

## Sources of Personal Meaning For Older and Younger Australian and Israeli Women: Profiles and Comparisons

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### **ABSTRACT**

This descriptive study looks at what 372 Australian and 191 Israeli women, aged 18–93, consider to be the most and least important sources of meaning in their lives. The Sources of Meaning Profile (SOMP), an instrument measuring current meaning, gave rise to two major observations. First, there are considerable similarities in attributions of meaning within age-differentiated national samples. Secondly, there are similarities in meaning perceptions between age-matched groups across national samples. Participation in personal relationships was the important source of meaning in all age categories, in Israel and Australia. Leaving a legacy for the next generation, participation in religious activities, and taking part in pleasurable (hedonistic) activities were among the least important sources of meaning cited by both samples. Meaning variables related to the realisation of individual potential (*e.g.* personal growth, creativity, etc.), were the most differentiating for the Australian age groups, while variables related to altruism, humanistic, social and cultural concerns were the most differentiating for the Israeli women. Theoretical implications are discussed.

**KEY WORDS** – personal meaning, life themes, life purposes, values, continuity theory, women.

### **Theoretical orientation: meaning in life**

It is generally accepted that adaptation in late life must be conceived as more than striving merely for contentment or happiness; adaptation is also the process by which a person organises the past, explains events, and communicates with others. It is the maintenance of this sense of continuity with the past by which older people help themselves to cope with change, and it is the creation and recreation of a sense of meaning by which the self interprets experiences and maintains – and perhaps even enhances – the sense of self.

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There have been a number of differing empirical approaches to understanding what people feel is most meaningful in their lives. Life-span psychologists such as Erikson (1959) and Jung (1963) have theorised about the development of changing values and meanings over the life course. Some investigators have studied the quality of life; some have studied happiness; and yet others, meaning in life. Research efforts have been driven, in part, by conceptualisations of changes in personality – from outer-world to inner-world orientations, and by value changes across life stages – from material concerns to contentment and withdrawal from goal strivings. As the individual passes through time he or she constructs and reconstructs ‘reality’ (Reker and Wong 1988), creating meaning by making choices (Frankl 1967 and 1978). Within an interpretive perspective, ageing may be viewed as a process of change in personal constructions over time (Reker and Wong 1988).

Personal meanings constitute a reality that is self evident to both the individual and others who share the same reality of everyday life, and with whom one communicates and interacts (Berger and Luckman 1966). ‘If we can find the sources of meaning held by the elderly and see how individuals put it all together, we will go a long way toward appreciating the complexity of human ageing and the ultimate reality of coming to terms with one’s whole life’ (Kaufman 1987: 165).

#### *Meaning as a construct*

Personal meaning has been defined as a ‘cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals and the accompanying sense of fulfillment’ (Reker and Wong 1988: 221). When we ask ‘what is the meaning of life?’ we are asking ‘what is worth living for?’ ‘what is the purpose in life?’ (Reker and Wong 1988: 220). Enmeshed within the concept of personal meaning are such related constructs as values and life themes. Values may be loosely defined as expressions of widely held ideals of human behaviour, emerging from – and characterising – a particular society during a certain historical period. As such, values clearly locate the individual within a historical cultural cohort. Values help give direction to behaviour in situations of conflict and choice and provide a means of confronting adaptive dilemmas that occur over the life span (Kaufman 1987: 114). According to Frankl (1963), creative, experiential and attitudinal values, expressed respectively in work and hobbies, relationships and feelings, and philosophical and spiritual beliefs, form the core of meanings.

Personal meanings drive, and/or are driven by, the themes people create, by which they interpret and evaluate their life experiences, attempting to integrate them to form a self-concept. They are the subjective interpretations of one's cultural heritage; they express the personal salience of growing up, living in, and deriving meaning from a certain kind of cultural experience. These themes, or cognitive areas of meaning, explain, unify and give substance to people's perceptions of who they are and how they see themselves participating in social life. Thus a sense of personal meaning is derived from, or closely reflects, the interaction between, on the one hand, the macro-level historically and culturally determined value system and its integration and, on the other, the micro-level life themes by which people know themselves and explain who they are to others.

*Sources and levels of meaning in life*

Though the populations that have been studied range from college-age students to older people, there seems to be general consensus as to the major sources from which meaning in life for individuals of all ages is derived. DeVogler and Ebersole (1980) conceptualised meaning as having eight sources: understanding (trying to gain more knowledge); relationship (interpersonal orientation); service (a helping, giving orientation); belief (living according to one's beliefs); expression (through art, athletics, music, writing); obtaining (respect, possessions, responsibility); growth (toward developing personal potentials, obtaining goals); and existential-hedonistic (the importance of the pleasures of daily life).

Closely paralleling these areas are the seven life goals that Fiske and Chiriboga (1991) delineate in their study of change and continuity across the life span. The goals most frequently listed in studies that they reviewed were: achievement and work (including economic rewards, success and social status); good personal relations; philosophical and religious goals; social service; freedom from hardship; security; self-maintenance; health; simple comforts; seeking enjoyment; and personal growth, including learning, knowing and mastering. Similarly, in studies by Thurner (1975), Hedlund and Birren (1984), Klinger (1977) and others, there seems to be a consensus on a few major sources of meaning, namely personal relationships, personal growth, success, altruism, hedonism, creativity, religion, and legacy.

Still in the embryonic stages of conceptualisation, several theoreticians have suggested that sources of meaning may be categorised according to deductively determined commonality of

meaning dimensions. This has produced some discussion as to *levels* of personal meaning. In the spirit of Frankl's (1963) contention, that full meaning in life can be achieved only by transcending self-interest, Baumeister (1991) suggests that meaning starts with the specific and particular, and gradually works up to the broad, all-encompassing, integrative abstract levels. Bengston (1975), in his study of value transmission between the generations, identifies two meaning continua: materialism/humanism and individualism/collectivism. Rokeach (1973) developed a hierarchical meaning system. It is upon this that the categorisation of the Sources of Meaning Profile (SOMP) instrument, used in this study – and presented in an earlier format (Reker and Wong 1988) – is based. Four levels of meaning are proposed: the lowest level, containing self-preoccupation with hedonistic pleasures and personal comforts; a second level, containing sources reflecting the realisation of personal potential; a third level, containing sources which move beyond the realm of self interests into areas that involve service to others and dedication to larger, societal or political causes; and a fourth level that incorporates values that transcends the self and others and encompass cosmic meaning and ultimate purpose.

*Continuity of self – and meaning – across the life cycle*

A person's sense of meaning is believed to be generally stable, undergoing only gradual transformations across the life-span in conjunction with changing belief and value systems (Zika and Chamberlain 1992). For Kaufman (1987) the focus on themes permits the researcher to conceive of ageing as a continual creation of the self through the ongoing interpretation of past experiences and current contexts. This is analogous to Frankl's (1963) 'ultimate' meaning, experienced when persons explore deeper meanings in life, relying on past experiences. More than the striving for contentment, adaptation in later life is the process by which a person creates meaning, organises the past, explains events, and communicates with others (Kaufman 1987).

In the absence of longitudinal data, recent years have seen a number of researchers utilise cross-sectional designs in attempts empirically to document the continuity of meaning over the life span. Though not as methodologically valid as longitudinal data might be, there has nevertheless been consistent confirmation of such 'continuity' across a wide variety of studies. Ebersole and DePaola (1989) in their study of meaning among active married older people, found no significant age

differences in depth of meaning. In their study of young mothers and their mothers, Zika and Chamberlain (1992) found support for Yalom's (1980) standpoint, namely that while the sources of meaning may change somewhat over a life span, the relation between the strength of life meaning and psychological health may remain consistent regardless of where meaning is embedded. Reker (1988), in his development of the Personal Meaning Index (PMI; as distinct from the current Sources of Meaning Profile), concludes that the fact that nearly identical factor structures were found for young, middle-aged and older adults 'attests to the factorial invariance of the PMI across the life span'. Researchers concur in that all but a few respondents, across disparate studies and age groups, give virtually no indication of Frankl's (1971) existential void or 'meaninglessness'.

#### *The older woman*

Many acknowledge that there are gender-specific sets of meanings attendant on the ageing experience. All too often, however, accounts of women's ageing have not dealt substantively with issues other than the 'basics' of demographics, health care needs, housing, vulnerability to poverty, adjustment to widowhood and the like. Little wonder that over the years the somewhat negative image of the older and ageing woman has been perpetuated through the transmission of inaccurate information (Block *et al.* 1981) and through the presentation of data which, at the least, are problem-focused and open to challenge.

The stereotype of the dependent, declining, internally focused and self-preoccupied older woman has only in recent years been tempered by the welcome attention given to study of female ageing trajectories in general, and to those themes and values, in particular, which are the constructions of, and mile-markers for, women's ageing experiences. For Dior (1990), the middle-aged woman's investment-in-self through leisure and work pursuits, her preoccupation with thoughts about new future opportunities, and her arriving at this juncture in her life possessing a better integration of her roles and activities than does her male counterpart, means that she enjoys a greater psychological well-being than he does. A welcome departure from the separation-individuation 'mould' is found in the studies of Friedman (1993), Berquist *et al.* (1993) and Henderson (1990). They discuss the ageing woman's need and search for independence and strength, and her attainment of autonomy. In comparing the older woman to her middle-aged counterpart, Bearon (1989) found that while material comforts were highly salient sources of satisfaction, they did not

constitute an important domain for the older woman's future concerns. The continued importance of close personal relationships (Crawford 1977; Lowenthal *et al.* 1975), the continued development of sources of support and satisfaction (Friedman *et al.* 1980), higher purpose-in-life scores as compared with younger cohorts (Ebersole and DePaola 1989), and the relevant late life goals of consolidation and optimization (Day 1991) are not suggestive of preoccupations with basic needs. Neither do they suggest significant declines in happiness, late life satisfaction, or, as Heidrich (1993) has found, lessened purpose in life. On the contrary, the picture that emerges from the foregoing is one of competence, assertiveness, and happiness (Fiske and Chiriboga 1991), stability, and 'integrality' (Erikson 1982). 'Love God, love nature and love life,' counselled an elderly New Zealand woman, in response to the question 'What is meaning in life for you?' 'Be optimistic, be helpful in the community, leave lots of good memories, and be remembered as an honest old lady who had a good life despite the struggles.'

The research presented in this paper focuses upon sources of personal meaning for age-differentiated female cohorts residing in two quite different cultural environments: Australia and Israel. In this descriptive study of sources of meaning in life for women, four questions guided the inquiry:

- What sources of meaning appear to be most significant for older age groups as compared with younger groups?
- What is the extent of diversification of meaning sources among age groups? Are older people as diversified in their sources of meaning as younger groups?
- Are there significant differences in meaning dimensions (content) and/or perceived importance (magnitude) in sources of personal meaning, between younger and older age groups *within* a specific culture?
- Are there significant differences in meaning dimensions (content) and/or perceived importance (magnitude) in sources of personal meaning *between* comparable age groups across cultures?

## **Method**

### *Subjects*

Non-random, volunteer samples of women in Australia and Israel were obtained for the study. The Australian women, whose ages ranged from 18 to 93, were drawn from Australia's two major cities – Sydney and Melbourne. Middle-aged and older subjects resided in five non-

contiguous neighborhoods in greater Sydney. The youngest respondents – in the main, students – were drawn from undergraduate and graduate classes at the University of New South Wales and the University of Melbourne. Older respondents were likely to be members of senior citizens' and volunteer organisations, as well as day centres for older people. The majority (62 per cent) of the Australian women were born in Australia. Among the two older Australian groups, country of birth was more likely to be Western European and Oceania region countries and territories; among younger immigrants, countries of birth also included China, Thailand, Korea and India.

The Israeli sample, with an age range of 24 to 95, was made up mostly of Tel Aviv area community dwellers, including attendees at two senior citizens' centres, several students in a 'university of the third-age' class at one of Israel's universities, second and third-year undergraduate students at another local university and residents of a housing facility for well older people. The residents of a remote agricultural settlement ('kibbutz'), aged 40 and over, were also included in the sample. Of the Israeli women interviewed, 54 per cent were born in Israel. As with the Australian women, the likelihood of their being born outside the country was greater among the older women. Poland, the former USSR, other Eastern bloc countries, Germany, as well as Morocco and Iraq were the birthplaces of almost all the remaining Israeli women. With very few exceptions the SOMP was self-administered at the subjects' places of work, recreation or study, or homes. Table 1 presents a summary of the salient demographic characteristics of each of the two samples.

The somewhat older age of the Israeli sample (a mean of 55.6 as compared with 46.2 for the Australian) was not intended but, rather, was attributable to the availability of subjects. As almost all these analyses are carried out either within the national samples, or across matched age Israeli and Australian groups – whose mean ages for each were almost identical – the sample age difference between the Australian and Israeli samples is believed to be of little consequence. Hierarchical regression analyses, not shown here, were performed to determine the impact of education, marital status, and family size on personal meaning. Family size had no significant effect on meaning in either country. The results for education and marital status were mixed, and will be discussed in the last section of the paper. Findings for identification with religious practice will also be discussed below.

TABLE 1. *Summary of salient sample characteristics for Australia and Israel (percentages)*

	Australia (n = 372)	Israel (n = 191)
<i>Age group</i>		
18–29	30	14
30–49	26	19
50–64	14	18
65–74	17	27
75+	13	22
<i>Education</i>		
0–9 years	8	18
10–12 years	19	13
Completed high school or equivalent	23	34
Tertiary/professional	50	35
<i>Family status</i>		
Single	41	20
Married	33	49
Divorced/widowed/ separated	26	31
<i>Number of children</i>		
0	48	29
1	13	14
2	19	28
3+	20	29
<i>Subjective health</i>		
Poor/fair	20	45
Good/very good	53	37
Excellent	27	18
<i>Identification with religious practices</i>		
‘Religious’	46	17
‘Secular’	54	83
<i>Language spoken at home</i>		
National tongue	85	87
Other	15	13

Percentages have been rounded.

### *Instruments*

A two-part questionnaire was used for the study, containing demographic and other background information, followed by the original 16-item version of the Sources of Meaning Profile (SOMP) developed by Reker (1988), primarily a measure of present meaning. The individual was asked to rate sixteen sources of meaning in terms of the amount of meaning derived from each source. Subjects responded to a 7-point Likert scale anchored by ‘none,’ or ‘of no importance’ (1), to ‘a great deal,’ or ‘of great importance’ (7). The instrument was introduced to each respondent as ‘a number of statements about



TABLE 2. Sources of meaning in life profile (SOMP): Items and corresponding levels

Sources of meaning (16-item version)	Corresponding levels <sup>1</sup>
1. Participation in leisure activities	2
2. Meeting basic, everyday needs	1
3. Taking part in creative activities	2
4. Engaging in personal relationships with family and/or friends	3
5. Being acknowledged for personal achievements	2
6. Experiencing personal growth	2
7. Taking part in religious activities	4
8. Interest in social causes	3
9. Being of service to others	3
10. Preserving human values and ideals	3
11. Preservation of culture and tradition	3
12. Leaving a legacy for the next generation	4
13. Feeling financially secure	1
14. Interest in human rights (humanistic concerns)	3
15. Participation in 'hedonistic' activities ( <i>e.g.</i> gambling, parties, etc.)	1
16. Acquiring material possessions in order to enjoy the good life	1

<sup>1</sup> Level 1 – sources of meaning reflecting self-preoccupation with hedonistic pleasures and personal comforts.

Level 2 – sources of meaning concerned with realization of personal potential.

Level 3 – areas of meaning lying beyond the realm of self-interests.

Level 4 – meaning which transcends self and others, encompassing cosmic meaning and ultimate purpose.

sources of meaning in people's lives which may provide a sense of purpose and order, which may be worthwhile goals to pursue, and which may be accompanied by feelings of contentment and fulfilment'. In keeping with the nature of the study, and with the intention of observing each of the sixteen sources of meaning across age groups in both countries, the SOMP was administered, as it was by its originator (Reker 1988), as a single homogeneous scale. Table 2 presents the sixteen meaning sources together with the non-factorially derived levels suggested by Rokeach (1973).

For the Israeli women the questionnaire was translated into Hebrew by a team of bilingual translators. The Cronbach (1951) alpha measure of internal consistency for the 16-item scale administered in Australia was .78, based upon 346 useable questionnaires; for the Israeli sample the alpha was .74. For the combined total of 511 completed Australian and Israeli questionnaires the alpha was .77, identical to the alpha obtained in the original Canadian administration with a similarly aged sample of both men and women. The Scheffé (1953) procedure for determining the significance of differences between two or more sets of

group means was used to compare meaning scores, within each country, for the five age groupings.

## Results

Descriptive data, including the results of Scheffé's procedures, are presented for the two samples for all sixteen meaning sources, followed by a summary table presenting the results of tests on means, comparing the mean scores for the age groups in the two countries on each of Rokeach's four levels of meaning. Though comparisons are frequently made here between the oldest and youngest groups – paralleling the procedures of other researchers – I prefer to describe differences and similarities between any two or more groups, wherever they may occur. Unless otherwise stated all cell values represent averaged mean scores per meaning source or per level (rows), or per age group (columns).

Tables 3 and 4 present the results of age group comparisons for the Australian and Israeli samples respectively, for each of the sixteen variables as well as the results of the Scheffé procedure.

Item responses for both samples were grouped into three scoring ranges: high, mid and low. Israelis as a whole used more mid-range responses than Australians, with correspondingly fewer polar answers. The general trend in both samples was for higher age groups to score meaning items as either 'high' or 'low'. Midrange responses were preferred by the younger groups.

Looking at the three highest of the sixteen meaning scores, Australian women and Israeli women both chose personal relationships as the most important source of meaning. Whereas experiencing personal growth, and meeting basic needs were ranked second and third highest by the Australians, the Israelis chose preserving human values and ideals and interest in humanistic concerns as their second and third choices. Both Australian and Israeli women gave their three lowest scores to taking part in religious activities, leaving a legacy for the next generation, and being acknowledged for personal achievement. The strong 'secular' as opposed to 'religious' identification of Israeli women (Table 1) was consistent with the low mean scores for the Israeli sample on participating in religious activities. Notwithstanding the considerable number of Australian women who identified themselves as 'religious', participating in religious activities was also one of the lowest ranking sources of meaning for the Australian group, although somewhat higher than for the Israelis.

The total mean score, from all sixteen sources, of 75.33 for the oldest

TABLE 3. Australia: sources of meaning item and scale means, standard deviations, one-way analysis of variance and Scheffé test procedure, by age groups ( $n = 344-370$ )

Item	Age groups								Mean <sup>1</sup>	SD	F. Ratio	Scheffé <sup>2</sup>
	18-29	30-49	50-64	65-74	75+	75+	75+	75+				
Var												
1	5.38	5.69	5.54	5.40	5.81	5.54	1.31	1.46	ns			
2	5.85	6.21	5.79	5.81	6.00	5.95	1.23	1.61	ns			
3	4.82●	4.79●	4.22	4.52	3.58	4.53	1.78	5.06**	sig			
4	6.54	6.65	6.48	6.42	6.51	6.54	0.89	0.73	ns			
5	4.25●●●	4.22●●●	2.96	3.41	3.09	3.78	1.78	9.17***	sig			
6	6.20●●●	6.48●●●	5.96	5.58	5.36	6.03	1.28	9.39***	sig			
7	3.61	3.57	3.94	3.70	3.76	3.68	2.08	0.32	ns			
8	4.67	5.22●	4.88	4.53	4.19	4.76	1.56	4.50**	sig			
9	5.54	5.57	5.77	5.56	5.70	5.60	1.27	0.40	ns			
10	5.37	5.46	5.48	6.23●●	6.19●●●	5.66	1.41	6.36***	sig			
11	4.56	4.82	4.96	4.92	4.96	4.80	1.69	0.83	ns			
12	3.89	3.55	3.69	3.98	3.67	3.76	1.74	0.81	ns			
13	4.66	5.44●	6.02●●	5.86●●	5.90●●	5.42	1.48	13.65***	sig			
14	5.22	5.97	5.62	5.97	5.96	5.79	1.36	2.17	ns			
15	4.46●●●	4.34●●●	3.67●●	3.35●●	2.28	3.84	1.81	17.76***	sig			
16	3.95	4.34	4.33	4.55	4.27	4.25	1.60	1.60	ns			
Totals												
M <sup>1</sup>	79.43	82.48●	78.98	80.24	75.33	79.85	11.50	2.91*	sig			
SD	10.68	9.15	12.20	11.82	15.55							
Range	52-102	60-104	55-109	52-103	41-106							

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .<sup>1</sup> Due to variations in the size of  $n$  computerised row averages and column totals for M may vary slightly from manual tabulations.<sup>2</sup> Scheffé Procedure: significance of differences between two or more sets of group means:  $p \leq .05$ . The number of bullets (●●●) following a value denotes how many values are significantly lower, beginning with the lowest value in that row.

TABLE 4. *Israel: sources of meaning item and scale means, standard deviations, one-way analysis of variance and Scheffé test procedure, by age groups (n = 180-191)*

Item	Age groups							Mean <sup>1</sup>	SD	F. Ratio	Scheffé <sup>2</sup>
	18-29	30-49	50-61	66-74	75+	75+	75+				
Var											
1	5.19	5.63	5.76	6.17	5.82		5.77	1.35	2.42*	ns	
2	5.35	5.49	5.21	5.92	5.55		5.55	1.36	1.66	ns	
3	3.80	4.14	4.56	4.96	4.33		4.43	1.91	1.91	ns	
4	6.00	6.23	6.24	6.60	6.55		6.37	0.94	2.57*	ns	
5	5.08●●	4.89●●	3.38	3.77	3.34		4.01	1.84	7.47***	sig	
6	6.31●	6.26●	5.74●	5.55	4.55		5.61	1.67	7.43***	sig	
7	1.81	2.09	2.58	2.77	2.68		2.44	1.68	2.09	ns	
8	4.04	4.54	5.00	5.02	5.18		4.82	1.64	2.57	ns	
9	5.00	5.11	5.41	5.92	4.97		5.34	1.60	2.73	ns	
10	5.46	5.54	6.18	5.54●●●	6.65●●●		6.16	1.14	9.76***	sig	
11	4.35	4.31	4.61	5.18	4.76		4.70	1.64	1.93	ns	
12	3.88	4.34	4.19	4.59	4.51		4.35	1.83	0.76	ns	
13	5.08	5.40	5.91	6.27●●●	6.43●●●		5.90	1.34	6.91***	sig	
14	5.15	5.57	6.12●	6.33●	6.40●		5.99	1.25	6.70***	sig	
15	4.96●	4.49	4.15	4.41	3.58		4.27	1.73	3.05*	sig	
16	5.27	4.74	4.30	4.43	4.25		4.55	1.58	2.17	ns	
Totals											
M <sup>1</sup>	76.96	78.77	78.11	83.89	80.58		80.16			2.22	ns
SD	9.21	9.07	10.60	10.94	13.71			11.09			
Range	58-97	61-93	60-101	59-101	39-103						

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

<sup>1</sup> Due to variations in the size of  $n$  computerized row averages and column totals for  $M$  may vary slightly from manual tabulations.

<sup>2</sup> Scheffé Procedure: significance of differences between two or more sets of group means:  $p \leq .05$ . The number of bullets (●●) following a value denotes how many values are significantly lower, beginning with the lowest value in that row.

Australian women was the lowest of the five Australian age groups, and significantly less than that of the 30–49 year old group. By comparison, the oldest group of Israeli women registered a total mean score of 80.58 which was the second highest of the five age groups, though there was no significant difference between these mean scores. As with the Australian women, the observed score range for the oldest Israeli women was the most extended of the five observed ranges. It can be seen that Australian and Israeli mean scores for the total samples: 80.16 for the Israelis and 79.85 for the Australians are almost identical.

Of the sixteen sources of meaning, the results of the Scheffé procedure found that being acknowledged for personal achievements, experiencing personal growth, the preservation of values and ideals, feeling financially secure and participation in pleasurable (hedonistic) activities significantly differentiated between two or more Israeli and Australian age groups. For the Australian women the results of the Scheffé test were also significant for taking part in creative activities and interest in social causes. For the Israeli women humanistic concerns also differentiated between three age groups. In both samples being acknowledged for personal achievement, experiencing personal growth, and participation in hedonistic activities were clearly scored higher by younger women than by the older ones. Preserving human values and ideals and feeling financially secure were scored significantly higher by the older women in both samples. Though no significant differences were found in scores for feeling financially secure in the four oldest groups of Australian women, these groups however did differ significantly from the youngest women.

Table 5 presents the Australian and Israeli data, grouped by age and level of meaning. The meaning content of each of the four levels is deductive and based upon individual perceptions of item commonality, largely those of Rokeach (1973). Depending, therefore, upon the reader's personal and cultural conceptions of 'meaning', and preferences for individualist/collectivist, materialist/humanist, or other organising schema, there may be some differences of opinion about which specific items should be included in which level. The levels are not empirically derived subscales, and have not been submitted to tests of internal reliability. They are simply intuitively derived heuristic devices for facilitating explanation of part of the data especially in observing differences and similarities between Australian and Israeli women along a self-preoccupation – transcendence-of-self-and-others continuum.

For the Australian women, only in the area of 'realization of potential' (level 2 – combining participation in leisure activities, taking

TABLE 5. Means, standard deviations, analysis of variance and Scheffé test for sources of meaning, by meaning level and age group: Australia (Aus.) and Israel (Isr.)

Meaning level	Age groups					Level		Scheffé test
	18-29	30-49	50-64	65-74	75+	Mean <sup>1</sup>	SD	
1 - Aus.	18.94	20.36	19.81	19.64	18.34	19.47	4.27	ns
Isr.	20.65	20.11	19.41	21.02	19.80	20.24	3.86	ns
2 - Aus.	20.65●	21.21●●●	18.62	18.86	17.71	19.87	4.07	sig
Isr.	20.60	20.91	19.44	20.44	17.97	19.85	4.30	ns
3 - Aus.	32.29	33.66	33.19	33.79	33.27	33.15	5.09	ns
Isr.	30.00	31.31	33.56	35.61●●	34.38●	33.34	5.17	sig
4 - Aus.	7.50	7.14	7.63	7.77	7.35	7.45	2.94	ns
Isr.	5.72	6.43	6.68	7.28	7.22	6.76	2.67	ns

●: \* = ≤ .05  
 \*\* = ≤ .01  
 \*\*\* = ≤ .001.

<sup>1</sup> Ranges for Levels 1 and 2: 4-28; Range for Level 3: 6-42; Range for Level 4: 2-14.

TABLE 6. *Tests on Means (two-tailed t): Australian and Israeli Samples, by Meaning Levels for Matched Age Groups*

Meaning level	Age groups				
	18-29	30-49	50-64	65-74	75+
1	t = -2.14 (df = 51.46) p = .037	ns	ns	ns	ns
2	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
3	t = 2.16 (df = 133) p = .033	t = 2.57 (df = 127) p = .011	ns	t = -2.20 (df = 108) p = .030	ns
4	t = 3.63 (df = 133) p = .000	ns	ns	ns	ns

part in creative activities, being acknowledged for personal achievements and experiencing personal growth) were there significant differences between the older and younger women. The mean score for the 30-49 year old group on this level was significantly greater than the mean scores for any of the three older age groups. The 18-29 year old group also scored significantly higher on this level than did the oldest of the five groups.

Unlike the Australians, the one level which differentiated significantly between the oldest and the youngest Israeli age groups was the level represented by what Bengston (1975) refers to as the collectivist/humanistic domain - level 3. Older Israeli women clearly scored higher on this level than their younger counterparts.

Table 6 compares the two samples of women, presenting the results of *t*-tests on means grouped by levels between matching Israeli and Australian age groups. No significant differences in mean scores were found between matched groups in either the 50-64 age group or in the oldest group. Statistically, the mean scores for these two age groups, in all four levels of meaning, were not significantly different between the two samples. In both the groups aged 30-49 years and 65-74 years only one meaning category was significantly different for the two samples. Of the 16 sets of means created by the comparisons of the four oldest age groups, in all four meaning levels only two such sets - both being in level 3 - significantly ( $p < .05$ ) differentiated the Australian from the Israeli sample. For the 18-29 age group the picture was considerably different. Significant ( $p < .05$ ) differences in mean scores were found in three of the four meaning levels, rendering these

youngest Israeli and Australian women more different from each other in meaning domains than any other age-paired Israeli and Australian women. Their oldest co-nationals were statistically undifferentiated from each other.

The means for level 2, combining four sources of meaning, were not significantly different for Australians and Israelis, regardless of age. Level 1 (self-preoccupation) and level 4 (transcending self and others) were significantly different for only the youngest of the five age groups. The meaning level which played the most significant role in distinguishing Australians from Israelis was level 3 (beyond the realm of self interests). In this level, for the two youngest age groups, the differences between the scores were small but significantly higher for the Australians as compared with the corresponding scores for Israelis. For the 65–74-year-old women this pattern was reversed, with a small but significant difference in scores favouring the Israeli women. Of the twenty sets of grouped sources of meaning which, theoretically, might all have differed significantly from each other, significant differences were found between Israeli and Australian women in only five sets.

## Discussion

The research discussed in this paper does not answer the question as to whether certain groups of people have more or less meaning in their lives when compared with others. Nor does it convey the depth of that meaning. The SOMP instrument purports to identify the most frequently mentioned dimensions of meaning, the sources of meaning in life being those culled from a number of investigations with younger and older subjects. The data for both the Australian and Israeli samples show that there is a considerable diversification of sources of meaning in life among all age groups. No single age group exhibited a tendency either towards constriction or expansion in the *number* of sources of meaning ‘needed’ to provide for an overall sense of personal meaning. If there was a differentiation in scoring *patterns*, the older three groups of Israeli women and two older groups of Australian women scored more individual items as either ‘high’ or ‘low’ than did younger members of the sample, who preferred mid-range responses.

Though the greatest range and variance in scores, for both the Australian and Israeli samples, was found in the 75+ age group there were no indications that this group, when compared with others, was either more or less diversified in sources of meaning than other age groups. With only one Australian exception, there were no statistically



significant differences in total SOMP scores within the two samples. This was despite the expected differences in the importance that subjects imputed to certain sources of meaning.

It would appear that if there is a universally important source of meaning across cultures it is that which is derived from engaging in relationships with others. The Australian and Israeli findings for personal relationships here are consistent with the findings of other studies (Lowenthal *et al.* 1975; Frenkel-Brunswick 1968), documenting the importance of marriage, family, and personal relationships in general for women at all stages. Among the least important sources of meaning for both the Australian and Israeli women, irrespective of age, were being acknowledged for personal achievement, religious activities, leaving a legacy for the next generation, and participation in 'hedonistic' activities. On the whole, sources of meaning which either reflected a preoccupation with self, or which encompassed meaning and purpose beyond the self and others, were generally of less importance to both groups of women than the sources of meaning in other domains. Least interested in personal acknowledgment for achievements or participation in pleasurable (hedonistic) activities were the older women, consistent with virtually all previous findings, including the theoretical formulations of Reker and Wong (1988).

If there were a wart on the face of a theory of late life collectivist/humanist orientations it is that interest in social causes significantly *decreased* between the youngest and oldest Australian women. Also, other humanitarian and collectivist meaning orientations, such as being of service to others, preservation of culture and tradition, and humanistic concerns, did not significantly differentiate the Australian age groups. If, at age 45 and beyond, the duties directed by our ideals and our conscience play a more dominant role than during the first half of life (Frenkel-Brunswick 1968), that was not unequivocally observed in the Australian sample. Contrary to the Australian findings the somewhat greater emphasis, by older Israeli women, on humanistic, social and cultural concerns, (Tables 5 and 6) supported earlier findings (Lowenthal *et al.* 1975), pointing to a lessening of the importance of 'individualistic achievement' with age, and an increased attribution of meaning to social ethics and concern for others, including and extending beyond the family. The Israeli cultural, social, and humanistic ethic: 'The members of the House of Israel are all responsible, one for the other' is manifest in their level 3 scores.

Developmental theories of ageing hold that the attainment of wisdom and maturity is a life-long process. Not surprisingly, therefore,

personal growth was considered as important a source of personal meaning for the 80-year-old as for the 30-year-old. However, experiencing personal growth, which many view as an expression of an achievement orientation, was found here, as in other studies (*e.g.* Fiske and Chiriboga 1991), to be more important for young and middle-aged Australian and Israeli women than for the older subjects. For the two youngest Australian age groups this source ranked second after personal relationships, while for the same two Israeli age groups it ranked first in importance. For the older two groups of women, by contrast, it ranked sixth and eighth for the Australians and eighth and tenth for the Israelis. Might it be that personal growth in the later years of life is less important as a source of meaning than is the integration of life experiences (Reker and Wong 1988; Erikson 1982; Jung 1969) and the consolidation of the growth and wisdom attained at earlier stages of the life course?

Participation in religious activities was the least important source of meaning for all women sampled, regardless of age and country of residence. The uniformly low scores registered for this source were somewhat unexpected for the Australian women, almost half of whom identified themselves as tending more to the 'religious' than 'secular' (Table 1). Sered's (1987) findings for Israeli Jewish women may well be valid for the Australians, namely that the essence of female religiosity is less in the ritual aspects and more in the interpersonal domain (helping and caring for others). A respondent could therefore answer that she was 'religious', yet not consider the *ritual* or study practices of her religion to be important as a source of meaning.

In the Israeli sample, the predominant identification of self as being 'secular' (85 per cent of the sample, and closely reflecting actual Israeli demographics) was clearly consistent with the Israeli scoring of participation in religious activities. Baumeister (1991) notes that all societies and cultures foist particular sets of beliefs onto their individual members, with some adopting a very heavy hand, enforcing a certain view of life, while others provide competing views. With dogmatic orthodox Judaism being the only state-recognised stream of Jewish practice in Israel, active religious pluralism has never characterised the spiritual fabric of this society. The heavily felt theological hand of the culture seems to have determined the extent to which most people will need – and seek – ritualistic religion as a source of meaning in their lives. Religious beliefs may satisfy some people's needs for meaning. Nevertheless, short of challenging the thesis that religiosity increases or decreases with age, the need for religion cannot *a priori* be considered as requisite for meaning (Ebersole and DePaola 1989). The finding, at

least for the Israeli women, that ageing does not appear significantly to increase the need for religion in one's life, is borne out by the results of at least two recent national studies (Modan 1991; Levy and Levensohn 1993).

The cross national findings presented in Table 6 support the role of cultural determinism and socialisation practices in the formulation of values themes and ultimately sources of meaning in life. The age group, whose meaning priorities differed most was the youngest one. Within the 18–29-year-old group, Israeli and Australians differed significantly on three of the four meaning levels. Values, themes and meaning clearly locate the individual within a historical cultural cohort. It came as no surprise, therefore, that the youngest age group appeared to be the one still experimenting with what its specific culture has to offer, more identified at this early stage in life with the norms and values of its own subculture than with that of the macro environment surrounding it. To the extent that this is so, we may infer that, with respect to the evolution of personal meaning dimensions, the youngest Israeli and Australian women represent two distinctly different cultural entities.

The findings are perhaps equally supportive of the thesis that, while patterns of ageing may be highly individualistic, there are processes of change, continuity and coherence (Sagy *et al.* 1990) which cross social, cultural and geographic boundaries. The force of cultural determinism on the youngest women in this sample appeared to be tempered considerably, if not by the ageing process *per se*, than by a commonality of experiential and existential factors which contribute to the shaping of the phenomenological world of the older person. The fact that Israeli and Australian women, aged 30 or more, varied significantly in only two of 16 age-by-categorized-meaning cells (Table 6) seems to indicate that, within the framework of attribution of importance to pre-determined sources of meaning, older Australian and Israeli women have more in common with each other than do the youngest cohorts of the two cultures. The argument may cautiously be made that, within older age groups, there may be some cross-cultural applicability of late life theories of adaptation, including such a phenomenologically grounded area as purpose and meaning in life.

I am aware of the methodological issues which may have affected the validity of the current findings. As with any cross-cultural research utilising identical or even culturally and linguistically adapted versions of an instrument, words may have different nuances and implied meanings, especially when referring to such abstractions and concepts as meaning in life. The major issue is one of comparability of meaning

when the items are presented to people who differ in everyday vocabulary and grammar. It is evident that instruments found valid, reliable and useful for measuring aspects of meaning in one culture, especially when based on subjective elements of experience, cannot be assumed to have identical worth elsewhere. Consequently, though care was taken to make necessary adaptations, and though the SOMP reliability psychometrics in Australia and Israel are almost identical and within acceptable limits, there is no way to be certain that all SOMP items were comprehended in an identical fashion by the two samples. Subtle differences in understanding would not only be expected; they would be virtually unavoidable. Future administrations of the SOMP, especially with subjects of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, should consider testing for differences in the comprehension of meaning items. Future research would also do well to address the limitations of using forced choice, predetermined sources of meaning. An instrument which permits the inclusion of additional dimensions of meaning, from which factorially derived subscales might be obtained, would substantially enhance the interpretation of the findings.

Another limitation relates to the sampling frame. A more carefully controlled sampling procedure, one which would have provided, for example, either nearly identical or demographically proportionate numbers of women, might have provided additional – or perhaps even somewhat different – insights into age-related perceptions of personal meaning for women within each sample. Lastly, only a longitudinal design or simulation could provide information on how the maturing and ageing human being negotiates, on the one hand, the constant need to adapt and adjust to alterations in external and internal environments and, on the other, intuitively and instinctively strives to maintain stability and continuity in meaning. While the age groups here might be construed as representing different points on the life span continuum, each group must be viewed as being a discrete cohort of like-aged Israeli and Australian women. However tempting it may be to use such descriptors as ‘changes with age’ or ‘shifts away from’, the cross-sectional design employed here permitted only a description of differences and similarities between discrete age groups.

A conceptual issue, if not research limitation, goes to the heart of sample differentiation on the basis of age groupings. In this study of Israeli and Australian subjects it may be speculated that chronological age masks the significant influences of very different socialisation and educational experiences, changing cultural emphases and expectations, as well as the ways in which life experiences are assimilated.

Confirmation of this may be found in the results of the hierarchical multiple regressions which examined the *unique* contribution of education, marital status and family size to explain variance in level 2 and level 3 meaning scores. While family size was of no consequence, marital status did make a significant impact on level 3 for Israelis, and level 2 for Australians. Educational attainment made a significant impact only on level 2 for Israelis. Though these findings are hardly conclusive, they do raise the question as to how much is gained – or lost – in the convenient categorisation of samples according to chronological age.

In conclusion, the research, notwithstanding its methodological limitations, registered a general consensus concerning which sources of personal meaning were most and least important to respondents. Considering the number of potentially significant differences in total SOMP scores obtainable between the age groups within both samples, the fact that only one such age dyad, in the Australian sample, differed significantly in total scores, leads to the conclusion that all women appear to extract meaning from a variety of sources which individually and collectively contribute to an overall sense of personal meaning (Reker and Wong 1988). But, furthermore, there also seem to be only marginal differences between the age groups in the total amounts of meaning they attribute to the total of the sixteen sources. The findings as a whole did not suggest either age-related preoccupations with basic needs or of a lessened purpose in life as a concomitant of age. No significant support was found for an age-related ‘existential vacuum’ (Frankl 1971). The qualitative shift in engagement towards a philosophical orientation in the later years (Neugarten 1968) was not unequivocally substantiated: While the Israeli data did provide support for this position, the Australian data did not. Both samples substantiated the Jungian view of a developmental shift away from instrumental values with age. Again, within the study’s limitations, the findings seem to favour a perception of sources of personal meaning as being generally continuous in content and depth. They support the hypothesis that meaning seems to be preserved even in areas in which current levels of ego involvement may be different from those of younger years.

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