

Identifying and Codifying the Model of Meaning of Life in the Iranian Elderly: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Introduction: The evolutionary characteristics of old age and the approach of people to death at this stage of life makes this period different from others in the field of meaning of life. The purpose of this study was to analyze the lived experience of the Iranian elderly in order to develop a conceptual model of meaning of life.

Method: This article is a qualitative research that was implemented and analyzed with the grounded theory approach. For this purpose, 25 elderly people (13 females and 12 males) of Shiraz city, who were over 65 years with the ability to speak Persian and those which had not any severe effective cognitive disorders were selected by purposeful and theoretical sampling method. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted. A systematic and analytical approach of Strauss and Corbin was used to reach the findings.

Results: Based on the analysis, in open and axial coding, the obtained model had 14 main categories and 37 themes. This means, the perspective and perception of the elderly about a meaningful life is multi-dimensional.

Conclusion: Paying attention to these components, in futuristic planning can be effective in constructing and accepting the active role of the elderly in the society and it can be used for planning macro-political, socio-economic policies with respect to future aging trends.

Keywords: Meaning of Life, Grounded Theory, The Elderly, Qualitative Study

Introduction

One of the factors associated with psychological problems and inadequacies is the acquisition of the concept and meaning of life. In recent years, more attention has been paid to the structure of meaning in life in psychological research [1].

So far, many psychologists have examined the meaning of life. However, Viktor Frankl, the developer of the logotherapy approach, has studied this topic more than others. Frankl [2] believes that the meaning of each individual's life is unique to him/her. This meaning may also change over time. He stresses three dimensions of finding meaning in life which include meaning in suffering, doing excellent work and love.

Despite these advancements, many researchers note that in this context, there is still great ambiguity, and various approaches have structurally neglected the complexity and conceptual range of the meaning of life [3]. The main question in the context of the

'meaning of life' is grounded on "Is life essentially meaningful?" If the answer is yes, what gives meaning to human life and what is the path to reach them? [4].

The characteristics of old age make this period a distinctive phase in terms of the meaning of life. As death approaches, the focus of the meaning of life at this stage becomes distinguished from that in previous phases. In examining the meaning of life for elderly people, an interesting fundamental aspect is understanding where does the sense of a meaningful life originate from at this stage of evolution [5]. Old age is considered an important phase in a person's life due to its significant characteristics and its specific problems are viewed as some of the most substantial challenges in the present world. Changes relating to elderliness are manifested physiologically as well as psychologically and socially [6]. In definitions proposed for elderliness, common concepts such as progressive decline, diminishing responsiveness, and reduced adaptation capacity are used which represent the perspectives on old age [7]. There is also a negative attitude with a negative tendency towards the elderly, which, as they age, lose their cognitive abilities and this disrupts the social functioning of the elderly [8]. Levels of self-reliance and autonomy as aspects of individual identity also experience change at this age. A limited physical ability as well as the death of close friends and family members may lead to isolation and loneliness of the elderly people [9].

Hill et al. [10], conducted a qualitative analytical study on the meaning of life of ten female Ph.D. graduates of psychology. Participants in this study defined the meaning of life as synonymous with purposefulness or having a purpose in life. They were searching diligently for the meaning of life and believed that it is influenced by the life experiences and cultural background of each individual. Zhang et al. [11] studied the structure of the sources of meaning in life among the university students of China. By analyzing their data, they found six sources of meaning which included social commitment, interpersonal relationships, materialistic and worldly pursuits, life experiences, civilization, and independence. They also emphasized that the findings are influenced by the common life philosophies in Chinese culture, especially Confucianism and Taoism.

Stavrova and Luhmann [12] describe social bonds as both a source and an outcome of having meaning in life, suggesting that the sense of belonging and attachment contribute to the meaning. Also, by reviewing longitudinal studies, they concluded that there is a reciprocal relationship between social bonds and the meaning of life. Callister et al. [13], proposing that people's perceptions contribute to the purposefulness of their lives, conducted a qualitative study of religious people's perceptions through interviews with 172 religious individuals living in Ireland and England and found three factors of loving and serving others, family relations, and the connection with God to be sources of meaning. Also, by analyzing the findings and reviewing the literature, they showed that religion's contribution to the meaningfulness of life is partly through encouraging

people to build and strengthen meaningful relationships. Research findings show that the existence of meaning in life is an essential element in psychological well-being. These studies have been carried out on different populations of the young, adult, and elderly individuals and had similar results [14].

In the context of old age and meaning of life, Ahmadi et al. [5] conducted a field study of sources and facets of meaning among elderly women and men using measurement tools for the meaning of life. The results showed that "family" and "emotional connections" were the areas most frequently viewed as sources of meaning in life by the participants. Also, new categories of meaning were proposed in this study as "morality" and "need for social acceptance". Noya et al. [15] studied the conceptual model of the meaning of life. Their findings identified six sources for meaning of life including having meaningful relations with others, being in a good relationship, having new experiences, engaging in a productive, social and creative activity, engaging in activities involving emotional charge, suffering and struggle (e.g., death of a family member or illness) and practicing spiritual or religious activities.

Many empirical works, resort to reductionist approaches that require measurement of meaning, and consequently, they are obliged to use tools for this purpose. However, before delving into the statistics, we are required to overcome the definitional ambiguity of such a structure and be more clear about "what exactly do we mean when asking about the meaning of life?" [16]. Since the meaning of life is an abstract, vague, multi-dimensional, and complex structure, its deep essence can be found only through in-depth interviews and qualitative research methodology.

Today, the increased population of the elderly people is considered as a major problem in any society and it has involved all the economic, social and health dimensions [17]. According to statistical indexes, aging is progressing in the Iranian society. Iran is currently in transition from a young population to an old population, hence becoming a country with an old populace in the near future [18]. The growth of the elderly population in a society is a positive consequence of its development. However, if the society is not prepared for this growth, it can lead to many negative outcomes. An increasing number of elderly people relative to the total population — combined with a consumerist view of the aging phenomenon — can lead to a reduction in productive economic activities in the society; thus lowering the country's independent economic capacity [19].

Also, studies on the meaning of life in the elderly people are mainly based on the framework of the Western culture [5]. Therefore, the scales used are derived from the same definitions and there are no in-depth qualitative studies on the challenge of the meaning of life facing elderly people in Iran. Whereas the meaning of life is a phenomenon that emerges from the structure and contents of each society and in a given cultural framework, sources and facets of such meanings are manifested differently. Therefore, the necessity of

understanding the old age phase from different perspectives of the socio-cultural context of a society is an irrefutable fact. Hence, this study attempts to design a conceptual model of the meaning of life in the Iranian elderly people based on their perspectives.

Method

This study is a fundamental research and the qualitative method was used to achieve its objectives. The present study was qualitative and implemented using the grounded theory research method. On this basis, the present study was theoretically saturated with 25 elderly people (13 women and 12 men). It was attempted for participants in this study to represent all walks of life among the Iranian elderly population as much as possible. To this end, the study area included citizens living in different regions of the Fars province, Jahandidegan centers, and parks across the city of Shiraz. Therefore, the criterion for entering the study was being over 65 and the ability to speak Persian and the criterion for leaving the study were acute disorders affecting the cognitive functions of the person that are problematic in the interview process (such as Alzheimer's and severe stroke) and lack of honest cooperation. The data collection tool in this research was a semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview is more structured than unstructured interviews and has more limitations on discussed topics [20]. The interview questions were prepared based on theoretical approaches, previous research, and opinions from professors and experts in the field, and at the end were approved by professors to measure their validity. After the questions were designed, an elementary interview was first conducted with four elderly people, and questions that were unintelligible to interviewees were edited. Finally, the content validity of the questions were confirmed by the six specialists. Each of the questions were developed in alignment with research objectives to obtain the essential data. A total of about 10 questions were asked by the participants. In particular cases, additional questions were asked out of necessity to obtain further, deeper understanding of participants' answers. The interview axes covered factors including the meaning of life, its dimensions, interfering factors, contextual factors, and consequences of having a sense of meaning in life. The interview questions target the meaning of life and its dimensions both directly and indirectly.

To ensure the data validity, triangulation and dependability were used and the theoretical and scholarly literature in the research topic area was reviewed based on the findings and categories. Also, judges outside the research space were asked to confirm whether the interpretation and results were supported by the data or not. Finally, the findings and interpretations from data were reviewed and judged among several participants who confirmed the results. Their feedback and opinions were applied in the final edition and formulation of interpretations. Also, a detailed description of participants and research process was provided to increase the transmissibility of the research findings.

To observe the ethics of the research, in addition to

obtaining conscious consent from participants, they were informed on the research objectives, interview method, the right to withdraw from the interview, and confidentiality of information. The average interview duration was 43 minutes. Interviews were initially conducted in the living or social environments of the elderly people, and then, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and compliance of health protocols, via phone calls. After asking for permission, some interviews were recorded and the rest were documented by writing down all the information from participants and returning the text immediately after the interview.

In the process of this study, the Strauss-Corbin systematic analytical approach was used to obtain the findings. For data analysis, the data were transformed into semantic blocks in the form of statements related to the main essence of the study and were as summarized and compressed to the extent possible. This process was continued abstractly to reach the main axes. This process was carried out simultaneously with the interviews. In this analysis, three stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were used. The pattern for the meaning of life from the elderly people's viewpoint was extracted from these codings and drawn as maps of the website network. In the end, the salient themes in each of the three stages as well as the relationship between them were formulated and presented.

In this study, the main source of data collection was semi-structured interviews. The initial interviews were exploratory and descriptive, and gradually after each interview, the data from the interviews were coded and follow-up questions were asked to better understand the issue. Below in open coding, axial classes and the final model are provided with evidence.

Step 1: Open Coding Process

At the first stage, the original codes were transformed into main themes and categories. This means that the initial codes that were conceptually in the same group were placed under a more general theme, and in the same way, similar themes were also placed under the main category.

Step 2: Axial and Selective Coding

At this stage, the components produced during open coding were determined based on the paradigmatic model and presented. These classes were then linked systematically to each other.

Results

According to the findings in this step, the resulting model had 14 main categories and 37 themes. In Table 2, a portion of the keywords and evidence extracted from the interviews, as well as the resulting themes and categories are sorted and presented.

After, identifying the axial class, other classes that were associated with it were identified and positioned. Then, the classes that needed further development were corrected, and, in the end, the researcher established the final frame of the paradigmatic model as a narrative based on his understanding of the phenomenon's context. In Diagram 1, the final, organized model has been presented.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Research Participants

Assigned Code	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Number of Children	Level of Education
1	Male	73	Married	2	Master of Mathematics
2	Female	75	Married	4	Associate degree in Literature
3	Female	66	Is dead	4	Diploma
4	Female	84	Is dead	5	Sixth elementary
5	Female	74	Married	3	Diploma
6	Female	72	Unmarried	—	Diploma
7	Female	73	Prolonged absence of a spouse	1	Fifth elementary
8	Male	73	Married	2	Diploma
9	Male	72	Married	4	Middle School degree
10	Male	73	Married	4	Master of Literature
11	Female	65	Is dead	5	Middle School degree
12	Male	71	Married	8	Fourth Elementary
13	Male	72	Married	4	Bachelor of Mathematics
14	Male	78	Is dead	7	Illiterate
15	Female	64	Divorced	3	Diploma
16	Male	65	Is dead	6	Literacy for reading and writing
17	Male	83	Married	2	General Surgeon
18	Male	67	Married	4	Diploma
19	Female	69	Divorced	2	Fifth elementary
20	Male	76	Married	5	Middle School degree
21	Female	74	Married	4	Diploma
22	Female	85	Married	8	Illiterate
23	Female	64	Divorced	1	Bachelor of Midwifery
24	Male	81	Married	6	Fifth elementary
25	Female	89	Is dead	5	Illiterate

Accordingly, the causal conditions that led to the creation and formation of the nuclear phenomenon or class included a major class entitled "the rationality of human nature". The main components in this study, which define the studied living phenomenon, were classified in the main category of "experience of love". The underlying conditions, which served as a platform for increasing the occurrence and paving the way for the study of the phenomenon, included two main categories: "social factors" and "intrapersonal factors". Deterrents, including the two main categories of "macro factors" and "micro factors", have slowed down or halted the emergence of the main concern by disturbing it. The consequences of implementing the strategies used by the elderly, which are the same as the results of processes and interactions, consist of the main categories of "sense of effectiveness", "feeling of immortality" and "elevation of the psychological aspect".

Discussion

By examining the meaning of life in the lifeworld of the Iranian elderly, the results of this study identified the phenomenon and using a community-based approach, described the other aspects related to it — i.e., causal conditions, strategies, interfering factors, and context, and outcomes of applying such solutions.

One of the categories that was categorized as one of the causal conditions in the theory was the category of "the rationality of human nature". Axial codes derived from it, including acceptance of death, the

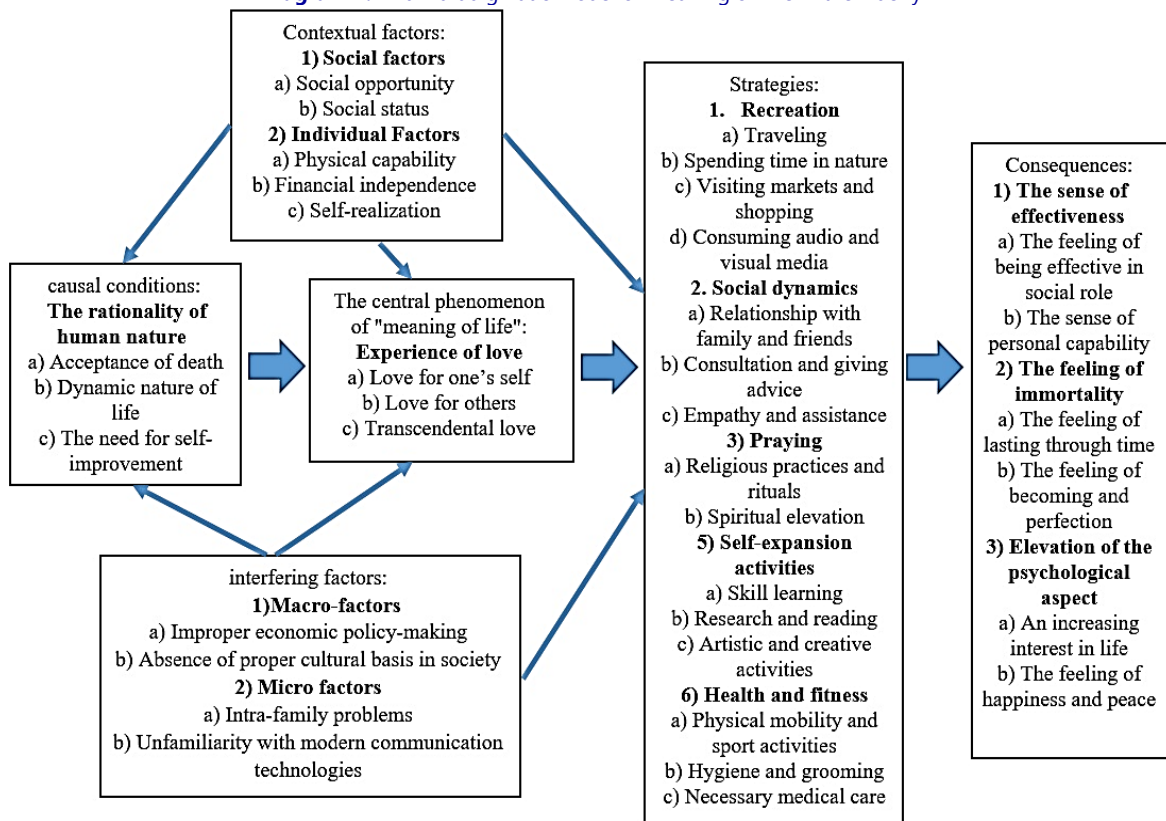
dynamic nature of life and the need for self-improvement. It can be said that this category has not been mentioned in other studies, whether qualitative or quantitative. Accepting the issue of death, which has not been around for a long time, leads the elderly in search of immortality, this innate instinct, in various fields. In this period, death shows itself closer and more real, and this is where the person is faced with many existential questions in his life, what he has done so far and what he can and has the opportunity to do, and it is this existential concern that is the issue of understanding which makes the meaning of life more colorful than before. Another issue that drives the elderly to seek the meaning of life is the dynamic nature of life. A concept that may at the first glance be the opposite of the previous concept of accepting death, but in reality is on the other side of this concept. The dynamic nature of life from the perspective of the elderly means the need to be on the same path and in sync with the flow of life. Life goes on, whether the person wants to or not, and this current draws man with it. Another central concept that from the perspective of the elderly can be a reason for searching for and understanding meaning in life is the issue of the need for self-improvement. This concept, from the perspective of the elderly, is a need that does not relate to a particular age, and perhaps the only thing that differentiates this need in different eras is the selective ways to address it in the process of achieving the meaning of life. As in the present study, different strategies have been mentioned.

Table 2. Initial Codes, Themes, Categories, and Frequencies Obtained from Interviews

Categories	Themes	Initial Codes (concepts)	Frequencies
The Rationality of Human Nature	Acceptance of death	Thinking of death, worrying about losing opportunities, caring about the world afterlife	8
	Dynamic nature of life	The necessity of thinking about the purpose of life, accomplishing one's goals and tasks in life, absence of a sense of emptiness and uselessness, importance having a purpose in life, the necessity of keeping pace with the passage of life, attention to the improvement of life based on the circumstances	5
		The need for self-improvement	Attention to personal development, getting better and making progress, the necessity of creating a valuable and a noble self, self-direction, self-management
Macro Factors	Improper economic policy-making	Discontent with income, issues with earning a pension, insurance, unemployment, high prices of goods and services, the disproportion between income and prices	21
	Absence of proper cultural basis in society	Society's misconceptions of old age, people's interaction with the elderly, the ageist stereotypes in society	11
Micro Factors	Domestic problems	Other people interfering in one's life, family disputes, disputes with children, disputes with siblings	7
	Unfamiliarity with modern communication technologies	Issues of using modern mobile phones, issues of using computers and software, problems associated with other new technologies, challenges of using online banking systems	6
Social Factors	Social opportunity	Opportunities are given by society to a person for an effective social presence	9
	Social status	An individual's influential and efficient presence in the society through his professional role or financial status	6
Individual Factors	Physical capability	Individual's physical capability for active and effective participation in the society, an individual's physical ability to adopt various influential roles, an individual's physical ability to perform the desired tasks	16
	Financial independence	Financial independence needed to do the required tasks, financial capability to run different activities	13
	Self-realization	Self-awareness, recognizing one's interests, knowing one's capabilities, recognizing one's limitations, and knowing one's situation and status	7
Experience of Love	Love for one's self	Attending to and caring for one's self, being kind to one's self, sense of value, compassion towards self, addressing one's own needs	8
	Love for others	Receiving unconditional love from others, expressing love for others, being interested in the world and nature, caring for animals, being in line with nature	12
	Transcendental love	Feeling the presence of superior power, surrendering to God, loving God, trusting in God, trusting in prophets and Imams	10
Recreation	Traveling	Going on trips, traveling to different places, visiting mystical and historical sites, interest in seeing historical and cultural places	18
	Spending time in nature	Going to gardens, mountains and nature, going to parks	14
	Visiting markets and shopping	Spending time in markets, shopping, buying unnecessary appliances, looking at shopping malls, buying life appliances	14
	Consuming audio and visual media	Watching movies, watching TV and satellite programs, listening to music, going to the movies, and plays	21
Social Dynamics	Relationship with family and friends	Relationship with the family, attending parties, gatherings, being present in the community, establishing boundaries with others, social participation, relationships with friends and peers, promotion of social relationships	22

Categories	Themes	Initial Codes (concepts)	Frequencies
	Consultation and giving advice	Advising others, presenting experiences to others, trying to provide favorable behavioral models to others, becoming a role model for others, providing consultation to family members, giving expert advice within the profession, guiding people based on life experience within the profession, guiding people based on life experience	19
	Empathy and assistance	Serving others, trying to resolve other people's problems, empathy with others, listening to other people's problems, helping others	25
Praying	Religious practices and rituals	Praying, reading the Quran, reciting prayers, going to religious places for praying and pilgrimage, participating in religious activities	25
	Spiritual elevation	Performing different activities for the spiritual experience, practicing yoga, meditation, lighting a candle for spiritual elevation	6
Self-expansion activities	Skill learning	Learning new skills, a new language, various arts, making efforts to improve on previous skills	11
	Research and reading	Reading books, scientific and specialized articles, newspapers and magazines, attending and participating at academic conferences, passion for science, books, and literature	9
	Artistic and creative activities	Attempting to create and record works of art across different areas, composing poems and publishing literary materials, writing, creating new tools and objects, invention and innovation in various fields of expertise	13
Health and fitness	Physical mobility and sport activities	A morning exercise routine, participating in public sports, walking and running, climbing and light exercises, swimming in the pool, passion for exercising	19
	Hygiene and grooming	Caring for and maintaining personal appearance, personal hygiene, grooming and make-up, managing, and organizing house affairs.	11
	Necessary medical care	Attending periodic check-ups, following up with medical treatments on determined dates, consuming medications on time, health awareness, monitoring their health	20
The sense of effectiveness	The feeling of being effective in social role	Sense of usefulness in a professional role, sense of influencing the people of the society, feeling valuable	6
	The sense of personal capability	Feeling of independence, effectiveness, self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-confidence, not feeling disabled	15
The feeling of immortality	The feeling of lasting through time	Feeling of leaving a positive legacy in the society after death, living on in history, not ending and going away with death, resolving the idea of disappearance through the immortality of works and activities	5
	The feeling of becoming and perfection	Absence of the sense of stagnation and inertia, feeling in the flow of life, the sense of actualization	4
Elevation of the psychological aspect	An increasing interest in life	Feeling hope for life, satisfaction with life, improvement in the quality of life.	25
	The feeling of happiness and peace	Feeling peace, happiness and prosperity, deriving joy	25

Diagram 1. Final Paradigmatic Model of Meaning of Life in the Elderly



At the same time, in the literature, different factors were listed in the definition and modeling of the meaning of life. Some of the previous studies have common grounds with the present research finding and in some cases, this research has found new results. For example, Noya et al. [15] consider the sources of meaning to be having meaningful relationships with others, having new experiences, engaging in creative and productive activities, engaging in activities that involve an emotional charge, spiritual and religious activities, and suffering and getting stronger. In Iran, Ahmadi et al. [5] assert that 'family' and 'emotional connections' had the greatest frequency in their study as sources of meaning in life for their participants. In the present study, these categories have also shown considerable frequency. Social activity is one of the main contributors to the meaning of life as perceived by elderly people. The importance of this aspect in defining the meaning of life has been emphasized in various ways in different researches. Actually some studies view social bonding as both a source and a consequence of meaning in life [12]. This category was defined in the present study as examples of helping others, becoming a role model for others, and social participation. The importance of this dimension in an individual's meaning of life is known as the 'other-oriented meaning' which is a key component of this concept [10]. Also, sub-categories of self-expansion and especially artistic and creative activities have been mentioned in different ways in some studies. This category is one of the strategies for old age that not only can contribute to the creation of meaning in a person's life, but also have a broader impact on the individual and the society. Also, the experience of love as an axial phenomenon in

the present study is a component that is compatible with other theories for understanding the meaning of life. Similarly, Callister et al. [13] propose three sources of the meaning of life — i.e., love and service to others, family ties, and the relationship with God. In Frankl's view, the perception of spiritual value is possible by gaining value or experience. This value or experience can be gained through culture and art or another form of understanding through "love". In the results of the present model, the promotion of psychological facet is one of the major categories emphasized in various research as the main outcome of understanding the meaning of life at different ages [14]. An interesting finding of this study is the elderly people's attention to their psychological needs, and their efforts in mobility and playing an active role in the society, improving the existing capabilities, and learning new skills by adopting new roles associated with their age. This, in combination with an understanding of their physical and mental limitations, becomes particularly important. In a way that the elderly people in this study, while emphasizing the need for a realistic understanding of their abilities and limitations, are making the effort to develop their network of beneficial relationships and to manage their presence in the community effectively and intelligently. Also, the addition of categories such as physical mobility and sports activities and recreation, as well as the presence and functioning in the society by adopting active roles indicate that the elderly community's culture is trying to escape negative stereotypes associated with aging. These are stereotypes that associate aging with sickness and have a consumerist, passive view of this period. But in the meantime, there are

some challenges that seniors themselves recognize. In some aspects, there is a need for compatibility, acceptance, or management by the elder individual, such as physical ailments and interpersonal relationships. In other cases, the necessity of government intervention, the establishment of macro policies, and the promotion of the correct culture are evident.

One of the main limitations of this study was the prevalence of the Covid-19 virus, which caused many limitations in the research process, especially in conducting face-to-face interviews. Another limitation of this study was obtaining the consent of the participants in recording the audio and conducting the interview, which in some cases caused the interview to be deleted and replaced by another interview.

It is suggested that in order to expand the meaning of life, the present study should be conducted in other social and cultural contexts of the Iranian elderly population. Also, due to the special and different living conditions in nursing homes and consequently the different lifestyles of these people compared to others, it is recommended to study and compare the views of these elderly people about the meaning of life with the views obtained in this study.

Conclusion

In a general conclusion, the meaning of life in the view of the elderly can be placed in a major category called "love" that this love can be expressed in relation to various sources (such as self-love, love-making and receiving love from another and, to a greater degree, spiritual and transcendent love). What is the most important and closest word for the elderly in gaining the "meaning of life" is love, which makes sense and saves life from emptiness and meaninglessness. From the perspective of the elderly, love contains a message of vitality, immortality and enthusiasm. However, to make love does not necessarily require a sexual and emotional partner of the opposite sex (as in Erickson's view of youth), but this concept of love is much broader and deeper, beyond all physical and emotional love.

Based on the present study, the elderly people's perception of the meaning of life, and their efforts to create a new role can be used in political, social, and economic macro-planning and policy-making due to their influential outcomes. This, along with the attention to an increasing elderly population in Iran and its future issues, as well as the role of the cultural context in achieving the meaning of life are highly important. Therefore, to promote the meaning of life and the resources to obtain it, it is suggested that the present study be conducted in other social and cultural spheres of the Iranian elderly population to reach a more comprehensive understanding of this concept and factors affecting it.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest and no financial benefits from this study.

Ethical Approval

All ethical considerations were applied in this study.

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