, caution should be exercised in extending these findings to unexamined populations. Future research should also look at intra-cultural variation (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000). For example, only 11% to 18% of the variance in subjective well-being measures seems attributable to between-nation differences (Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). What are the specific factors that assist in finding meaning in distinct cultures? What sub-cultural factors, such as multicultural identity or social inequity affect the presence of and search for meaning? What are the implications of globalization for dimensions of meaning in life in different cultures? What do dimensions of meaning do for individual functioning in various cultures? These are important questions for future research.

8. Conclusion

The presence of meaning in life appears to be important to the well-being of members of both American and Japanese cultures, although mean levels differed. Relations between search for meaning and well-being differed significantly in these two cultures. Thus, presence of meaning functions similarly to other measures of well-being. In contrast, search for meaning appears somewhat unique to cross-cultural research on well-being. These two dimensions add additional insight to cultural variation in well-being and should be considered for inclusion in future cross-cultural research. The present study provides a conceptual foundation for making predictions and interpreting levels and correlates of dimensions of meaning in life across cultures, and adds richness to our understanding of cultural influences on the ways people think about themselves and their lives.

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