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An Examination of the Relationships between Activity Participation, Social Relations,
and Meaning in Life among Older Adults in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

Previous research suggests that a sense of meaning in life (MIL) contributes to physical and psychological well-being among older adults. Given the positive outcomes associated with MIL, it is important to identify sources of MIL and understand how MIL arises among older adults. The increasing proportions of older adults engaging in employment, volunteering, and informal caregiving suggests that it may be important to consider the influence of these activities on MIL. Furthermore, while there is evidence that receiving social support enhances MIL, there does not appear to be any research on the effects of providing social support on an individual's sense of MIL. This research examines relationships between health, MIL, and volunteering, employment, and informal caregiving, and the role of social support in these relationships among a sample of older adults in Aotearoa New Zealand. In addition, this research aims to examine how different aspects of caregiving relate to MIL among older adults who are informal caregivers.

This research was secondary data analysis of a large sample of community-dwelling older adults in Aotearoa New Zealand. Relationships were examined using standard quantitative statistical procedures with linear hierarchical regression being the primary technique. MIL was found to be associated with psychological but not physical health with the exception of older adult informal caregivers for whom MIL was associated with both dimensions of health. Consistent with previous research, volunteering was associated with higher MIL among older adults and this relationship was mediated by the provision of social support. Results also indicated that informal caregiving may enhance MIL indirectly through the provision of social support. However, no evidence was found that participation in paid employment is associated with either higher or lower MIL. Among

informal caregivers, perceived social support was the only aspect of caregiving which remained a significant predictor of MIL after controlling for demographic and health variables.

The research suggests MIL is an important resource for the psychological health of older adults, supporting the incorporation of MIL into psychological interventions for this population. Volunteering and other roles which present opportunities to provide support for others may be particularly effective for enhancing MIL. Further research is needed to investigate how different aspects of employment relate to MIL in order to better understand how employment may be structured to contribute to MIL. Considering the socio-historical context in which older adulthood is lived out, the research contributes to the growing body of literature on MIL, providing insight into how MIL might be promoted among older adults.

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Preface

I have had a long standing interest in working with the older adult population, an interest which formed the foundation for my research. In addition given the ageing population, working as a psychologist I am increasingly likely to work with older adults in a clinical capacity. It is important to ensure mental health professionals are able to meet the needs of this population and provide effective therapeutic interventions. The focus on meaning in life developed after reading the writings of Viktor Frankl, one of the first to theorise about meaning in life, which I found extremely interesting and engaging.

With these foundations I started to form the current research project, reading key theorists in this area to develop an understanding of theories regarding MIL, the current state of MIL research, and the areas in need of further research. Concurrently, I began researching ageing and older adulthood to gain an understanding of the current research in this area. From my initial research I formulated tentative research questions and approached the Massey University Health and Ageing Research Team (HART) who granted permission and access to data from the Health, Work, and Retirement (HWR) study, the flagship longitudinal study of the HART. A process of moving between the data and the research ensued until my tentative research questions could be solidified, forming the primary section of the research project: *An Examination of relationships between MIL, employment, volunteering, informal caregiving, and provision of social support*. Further research and examination of the data, suggested opportunities for additional research questions and an additional two sections, examining health, meaning in life, and caregiving, were developed to supplement and expand the core section of the project.

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