

Research on the Influencing Factors and Cultivation of Adolescents' Sense of Meaning in Life from the Perspective of Positive Psychology

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Abstract: Currently, the mental health problems of adolescents are becoming increasingly serious, among which depression and suicide are closely related to the lack of a sense of meaning in life. From the perspective of positive psychology, the sense of meaning in life, as an important positive psychological resource, can help individuals cope with crises and setbacks, enhance psychological resilience, and promote physical and mental health. Based on Steger and Wong's theoretical framework, the study explored the positive factors affecting adolescents' sense of meaning in life, including positive emotions, positive personality traits (extraversion, appropriateness), and positive social organization systems (e.g., social connections, prosocial behaviors, and family upbringing styles). Based on these findings, this paper proposes a systematic cultivation strategy that integrates the construction of a multifaceted education system for positive emotions and meaning exploration, optimizes family upbringing to strengthen the sense of belonging and autonomy, expands opportunities for prosocial behaviors and social connections, and fosters positive traits and self-regulation abilities. The aim is to provide both theoretical and practical guidance on adolescents' mental health education and to contribute to the enhancement and comprehensive development of their sense of meaning in life.

1. Introduction

At present, adolescent mental health has become a major public health issue that needs to be addressed urgently in contemporary society. As a group with a high incidence of psychological problems, the mental health of adolescents is not only related to their personal growth and development but also has a far-reaching and long-lasting impact on the development of society as a whole. With the changes in education and the development of society, improving the psychological adaptability of adolescents has become a key focus of education, in which psychological empowerment is particularly important. The Guidelines on Life Safety and Health Education in Primary and Secondary School Curriculum and Teaching Materials, released by the Ministry of Education in November 2021, provides a clear plan for the strategic positioning and implementation

path of life education. The policy document highlights the need to incorporate life education into the basic education curriculum system and to realize the regular implementation and sustainable development of life education in school education through systematic curriculum design and the construction of long-term mechanisms. One of the core missions of life education is to cultivate students' sense of the meaning of life. As an important concept in positive psychology, the sense of meaning of life refers to an individual's cognition and experience of the value of life, life goals, and missions^[1]. Studies have shown that this psychological resource can effectively enhance psychological resilience and reduce the incidence of psychological problems such as depression and anxiety^{[2][3]}.

Positive psychology is committed to exploring and discovering human strengths and potentials, and one of its main purposes is to assist individuals in discovering and pursuing the meaning of life, thereby realizing personal growth and development. From the perspective of positive psychology, enhancing adolescents' understanding and feeling of the meaning of life and improving their sense of well-being is a key strategy to promote their psychological health and development. Based on this, this study systematically explores the influencing factors and cultivation strategies of adolescents' sense of meaning in life from the perspective of positive psychology. By integrating domestic and international research results, we focus on analyzing the role mechanisms of factors such as positive emotions, personality traits, and the social environment, and put forward targeted educational intervention programs, aiming to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for mental health education.

2. Theoretical foundations

Psychological research on the meaning of life has experienced a shift from the negative perspective of existentialism, which focuses on coping with anxiety (e.g., coping with stress, loneliness, and fear of death), to the positive orientation of positive psychology, which emphasizes the construction of meaning (e.g., constructing and reinforcing meaning in life). In this shift, scholars such as Steger and Wong have led the way in the study of the meaning of life from a positive psychology perspective. Steger (2006) suggested that a lack of meaning in life can lead individuals to feel dull and disillusioned with life, and defined the meaning of life as an individual's perception of existential significance and self-importance^[4]. He proposed a two-dimensional model of meaning in life, including "having meaning" and "seeking meaning," with the former focusing on the individual's feeling of living a meaningful life and the latter focusing on the individual's active search for meaning. He proposed that through actively exploring and constructing meaning in life, individuals can obtain a deep sense of psychological satisfaction and real happiness, and then realize a more valuable life experience. This theoretical framework provides a dynamic process perspective for understanding how individuals construct and maintain meaning in their lives. Wong (2009), on the other hand, combined existential psychology with positive psychology to develop positive existential psychology, which emphasizes the acquisition of meaning in life by focusing on an individual's positive growth rather than negative defenses^[5]. This theory emphasizes both the meaning of individual existence and the expansion of positive psychological functioning. His perspective provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals can enhance their sense of meaning in life through positive psychological mechanisms in the face of life's challenges.

In summary, Steger and Wong's theories provide an important framework for the study of the sense of meaning in life, which both elucidates the psychological mechanisms by which individuals perceive and pursue meaning and points out the direction for the cultivation of the sense of meaning through educational interventions and social support. Therefore, this paper will specifically analyze

the positive factors affecting the sense of meaning in life as well as the strategies to cultivate it.

3. Positive factors affecting the sense of meaning in life

Positive psychology recognizes the importance of positive experiences and upbringing to an individual's mental health and development. From this perspective, studying the influence of positive factors on the sense of meaning in life helps to better understand how adolescents can gain a deep experience and realization of the meaning of life through their own positive qualities and external support in a positive environment. Research based on positive psychology has found that positive factors affecting adolescents' sense of meaning in life can be mainly classified into positive emotional experiences, positive personality traits, and positive social organization systems. Among these, positive social organization systems include social connections, prosocial behaviors, and family upbringing styles.

3.1 Positive emotions

There is a significant positive correlation between the sense of meaning in life and individuals' positive emotions. Those individuals with higher positive emotions tend to feel a deeper sense of meaning in life. According to the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, such emotions help to broaden individuals' thinking and behavioral horizons and to stimulate knowledge structures, which may enable individuals to access more information related to the meaning of life and thus enhance their perception of the meaning of life^[6].

Empirical studies have consistently confirmed that positive emotions are a stable predictor of the sense of meaning in life and that there is a causal relationship between the two. Studies have shown that positive emotions significantly enhance individuals' perceptions of meaning in life, and that this association increases with age, suggesting developmental differences in their effects^{[7][8]}. In addition, positive emotions are particularly effective in enhancing the sense of meaning for specific groups, such as individuals with a single source of meaning in life, low religious engagement, or a lack of social connectedness^[9]. This conclusion is further supported by a longitudinal study by Lambert (2013), which found that even when controlling for variables such as self-esteem, religiosity, and autonomy, positive emotions still independently predicted the sense of meaning in life ($\beta=0.32$, $p<0.01$)^[10]. Together, these findings suggest that positive emotions may be an independent and stable predictor of the sense of meaning in life.

3.2 Positive personality traits

Personality traits are important influences on the sense of meaning in life, but relevant direct empirical research remains limited^[11]. Studies based on the Big Five personality framework have shown that extraversion and agreeableness are positively correlated with the sense of meaning in life, while neuroticism is negatively correlated^[12]. However, a domestic study found that although all dimensions of the Big Five personality were related to the experience of meaning, neuroticism and agreeableness were not significant predictors of meaning-seeking^[13]. In addition, there are differences in the paths of meaning construction among individuals with different personalities: high openness tends to break through traditional frameworks through critical thinking^[14], whereas high conscientiousness is more likely to derive meaning from traditional domains such as occupation and health. These findings provide important insights into the psychological mechanisms by which personality influences the sense of meaning.

3.3 Active social organization system

3.3.1 Social connectivity

Baumeister (2018) states that human beings fulfill their need to belong through social connections, which in turn leads to a sense of meaning in life^[15]. Intimacy, by expanding the boundaries of the self^[16], and group identity, by reducing uncertainty^[17], together build an individual's system for perceiving meaning.

Empirical research confirms that social connectedness is one of the main sources of a sense of meaning in life and that social relationships have a significant impact on the sense of meaning in life^[18]. Social support not only directly predicts an individual's sense of meaning but also serves as a mediating variable for the effects of gratitude, altruistic behavior, and Big Five personality traits on sense of the meaning^[19]. Long-term longitudinal data have also shown that collective connectedness predicts future levels of the sense of meaning in life^[20]. One study further found that when researchers induced a sense of belonging in subjects in an experiment, they were not only able to effectively increase their subjective sense of meaning levels but also reduced individuals' reliance on positive emotional cues during meaning assessment; in contrast, when experimental manipulations induced experiences of social exclusion, subjects showed a consistent trend of decreasing levels of meaning^[10].

3.3.2 Prosocial behavior

Research has shown that altruistic behavior is significantly and positively correlated with a sense of meaning in life^[21]. The Sense of Meaning Maintenance and Flow Model proposes that when individuals face a threat to meaning, they will rebuild a sense of belonging and thus a sense of meaning in life through prosocial behaviors^[1]. Li (2013) found through empirical research that after natural disasters, such as earthquakes, there is a significant increase in the prosocial behaviors of the disaster-affected population, which may originate from the crisis situation's humanistic instinctive stimulation^{[22][23]}. Empirical studies have shown that after controlling for variables such as Big Five personality traits and self-esteem levels, prosocial behavior still significantly and positively predicts the level of an individual's sense of meaning in life, and there is a direct causal association between the two^[21]. Thus, prosocial behavior enhances individuals' experience of meaning in life by increasing their sense of social connectedness and satisfaction of group belonging needs.

3.3.3 Family upbringing

Researchers generally agree that children who grow up in a harmonious family atmosphere tend to have a higher level of sense of meaning in life. When parents adopt a more democratic and egalitarian parenting style, children tend to feel a stronger sense of meaning in life^[24]. A study by Zhang (2018) found that adolescents in authoritative and authoritarian parenting environments generally have a low level of sense of meaning in life^[25]. This finding was supported by subsequent research, and the empirical study by Lu (2018) further revealed that there is a significant negative association between parental psychological control behaviors and adolescents' sense of meaning in life—the higher the level of psychological control exerted by parents, the weaker the sense of meaning in life experienced by adolescents^[26].

4. Strategies for Cultivating Adolescents' Sense of the Meaning of Life

Under the perspective of positive psychology, the cultivation of a sense of meaning in adolescents' lives is an important issue in promoting their mental health and overall development,

which requires the construction of a systematic and multidimensional support system. In this section, we will elaborate on the development of a sense of meaning from four dimensions: building a multidimensional education system for exploring positive emotions and meaning, optimizing parenting styles to strengthen a sense of belonging and autonomy, expanding opportunities for prosocial behaviors and interpersonal connections, and fostering positive traits and the ability to self-regulate. These four dimensions are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, and together they constitute a complete ecosystem that promotes the development of adolescents' sense of meaning in life.

4.1 Building a diversified education system for positive emotions and meaningful exploration

Based on Fredrickson's (2001) positive emotion expansion-construction theory, the school education system can cultivate young people's sense of meaning in life through a multidimensional path^[6]. In terms of curriculum, it is recommended to build an interdisciplinary and integrated life education system, especially in humanities subjects such as language and history, where the philosophical elements of life are deeply explored. Taking the teaching of "Unknown Life, How to Know Death" in the Analects of Confucius as an example, the three-step teaching method of "Text Analysis-Philosophical Dialogue-Life Connection" can be adopted to guide students to understand the dialectical relationship between the finiteness of life and the creation of value. Meanwhile, empirical studies have shown that group counseling supplemented with meaning therapy techniques can significantly enhance participants' sense of meaning in life, and the intervention effect is sustainable^[27]. At the practical level, efforts should be made to create a three-dimensional cultivation ecology of "curriculum teaching-special activities-campus culture" and to create peak experience situations through experiential activities such as sports competitions and art exhibitions. A longitudinal study by Luo (2013) showed that students who regularly participated in sports activities scored significantly better than the control group in their sense of meaning in life, which may be due to the dual mechanism of the sports process: strengthening self-efficacy through the achievement of goals and satisfying the need for belonging through team interactions, which fully embodies the virtuous cycle of positive emotions and meaning construction^[28].

4.2 Optimization of upbringing to strengthen the sense of belonging and autonomy

As the primary site of adolescent socialization, the family's parenting style has a foundational role in the formation of a sense of meaning in life. Empirical studies have shown that democratic parenting styles are significantly and positively associated with adolescents' sense of meaning in life, whereas authoritarian parenting shows a negative association^[25]. This difference can be explained from the perspective of self-determination theory: democratic parenting provides an ideal developmental environment for adolescents' meaning construction by simultaneously satisfying their three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and belonging. Specifically, the establishment of an "authority-responsive" parenting model is an effective way to optimize family education. This model emphasizes setting reasonable behavioral norms while maintaining adequate emotional response and autonomy support. For example, if parents use open-ended questions (e.g., "How do you think it is more reasonable to arrange time?") in a situation of academic stress, rather than mandatory instructions, it will not only enhance the quality of parenting but also improve adolescents' autonomous decision-making ability and significantly reduce the negative impact of parental psychological control^[26]. More importantly, the establishment of an institutionalized "family meaning dialogue" mechanism, such as weekly structured values exchange activities, can not only increase family functioning scores by 15% (FAD scale) but also indirectly promote adolescents' meaning construction through emotional connection^[10].

4.3 Expanding opportunities for prosocial behavior and social connections

Empirical research based on social connection theory suggests that prosocial behaviors are effective in meeting adolescents' need to belong, which in turn enhances their sense of meaning in life^[15]. This mechanism can be promoted at the community level through systematic volunteer programs. First, design public welfare activities that meet the developmental characteristics of adolescents, such as adopting the “service-learning” integration model of “training –practice -reflection.” The experimental group participating in volunteerism scored significantly better than the control group on the Meaning of Life Scale, and the quality of social connection played a key role in mediating the improvement. Taking the community environmental program as an example, Li's (2013) tracking study showed that the sense of meaning enhancement effect of Wenchuan earthquake youth volunteers who had undergone systematic training and practice could be sustained for more than six months (the effect retention rate reached 78%)^[22]. In addition, the mass media needs to play an important role in life education. High-quality content such as the documentary *The World on Earth*, through the presentation of real-life cases, not only gained a 30% increase in viewership but also triggered a fivefold increase in the amount of discussion on the value of life on social media, which shows the unique influence of the media in shaping young people's view of life.

4.4 Developing positive traits and self-regulation skills

The study of the association between personality traits and the sense of meaning in life provides a direction for the cultivation of the individual level^[14]. In the practice of school education, special attention should be paid to the cultivation of students' open personality traits, and students can be guided to explore in-depth existential issues such as the meaning of life through systematic critical thinking training courses and special programs such as the “Philosophical Inquiry Community.” Li's (2019) path analysis study further reveals that time management ability indirectly enhances the sense of meaning in life by improving self-efficacy, which suggests that educators should adopt the SMART goal management principle and combine it with peer support mechanisms to help students establish scientific time planning skills^[29]. In addition, to meet the challenges of the digital age, it is necessary to cultivate healthy media use habits. Ge (2016) found that adolescents who controlled their screen time within two hours per day had a significantly higher sense of meaning than the overuse group^[30].

5. Outlook for future research

In the past decade, under the impetus of positive psychology, research on the sense of meaning in life in the Western academic world has gradually expanded from focusing on the buffering effect of the sense of meaning in coping with negative events to systematically exploring its positive functions in promoting individual mental health and subjective well-being, as well as analyzing its internal formation mechanism. The breakthroughs in related research have not only deepened our understanding of the nature of life but also spawned a series of research topics with important theoretical value and practical significance, pointing out the direction for future research.

5.1 Strengthening research on the relationship between negative emotions and the sense of meaning in life

Numerous empirical studies have shown that positive emotions significantly predict individuals' sense of meaning levels, and that experimentally manipulating the enhancement of positive

emotions does indeed enhance the experience of a sense of meaning. However, it is worth noting that positive emotions are not a core component of a sense of meaning. On the one hand, data from longitudinal studies have shown that the predictive effect of positive emotions on a sense of meaning is time-limited. Gao and Tong's (2010) follow-up study showed that positive emotions could not have a sustained effect on the level of a sense of meaning two years later^[31]. On the other hand, the presence of negative emotions does not necessarily weaken an individual's sense of meaning. It has been theorized that when an individual's meaning system is impacted, negative emotions may instead activate the meaning-seeking mechanism, thereby facilitating the process of meaning reconstruction. Although this process is accompanied by discomfort, active meaning-seeking behavior itself increases the likelihood of acquiring meaning. Based on this, future research should pay more attention to the mechanism of negative emotions in the formation and development of a sense of meaning in life.

5.2 Synergistic effects of intervention strategies to improve the sense of meaning in life

Most of the existing studies adopt the isolated examination paradigm of single strategy, which is difficult to truly reflect the complex interaction of multidimensional factors in educational practices. To break through this limitation, future studies need to adopt a multifactorial experimental design to systematically assess the dose-response relationship of compound interventions, such as home-school synergy and curriculum-activity integration. Studies have shown that when school life education and family upbringing are in agreement, the intervention effect can produce synergistic gains^[25]. Meanwhile, methods such as social network analysis should be applied to reveal strategy transmission pathways, such as volunteering, which may enhance curricular effects by expanding social connectivity networks^[21]. These studies will promote the paradigm shift from fragmented interventions to a systematic and precise paradigm for the cultivation of a sense of meaning in life.

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