What Makes Life Meaningful? Combinations of Meaningful Commitments Among Nonreligious and Religious Americans

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Having a sense that one's life is meaningful is related to, but distinct from, happiness, satisfaction, or living a moral life. Scholars across disciplines have investigated the role of religion in providing meaning or questioned whether religious decline prompts a crisis of meaninglessness. We use national survey data (2019, N = 1,326) to identify the overall patterns in what people find meaningful in general and how they spend time in activities understood as meaningful. We find five bundles of meaningful commitments: three focused on relationships, including one focused on a variety of family and friend relationships, one anchored by a relationship with a partner, and one anchored by a relationship with a child; one focused on ideals and lifestyle; and one that is less specialized but more prone to focus on religious commitment. We find three bundles of meaningful practices, the things people do in their daily lives that they understand as meaningful: one focused on relationships, one focused on ideals and lifestyle, and one that is less specialized but more prone to focus on religious commitments. We analyze how each bundle is associated with happiness and well-being, and how religious and nonreligious identification shape who embraces which bundle. In the conclusion, we discuss the benefits of our approach and suggest directions for future research.

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What makes life meaningful? Questions about meaningfulness gained both urgency and ubiquity in post-WWII American culture. A discourse focused on

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meaning facilitated discussion about the nature of the good life, and the good society, in a context in which the majority of Americans embraced "conventional faith in God" but were "struggling mightily with the very real possibility that there might not be any such being, that He might be dead" (Cassedy 2022:9). Both scholarly and popular writing on meaningfulness has been driven by worries about the alienating and dislocating aspects of modern society (Giddens 1990) as well as concerns about disenchantment and declines in social solidarity arising from the secularization of society (Taylor 2009, 2018). Recently, some have asked whether our society as a whole is experiencing a crisis of meaninglessness rooted in rising loneliness, smaller families, and the decline of religion and other traditional commitments and manifesting in reduced well-being, both individual and collective (Routledge 2018; Routledge and FioRito 2021).

Meaning and meaningfulness are inherently multivalent and somewhat ambiguous categories in both popular and scholarly discourse (Park 2010). Moral philosophers argue that meaningfulness is distinct from happiness or satisfaction in life, and not the same as living a moral life (Cottingham 2002; Frankl 2006; Metz 2013, 2016; Wolf 2010). But of what does meaningfulness, this "major category of human motivation" (Metz 2016), consist? And why might it matter to find out?

Inspired by the foundational mid-twentieth century work of Frankl (2006), and gaining further momentum with the late-century turn to positive psychology (Baumeister 1991; Seligman 2002), psychologists have worked to measure meaning and meaningfulness as distinct from related concepts like happiness and life satisfaction (e.g., see Morgan and Farsides 2009; Schnell 2009). Most agree that meaningfulness can foster both physical and psychological well-being, although it has become clear that not everyone has the same need for meaning (FioRito, Routledge, and Jackson 2021; Nelson, Abeyta, and Routledge 2021). Moral philosophers also continue to debate the nature of meaning and, in particular, the necessity of religion for providing meaning (Cottingham 2002; Epstein 2009; Hägglund 2019; Pinn 2012).

Psychologists have worked to define meaningfulness (Martela and Steger 2016), identified specific goals, actions, and beliefs associated with experiences of meaningfulness (Kim et al. 2022; Schnell 2009), and asked people what they believe makes life meaningful, identifying not only subjective factors but also social connections and activities as important for meaning-making (Heintzelman et al. 2020). We focus on the latter, bringing a sociological perspective to bear in identifying the commitments, activities, and experiences that people report as making their own lives meaningful. While much of this research examines variation in who experiences or engages with specific sources of meaning (Pew Research Center 2018b), our approach is different. We look for overall patterns or "bundles" of commitments that people identify as important for living a meaningful life (cf. Morgan and Farsides 2009).

When we asked a sample (N = 1,326) of Americans about the commitments and activities that give their lives meaning, we found relationships, value commitments and related activities, and religion and spirituality to be particularly

important axes of meaning-making. Instead of a crisis, we find overall high levels of meaningfulness among both religious and nonreligious survey participants. Finally, we find that all of the bundles we identify are associated with high levels of well-being as measured by self-reported happiness, health, and life satisfaction, with those focusing on relationships associated with the highest levels of well-being.

In our discussion, we pay particular attention to whether the religious and nonreligious find meaning in different kinds of activities and commitments (Nelson, Abeyta, and Routledge 2021), and whether this is associated with differences in self-reported well-being. Our aim is to contribute to a small but growing literature on the nature and sources of meaning, purpose, and well-being among the nonreligious (Baker and Smith 2015; Schnell 2015; Schnell and Keenan 2011; Smith and Halligan 2021; Zuckerman 2008, 2009), and to address whether the nonreligious experience more meaninglessness or whether their packages of meaningful commitments associate with reduced well-being. We also contribute to understandings of the role of religion and spirituality in fostering meaning (Pargament, Magyar-Russell, and Murray-Swank 2005; Park 2013) after a period of rapid decline in religious commitment (Pew Research Center 2019). In the conclusion, we outline the implications of our findings for future research.

THE NATURE OF MEANING AND A MEANINGFUL LIFE

Cassedy (2022) identifies the post-WWII era as the time when psychologists, theologians, and moral philosophers began to identify meaningfulness as a distinct dimension of human experience (Frankl 2006). Meaningfulness and meaning, as cultural categories, are multivalent and ambiguous, capable of expressing an array of experiences, and this is part of their appeal both in everyday life and to scholars (Cassedy 2022; Park 2010). Meaningfulness is not the same as happiness, though it may be a component of happiness (Seligman 2002) or lead to its own form of happiness (eudaimonic) that is distinct from the happiness that comes from pleasure (hedonic) (Baumeister 1991; Metz 2013). Meaningfulness is also not the same as morality, or living a good life (Cottingham 2002; Metz 2013; Tillich 1967).

Psychologists argue that goals, motivations, and beliefs all matter for generating a subjective sense of meaning (Damásio, Koller, and Schnell 2013; Schnell 2009). To have a meaningful life, one must feel that one matters and is connected to others or to things larger than oneself (significance), that one is engaged in goal-directed pursuits (purpose), and that one's life and experiences make sense (coherence) (Heintzelman et al. 2020; Martela and Steger 2016) and are valued (Kim et al. 2022). Meaning is experienced as a "global" or general feature of life, but in a crisis people may temporarily lose a sense of meaning and engage in meaning-making to restore it (Park 2010; Schnell 2009). Meaningfulness is distinct from, but positively associated with, both happiness and enhanced

subjective well-being (Park 2010; Schnell 2009; Seligman 2002; Shmotkin and Shrira 2013).

Moral philosophers eschew the focus on the links between meaningfulness and individual happiness and well-being that motivates much of the research in psychology, and focus on the societal benefits of meaningful commitments that are also ethical (Taylor 2018) and pro-social (Etzioni 2018; FioRito, Routledge, and Jackson 2021). Wolf (2010) argues for understanding meaning as active engagement with—and caring about—things understood as good, worthy, and valuable for their own sake. Wolf understands "the good" or "the worthy" as universal,[1] but others argue for understanding these as culturally and historically specific (Arpaly 2010; Haidt 2010).

Whether religion is necessary for experiencing meaning or having a meaningful life has been a question running through the research on meaning since the post-WWII era. Cassedy (2022) argues that the categories of meaning and meaningfulness can bridge religious and secular meaning systems and worldviews; this became more important as modernity became understood as hostile to religious experience (Taylor 2009), and as religion—especially white Christian religious expressions (Jones 2016)—lost cultural privilege and authority in the postwar era (Niebuhr 1956). Some moral philosophers define religious belief or commitment as essential for meaning, because religion is about what is "really real" (Cottingham 2002; cf. Tillich 1967). Others argue against the idea that religion is necessary for experiencing meaning or for having a meaningful life, drawing on humanist traditions to articulate a secular rationale for a life filled with meaning and purpose (Hägglund 2019; Pinn 2012), rooted in ethics of justice and care (Boltanski 2012), humanist values (Epstein 2009; Hutchinson 2011; Pinn 2015) or in a sacramental approach to everyday life (Pinn 2012).

Some argue that religion may be particularly suited to providing meaning because it is widespread and provides cosmologies that lend coherence (an aspect of meaningfulness) and offers answers to existential questions (which may bolster significance, another aspect of meaningfulness) (Pargament, Magyar-Russell, and Murray-Swank 2005; Park 2013; Smith 1998). In an extensive review, Park (2013) found that empirical studies find mixed results and modest effects when it comes to religious effects on meaningfulness. In addition, religious individuals may experience particular challenges to meaning-making if they engage in negative religious coping in the face of stressors or if they experience a violation of something perceived as sacred (Pargament, Magyar-Russell, and Murray-Swank 2005).

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[1]Wolf's (2010) concern is to define meaning and meaningfulness in a way that does not center morality, but that also rules out evil. If one finds purpose, significance, connection, and coherence in committing acts of violence or injustice, Wolf, as a moral philosopher, argues that should not be understood as constituting a meaningful life (cf. Hägglund 2019; Metz 2013).

Secular networks and communities can provide a sense of identity and meaning, and be a locus for engaging in meaning-making activities, including rituals (Frost 2022; Guenther 2018; Schnell and Pali 2013; Smith 2011). In an empirical study using qualitative data and set in the contemporary United States, Smith and Halligan (2021) argue that the nonreligious make meaningful lives by creating narratives and participating in secular communities and networks. In doing so, they find meaningful ways to cope with the challenges of chaos, suffering, and death (Geertz 1973). They also create meaningful secular worldviews, defined *as* secular and distinct from religious worldviews (Lee 2015; Quack 2014), that affirm normative secular values (Cimino and Smith 2014; Smith and Halligan 2021; Sumerau and Cragun 2016) and frame existential concerns in secular terms (Frost 2019). This aligns with a scholarly turn away from conceiving nonreligion as a "lack" of religion and toward analyzing secular communities, identities, and philosophies as positive and generative sources of values, connections, and commitments (Galen 2018; Kettell 2014; Lee 2015; Pinn 2012).

There is some indication that meaning and meaningfulness may be understood and experienced in different ways by the religious and the nonreligious (Nelson, Abeyta, and Routledge 2021). A recent analysis of the American General Social Survey found that nonreligious Americans were no more likely than religious Americans to report high levels of fatalism or nihilism, but were more likely to report endogenous (self-produced) sources of meaning (Speed, Coleman, and Langston 2018). And some nonreligious persons (atheists) may exhibit lower scores on measures of meaning and meaningfulness without experiencing distress or a sense of crisis (Schnell 2010; Schnell and Keenan 2011). This research aligns with studies of nonreligious well-being more generally, which find that the nonreligious exhibit both high levels of well-being and pro-social commitments (Zuckerman 2008, 2009).

Sources of Meaning

There is also a growing literature on the sources of meaning in life. Research in psychology focuses on subjective sources of meaning, including intrinsic values that shape goals, motivations, and beliefs. Sources of meaning are diverse, but generally involve one of four dimensions: achievement/work, relationships/intimacy, religion/spirituality, and self-transcendence/generativity (Emmons 2003). Schnell and colleagues (Damásio, Koller, and Schnell 2013; Schnell 2009) used qualitative interviews to inductively identify 26 possible sources of meaning that fall broadly into these four domains. Who is likely to draw on a particular source of meaning is shaped by personality (Schnell 2011), as well as demographic characteristics and national context (Damásio, Koller, and Schnell 2013; Grouden and Jose 2014). One study used factor analysis of survey data to identify five underlying constructs that can be understood as different types of meaningful life: a purposeful life, a principled life, a valued life, an exciting life, and an accomplished life (Morgan and Farsides 2009). Taken together, these encompass varied understandings of what is valuable for its own sake (cf. Arpaly 2010; Haidt 2010).

Other research has asked people directly what they consider to be meaningful. While there is cross-national variation in what people understand as sources of meaning, there is common agreement that social relationships are important sources of meaning (Heintzelman et al. 2020; Nelson, Abeyta, and Routledge 2021). The Pew Research Center has used national survey data to identify the specific activities and commitments that Americans find meaningful (Pew Research Center 2018b). They find that relationships with family are high on the list of things in which Americans find meaning and fulfillment, and for those with higher education and income, friendship, good health, stability, and travel are frequently mentioned. Atheists and liberals are less likely to say they find meaning in religion than are evangelicals and Republicans, but more likely to list a range of lifestyle-oriented activities or participation in political activism or causes. In a different report, in which they developed a typology of religious and nonreligious Americans, Pew researchers found some variation among both religious and nonreligious Americans in how central family is to a meaningful life, and in the overall number of things identified as meaningful (Pew Research Center 2018a).

We build on the research on the sources of meaning in life by focusing on the overall patterns in people's responses to two kinds of questions: in general, what do they believe is necessary for a meaningful life and, in particular, which activities regularly provide them with a sense of meaning or purpose. We wanted to provide a broad range of possible sources for people to consider in answering our questions about meaning, with measures that capture both religious and secular commitments. While religion has generally been understood as a common, if not necessary, source of meaning (Park 2013), religious belief and commitment has declined markedly over the past 30 years, both in the United States (Voas and Chaves 2016) and globally (Inglehart 2021). And a growing literature has identified secular sources of meaning, from secular communities and networks (Smith and Halligan 2021) to secular values (Epstein 2009; Hägglund 2019; Uzarevic and Coleman 2021).

Our analysis identifies three broad approaches to living a meaningful life—one focusing on relationships, one focusing on beliefs and lifestyle and valued activities, and one including religion and spirituality. We identify the factors associated with choosing a particular bundle of meaningful commitments and examine whether particular bundles are associated with more or less well-being as measured by self-reported happiness, health, and life satisfaction. In our discussion, we compare the packages of meaningful commitments embraced by religious and nonreligious individuals. Overall, we find little evidence of a crisis of meaninglessness, or of reduced meaningfulness or well-being among the nonreligious. Below, we describe the results of our analysis, and outline implications for future research.

THE STUDY

Data for this analysis are drawn from the Nonreligious Engagement and Wellbeing Survey (NEWS) (*n* = 1,326, PIs Frost and Edgell). NEWS survey

items measure variation in religious and nonreligious identities and beliefs, physical and mental health, involvement in civic life, and social networks and social support. The NEWS survey was administered via SurveyMonkey's Audience service in August 2020. SurveyMonkey recruits participants from online advertising, not from a random address-based or random-digit-dial sampling procedure common among other services, to create nationally representative online panels for survey administration. The Audience service employs sampling criteria to provide a demographically balanced sample from their larger panel of recruited respondents; we used the default criteria balanced to reflect United States Census benchmarks on gender, age, and household income. The survey was administered to two samples of Americans over the age of 18—one with no filtering criteria (n = 1,086) and one additional pool limited to religiously unaffiliated respondents to generate a supplemental oversample (n = 240). All respondents were paid for their participation.

We asked respondents a general question about their overall experience of meaningfulness ("In general, do you feel that your life is meaningful?" with response options of "Yes, always," "Yes, sometimes," and "No, never"). We also asked two questions about meaningful experiences. The first is about respondents' *general assessment* of what makes their lives meaningful. The question wording was, "Many things can make a person feel that their life is meaningful and fulfilling. Which of the following do you think are most important for you in order to have a meaningful and fulfilled life?" People were asked to choose up to 5 items on a 17-item list that included measures of relationships (with a spouse, children, parents or extended family, or friends), lifestyle factors (financial stability, living a healthy life, working toward health or fame, having a satisfying career), and value commitments (making a lasting impact on the world, working to protect nature or the environment, expressing one's religious/spiritual/or nonreligious identity, reducing suffering and injustice, getting an education or accumulating knowledge, engaging in creative pursuits, or engaging in activism or politics); people could also choose "none of the above." The second question is about people's *routine meaningful activities and experiences* ("Regardless of how much time you spend doing them, which of the following provides you with meaning and fulfillment on a regular basis?"). This question also asked respondents to choose 5 items from a long list (16 items) that included spending time with friends, family, or pets, watching TV, reading, experiencing nature, doing arts and crafts or creative writing, practicing their religion, meditating or doing yoga, working/pursuing a career, supporting a social or political cause/movement, sports or exercise, studying or practicing a new skill, journaling or personal reflection, taking mind-expanding drugs, or none of the above.

It is challenging to operationalize meaningfulness. This informs our approach, which is to offer survey respondents a wide range of activities, value commitments, and relationships which they might, or might not, designate as meaningful, using methods that allow for an inductive understanding of overall

patterns of responses. We adapted our meaningfulness questions and response options from the Pew Research Center reports (2018a, 2018b) described above. While this has the advantage of replication (to compare patterns of findings), the Pew question asks about meaning and fulfillment, together, and this adds some measurement uncertainty. To the extent that there is variation in how these questions are understood by research participants we expect that this variation is stochastic and not representative of underlying patterns of social group membership or status.

Analytic Strategy

We used Stata 15's generalized equation modeling command to perform latent class analysis (LCA) and identify combinations of meaningful activities and commitments among our respondents. LCA identifies groups of respondents that share similar answers to a range of indicator variables. In our case, we conducted two latent class analyses. First, we identified latent classes among respondents based on their answers to our general question about the things that make life meaningful. Then, we identified latent classes on the basis of the commitments and activities that respondents reported as regularly providing them with meaning. Descriptive statistics demonstrating the proportion of our respondents that identified each of the indicator variables are reported below.

LCA returns the proportion of the sample in each latent class. This is a probabilistic estimation rather than a measure of true class membership; however, it can be interpreted as the proportion of the sample in each class (Vermunt and Magidson 2003). LCA also returns the probability of a positive response on each indicator item for members of a latent class, known as class-specific probabilities. These are interpreted as the substantive characteristics of the class. We excluded two response categories from the model of specific meaningful commitments in the respondent's life - journaling or personal reflection and taking mind-expanding drugs. We excluded these items, as fewest respondents (4.68% and 3.85%, respectively) indicated that these items provided meaning or were important for meaning, their inclusion did not substantively alter the composition of the latent classes, and removing them from our models substantially improved model fit. Excluding these responses allowed us to address the "empty cell" issue common in maximum likelihood estimation techniques such as LCA.

It is possible to construct latent class models with a wide range of class number possibilities. Selecting the appropriate number of classes for an analysis involves considering both goodness-of-fit statistics as well as the theoretical background of the study. We tested a variety of models, using two to seven latent classes, and settled on a five latent class model for our *meaningful commitments* and a three class model for our *meaningful practices*. These were the best fitting models, returning the lowest Bayesian information criterion, a common fit statistic for LCA, and allowed us to include the widest variety of indicator variables (Nylund, Asparouhov, and Muthén 2007). Two other fit statistics commonly reported for LCA are the Lo–Mendell–Rubin likelihood ratio test and the bootstrapped

likelihood ratio test, neither of which are available in Stata's gsem program. Table 1 compares the fit statistics for latent class models with between two and seven classes.

In the second step of our analysis, we fit a multinomial regression model to our latent classes. Multinomial regression models use one of the latent classes as a reference and return results that indicate the influence of covariates on the probability of membership in the compared latent class. We examined the influence of key demographic variables of interest on the probability of membership in the identified latent classes.

Finally, we assigned respondents to latent classes based on posterior probabilities of class membership estimated after we fit the latent class models. Although there is disagreement about how to best assign respondents to latent classes, thereby transforming a probabilistic relationship between the latent classes and individual respondents into a discrete relationship, we assigned respondents to the class with the highest probability score (Goodman 2007). Because prior work raises the question of the link between meaningfulness, happiness, and well-being, we chose to assign respondents to latent classes, allowing us to examine how members of each class differ on three well-being outcomes: self-reported happiness, self-reported life satisfaction, and self-reported health. Although we could have included these in our multinomial regression, as part of one-step estimation of a latent class model and influence of latent class membership on covariates, we felt doing so did not make theoretical sense. Including these in our latent classes modeling, as part of the multinomial regression, would mean that scores on these well-being indicators would predict class membership rather than examining the influence of class membership on well-being scores (Bakk, Tekle, and Vermunt 2013). Finally, we used one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests and chi-square tests of independence to determine whether there was significant variation between our latent classes on these key measures of well-being.

TABLE 1   Descriptive Statistics for Key Indicators Variables

Number of classes	Meaningful commitments	Meaningful practices
	Bayesian information criterion (BIC)	
1	19,891.575	18,762.26
2	19,132.116	18,621.47
3	18,983.485	18,614.93
4	18,880.001	18,645.64
5	18,874.191	18,635.31
6	19,654.585	18,696.85
7	19,083.85	18798.70

RESULTS

Overall, our findings support the idea that meaningfulness is a distinct dimension of experience, not the same as happiness or life satisfaction. Descriptive results are available in table 2. For example, while only 28% of our sample described themselves as "very happy," and 31% said they were "very satisfied" with their lives, 42% told use that their lives are "always meaningful." Moreover, we did not find evidence of the "crisis of meaning" about which some social philosophers worry (Taylor 2018). Over 92% of our respondents said that their lives were either "always" or "sometimes" meaningful.

In analyzing the results of our questions about the sources of meaning in our respondents' lives, we find some patterns that are similar to those in the Pew Research Center (2018b) report. Relationships are very important for a meaningful life, whether with a spouse, children, parents and extended family, or with friends. This is true for both people's general commitments and in terms of where they regularly invest their time. Financial stability and good health are mentioned frequently as being of general importance, and in terms of investing time, caring for pets or animals, being outdoors and experiencing nature, reading, and consuming popular culture (movies, TV) are common sources of meaning.

We investigated whether people have, overall, different ways of combining the meaningful commitments they make in their lives. How do people put together different activities and commitments into an overall package to make a distinct *kind* of meaningful life? We used LCA to analyze responses to both our question on the general things that make life meaningful (general commitments), and the specific meaningful activities that people pursue (meaningful practices). LCA allows us to identify underlying commonalities in the patterns of individuals' responses over multiple items (see table 3).

Our LCA revealed similar patterns of responses across people's general commitments and their meaningful practices. In other words, similar patterns emerge for what people consider important for a meaningful life in general, and the activities they choose to pursue. This may indicate that a particular understanding of what makes life meaningful *in general* may affect how people choose to engage in specific activities or, possibly, affect how people assess the meaningfulness of those daily activities.

In terms of things that people designate as "most important for a meaningful life," we found five bundles of commitments, three of which are focused on relationships: *Family and friends* respondents are the most likely to say that relationships with a spouse, extended family, and friends are important for a meaningful life, and somewhat likely to mention financial stability and living a healthy lifestyles. *Immediate family-focused* respondents identify their relationships with their spouses and children as most important for a meaningful life. The small *child and religion* class is most likely to say that a relationship with a child is important for a meaningful life and are the most likely to say expressing religion and spirituality is important for a meaningful life. *Lifestyle* respondents

TABLE 2   Descriptive Statistics for Key Indicators Variables

Variable	Value	Percentage of full sample
Gender	Female	53.54
	Male	46.46
Religious identification	Atheist	8.60
	Agnostic	15.01
	Spiritual but not religious	7.47
	Nothing-in-particular	5.58
	Nonreligious	8.14
	Religious	58.75
Age	18–29	28.51
	30–44	22.40
	45–60	34.24
	60+	14.86
Partnership status	Married or cohabitating	50.45
	Not married or cohabitating	49.55
Race	White	61.76
	Black	7.01
	Hispanic	12.22
	Asian	10.18
	Other	8.83
Education level	Less than high school	4.83
	High school or equivalent	16.89
	Some college	22.78
	Associates degree	11.76
	Bachelor's degree	28.21
	Graduate degree	15.53
In general, do you feel that your life is meaningful?	Always	39.52
	Sometimes	51.50
	Never	8.97
Most important for meaningful/fulfilled life?	Relationship(s) with spouse/partner	65.23
	Relationship(s) with my children	52.49
	Relationships with extended family	49.17
	Relationships with friends	50.60
	Living a healthy lifestyle	37.33
	Financial stability	47.13
	Working toward wealth and/or fame	5.73
	Making a lasting impact	23.60
	Working to protect nature	12.75
	Expressing my religion or spirituality	11.54
	Expressing my nonreligious identity	2.41
	Having a satisfying career	14.93
	Reducing suffering/injustice in the world	10.56
	Getting an education	14.48
	Engaging in creative pursuits	15.38
	Engaging in activism/politics	3.77
	None of the above	2.34

TABLE 2. CONTINUED

Variable	Value	Percentage of full sample
What regularly provides meaning/fulfillment?	Hanging out with family	65.46
	Hanging out with friends	58.82
	Caring for pets/animals	46.83
	Watching TV, movies, web videos	43.44
	Reading	36.50
	Being outdoors/experiencing nature	42.68
	Doing arts and crafts	21.57
	Creative writing	7.77
	Practicing religion	15.54
	Meditating or doing yoga	8.14
	Working/pursuing a career	15.91
	Supporting social/political cause	7.62
	Participating in sports	12.82
	Studying/practicing a new skill	13.80
	Journaling/personal reflection	4.68
	Taking mind-expanding drugs	3.85
	None	1.51

are the most likely to designate relationships with spouse and friends as important and they are also higher than any other classes in their probability of naming having an impact, working to protect nature or to increase environmental sustainability, pursuing an education, creative pursuits, protecting nature, and reducing suffering and injustice. Finally, *non-specialist* respondents have a moderate probability of naming a range of sources of meaning with no one meaning source defining this class.

When it comes to how respondents invest their time, we also found three latent classes, or three bundles of commitments. *Relationships first* respondents prioritize spending time with family, friends, and pets, along with reading, consuming popular culture, being outdoors, and investing in creative pursuits. *Lifestyle and causes* respondents are more likely than members of other classes to name creative writing, meditation and yoga, studying and practicing a new skill, and supporting a political or social cause as important. And there is a group that commits to both *religion and relationships*, spending time with family and friends (but not pets), and practicing their religious faith. Members of this class, unsurprisingly, are less likely to be nonreligious.

Composition of the Classes: Multinomial Regression Model

We used a multinomial logit regression model to examine the influence of covariates of interest on the probability a respondent would fall into a given latent class. Multinomial regression models use one class as a reference and demonstrate

TABLE 3   Class Conditional Probabilities

Variable	General commitments					Variable	Meaningful practices		
	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	Class 5		Class 1	Class 3	Class 3
Relationship w/ spouse/partner	0.76	0.47	0.41	0.00	0.95	Time w/ family	0.91	0.39	0.78
Relationship w/ children	0.17	0.03	0.34	0.96	0.99	Time w/ friends	0.78	0.42	0.63
Relationship w/ extended family	0.62	0.29	0.30	0.60	0.60	Caring for pets/animals	0.70	0.47	0.26
Relationship w/ friends	0.68	0.52	0.29	0.55	0.50	Watching media	0.52	0.43	0.36
Healthy lifestyle	0.52	0.39	0.23	0.45	0.34	Reading	0.39	0.40	0.30
Financial stability	0.67	0.42	0.17	0.68	0.50	Being outdoors	0.49	0.41	0.40
Wealth/fame	0.14	0.01	0.09	0.01	0.02	Doing arts or crafts	0.26	0.23	0.16
Lasting impact	0.21	0.47	0.11	0.23	0.20	Creative writing	0.02	0.14	0.05
Protecting nature	0.03	0.34	0.11	0.15	0.08	Practicing religion	0.00	0.01	0.49
Expressing religion/ spirituality	0.06	0.06	0.16	0.28	0.12	Meditating/ yoga	0.04	0.14	0.05
Expressing nonreligion	0.01	0.00	0.10	0.04	0.00	Work/career	0.11	0.17	0.19
Satisfying career	0.28	0.22	0.07	0.09	0.10	Social/political cause	0.07	0.11	0.04
Reducing suffering/ injustice	0.01	0.32	0.06	0.16	0.06	Sports/ exercising	0.05	0.13	0.20
Pursuing an education	0.17	0.35	0.07	0.10	0.08	New skill	0.01	0.22	0.15
Engaging in creative pursuits	0.13	0.25	0.11	0.23	0.13				
Engaging in activism or politics	0.00	0.09	0.03	0.08	0.03				

the effect of a one unit change in a covariate on the likelihood of a respondent being in each latent class compared with the reference class. Results of the multi-nomial analysis are presented in table 4.

TABLE 4 Multinomial Regression Models Estimating Impact of Demographic Characteristics on Class Membership

Variable	General commitments					Meaningful practices		
	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	Class 5	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3
All nonreligious	Ref	1.31***	−1.42*	0.59	−0.24	Ref	0.44	−3.20***
Female	Ref	0.37	0.04	3.32***	0.98**	Ref	−0.93*	−0.76*
Age	Ref	0.76**	0.21	2.16***	0.77***	N/A	N/A	N/A
Education	Ref	0.03	−0.81***	−0.40	−0.46**	Ref	0.02	0.14
Parent	Ref	0.38	5.00***	11.53*	8.57***	Ref	−0.46	−0.15
Married/ cohabitating	Ref	−1.17***	−0.78	−5.14*	0.70	Ref	−0.73**	−0.07
Black	Ref	−0.38	0.74	0.32	0.14	Ref	2.83	3.67

*p < .05;
**p < .01;
***p < .005.

In our first model, examining combinations of general commitments, we find that the *child and religion-focused* group is more likely to be women and parents and religious and less likely to be married than the *family and friends* class. Compared with the *family and friends* class the *immediate-family* focused class is also more likely to be women and parents. They are also more likely to be older and have less education.

Members of the *lifestyle* class are significantly less likely to be married compared with the *family and friends* class. They are also more likely to be nonreligious. Finally, the *non-specialist* class is more likely to have less education and is more likely to be nonreligious and have a child.

In our second model, examining meaningful practices, we find that the *lifestyle and causes* group is slightly less likely to be married or female compared with the *relationships first* group. Unsurprisingly, the *religion and relationships group* are much less likely than the *relationships first* group to be nonreligious. They are also slightly less likely to be female.

Latent Classes and Well-Being

We used a one-way ANOVA test and determined that mean scores on three well-being factors—life satisfaction, happiness, and self-reported health—statistically differed between our classes. Using a chi-square independence test we analyzed whether there was a statistically significant relationship between latent classes and how often respondents felt their life had meaning. Results of this analysis are reported in table 5.

Looking at table 5, we see associations between how people combine their daily activities into overall packages and their average scores on our well-being

TABLE 5 Mean/Proportion Well-Being Scores by Latent Class

Variable	Range	General commitments						Meaningful practices			
		Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	Class 5	Significance	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Significance
Life is meaningful											
Always		0.36	0.283	0.342	0.333	0.338	***	0.394	0.310	0.507	***
Sometimes		0.552	0.533	0.570	0.545	0.451	*	0.539	0.552	0.443	***
Never		0.087	0.182	0.088	0.099	0.044	***	0.066	0.138	0.050	***
Self-rated health	1–5	3.30	3.11	3.14	2.94	3.24	***	3.13	3.14	3.31	*
Happiness	1–4	1.96	2.13	2.06	2.06	1.77	***	3.08	2.91	3.20	***
Life satisfaction	1–4	1.96	2.19	1.99	2.11	1.75	***	3.10	2.88	3.25	***

Notes: All means/proportions are unweighted. Significance calculated using one-way ANOVA analyses for continuous or dichotomous items, and Pearson's χ^2 tests for categorical items.

*$p < .05$;
***$p < .01$;
****$p < .005$.

measures. Members of the *family and friends* class are the most likely to say that life is "always" meaningful, and they also report the highest average levels of self-rated health. Those in the *lifestyle class* are the most likely to say that life is never meaningful, though they report the highest levels of life satisfaction and happiness. Member of our *non-specialist* class have the lowest self-rated health but score comparably on happiness and life satisfaction. When it comes to the meaningful activities that people engage in everyday, those in our third group, who focus on *religion and relationships* have the highest scores on happiness, life satisfaction, and self-rated health.

DISCUSSION

Our purpose in this analysis is to build on prior research that documents the sources of meaning in life by identifying overall profiles of meaningful commitments. We present the results of multivariate models predicting membership in each of our latent classes that include demographic characteristics and nonreligious identities (comparison category = the religious). We also examine the relationship between these different bundles of meaningful commitments and other experiences of subjective well-being (happiness, self-reported health, and life satisfaction).

We find that people specialize when it comes to embracing a variety of relationships, activities, and value commitments that can make life meaningful, orienting their lives and investing their time along different axes. Broadly speaking, some people invest more in relationships, some in religion, and some in a lifestyle centered around causes or creative activity. But contrary to a strongly entrenched meta-narrative of a decline in meaning or a crisis of meaninglessness, one that is now commonly echoed in popular discourse[2] as well as scholarly accounts (Giddens 1990; Taylor 2018), the vast majority of our respondents report living meaningful lives. Moreover, they invest in a wide range of activities and commitments that foster connection with others, and they dedicate time to activities that would meet the criteria of moral philosophers regarding things that are inherently valuable and good (Wolf 2010).

It is worth noting, given the debates in moral philosophy about the necessity of religion for living a meaningful life, that only 12% of our sample named "expressing my religion or spirituality" as important to them in general, and only 15.54% named "practicing my religion" as an important element in giving their daily lives purpose and meaning. While some people specialize in bundles of meaningful commitments that include religious commitments, religion is less likely to be named as being of general importance for living a meaningful

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[2]There are many examples; a recent Google search turned up too many to include here but one will give a sense of the tenor of the popular discussion: https://www.newsweek.com/ben-shapiro-america-engulfed-crisis-meaning-and-its-killing-us-opinion-1238555.

life than are relationships, a healthy lifestyle, and financial stability. Religious commitments are about as commonly associated with meaningfulness as those involving making a difference in the world, having a good career, getting an education, reducing suffering, engaging in creative pursuits, and protecting nature. When it comes to spending time on things identified as meaningful, religious practice is far less commonly mentioned than are relationships of all kinds, less likely to be mentioned than being out in nature, reading, watching TV/movies, and roughly as likely to be mentioned as engaging in arts/crafts, sports, working, or learning a new skill. Overall, we found that religion is akin in its importance to other kinds of value commitments that people embrace, but not uniquely important for meaningfulness (as are, e.g., relationships).

Religious respondents are the most likely to say that life is "always" meaningful, and the least likely to say that life is "never" meaningful, when compared with those embracing a variety of nonreligious identities. Those who focus their daily activity around "religion and relationships" have the highest self-reported well-being, although levels of well-being in the other classes are also high. However, the nonreligious in our sample also report that they are happy, satisfied with their lives, and healthy. This makes sense in light of recent research indicating that not everyone has the same need for meaning and that reporting lower levels of meaningfulness is not always associated with distress or reduced well-being (FioRito, Routledge, and Jackson 2021; Nelson, Abeyta, and Routledge 2021).

We contribute to an emerging line of research that suggests the meaning-making of nonreligious persons may be different than that of religious persons (Speed, Coleman, and Langston 2018). We find that the nonreligious tend to embrace distinct bundles of meaningful commitments as compared with the religious. When identifying what makes life meaningful in general, the nonreligious are more likely than their religious counterparts to name causes and values and lifestyle factors; when it comes to daily life, they tend to be in the "relationships first" class (as compared with the "relationships and religion" class).

Given our findings, we believe there are four fruitful avenues for future sociological research on the sources of meaning. First, it would be helpful for the field to continue to refine the measurement of meaning and to distinguish it from related concepts like purpose and fulfillment. Second, while we found quite a bit of consistency in people's responses about what makes life meaningful *in general* and what makes their own daily lives meaningful, we cannot know, given the nature of our data, how these two become aligned. Do people have a general sense of what makes for a meaningful life, and then bring their commitments of time, money, and energy into alignment with that? Or, when confronted with survey questions about what makes life meaningful in general, do they answer those questions while thinking of their daily commitments and activities that they find meaningful? Questions about alignment would be best tackled with panel data or through different methods (e.g., a mixed methods approach using in-depth interviews and time diaries). Moreover, given the importance of different kinds of family relationships that give a sense of meaningfulness, future work should

explicitly account for how life-course factors, particularly family formation and dissolution, shape meaningfulness.

Third, we agree that meaning, meaningfulness, and meaning-making are experienced in variable ways across time and social context (Arpaly 2010; Cassedy 2022; Haidt 2010). We find bundles that focus on relationships, on causes and lifestyle factors, and on combining relationships and religious commitments. How do these bundles, themselves, relate to historically important cultural discourses on meaning? It would be particularly important to focus on the groups, organizations, and communities that people belong to, not only in studies of meaning-making in the face of crisis, but in developing a more general or global understanding of what makes life meaningful or how to live a meaningful life. This would require different methods, akin to those used by cultural sociologists who examine the institutional and discursive influences on how people interpret their lives and intimate commitments (Illouz 2003; Swidler 2001).

Finally, we suggest that there is much to learn in continuing to build on the insight that people vary both in their need for meaningfulness and in the ways in which they make and find meaning in their lives. A half-century of religious decline has fundamentally changed the role of religion in providing meaning. What new sources of meaning are people drawing on and putting together into bundles to make a meaningful life? Is the concept of having a meaningful life all that important to those who do not experience a lack of meaningfulness as stressful or as leading to decreased well-being? These questions are beyond the scope of our analysis, but we encourage others to explore them in continuing work that examines the sources of well-being for both religious and nonreligious Americans.

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