Emotional Intelligence and Meaning in Life Among Algerian Elderly: A Correlational Study

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between emotional intelligence and meaning in life among elderly individuals in Biskra, Algeria. A correlational design was employed with a sample of 174 elderly persons (60% female, 40% male; mean age = 70.3 years, SD = 6.5). Participants completed the Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire. Results indicated moderately high levels of both emotional intelligence (M = 3.45, SD = 0.52) and meaning in life (M = 3.38, SD = 0.49). Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between emotional intelligence and meaning in life (r = .52, p < .01). Regression analysis demonstrated that emotional intelligence accounted for 41% of the variance in meaning in life (β = .41, p < .01). These findings suggest that emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in enhancing meaning in life among the elderly. The study recommends integrating emotional intelligence development programs into elderly care services to promote psychological well-being and existential fulfillment in late adulthood.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, meaning in life, elderly, aging, psychological well-being, Algeria

Introduction

Global demographic structure is witnessing a noticeable shift toward population aging, placing issues of psychological health and well-being among the elderly at the forefront of scientific and societal attention (World Health Organization, 2022). United Nations estimates indicate that the number of people aged 60 years and over will double by 2050. In the Algerian context, data from the National Office of Statistics (2023) indicate a steady increase in the proportion of elderly people, representing more than 10% of the total population, which requires in-depth studies to understand the psychological factors that contribute to protecting them from existential pressures and enhancing their quality of life.

Old age is considered a sensitive developmental stage during which the individual goes through a series of biological, cognitive, social, and emotional changes. The elderly may face challenges such as retirement, loss of loved ones, declining physical health, and shrinking social networks, which may threaten their sense of identity and purpose (Carstensen, 2019). In this context, there is a need to explore internal psychological resources that can act as protective factors and help the elderly adapt positively to these transitions, and maintain or even enhance their psychological well-being.

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is one of the pivotal psychological constructs that has received significant attention in recent literature. Emotional intelligence is defined as the individual's ability to perceive, assess, and express emotions, as well as understand and regulate emotions to enhance emotional and intellectual growth

(Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Numerous studies have indicated that emotional intelligence constitutes a protective factor that helps individuals, especially the elderly, face the challenges associated with aging by improving coping mechanisms and stress management (Carstensen, 2019; Bashir, 2022). Emotional intelligence helps the elderly recognize feelings of sadness or loneliness associated with losses and manage them effectively, preventing them from developing into more serious psychological conditions such as depression or existential anxiety.

In contrast, the existential concept of Meaning in Life (ML) emerges as a fundamental psychological need, especially in old age, where existential questions about life's value and personal legacy abound. Meaning in life refers to the individual's perception that their life has purpose, direction, and value (Steger, 2006). Steger (2006) distinguishes between two main dimensions of meaning in life: (1) **Presence of Meaning**, which is the current sense that life is understandable and purposeful, and (2) **Search for Meaning**, which is the motivation and activity directed toward finding or enhancing the understanding and purpose of life. The presence of meaning in life is associated with higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction, and lower levels of depression and existential anxiety among the elderly (Frankl, 2011; Steger, 2020).

Theoretical and empirical frameworks indicate a reciprocal relationship between emotional intelligence and meaning in life. Individuals with high emotional skills are more able to interpret their life experiences positively, manage negative emotions, and build supportive social relationships, which provides a rich context for generating and sustaining meaning (King & Hicks, 2009; Wong & Goodwin, 2022). This relationship can be explained through Mayer and Salovey's (1997) model, where the ability to accurately perceive emotions and understand their causes allows the individual to form a coherent life narrative,

a process fundamental to meaning-making. Furthermore, the ability to regulate emotions enables the individual to overcome negative emotions that may hinder seeing meaning in facing adversity.

In the Arab context, some studies such as Al-Khatib (2019) and Bashir (2022) have supported this positive relationship. For example, Al-Khatib's (2019) study found that emotional intelligence predicted 42% of the variance in meaning in life among university students. Within Algeria, a study by Ayyashi (2022) in the city of Biskra indicated a positive correlation between emotional intelligence and meaning in life.

Despite the importance of the topic, studies examining this relationship among the elderly in the Algerian context, especially in interior regions like Biskra, remain limited and scarce. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by answering the main question: What is the nature of the relationship between emotional intelligence and meaning in life among the elderly in the city of Biskra?

Research Questions

1. What is the level of emotional intelligence (and its dimensions) among the elderly in the city of Biskra?
2. What is the level of meaning in life (and the two dimensions: presence of meaning and search for meaning) among the elderly in the city of Biskra?
3. Is there a statistically significant correlation between emotional intelligence and meaning in life among the elderly?
4. Can emotional intelligence predict meaning in life among the elderly?

Method

Research Design

A correlational descriptive design was used, appropriate for the nature of the study's aims of measuring the relationship between the two main variables (emotional intelligence and meaning in life) without manipulating them, and examining the predictive ability of one for the other.

Participants

The study sample consisted of 174 elderly individuals living with their families

(69 males, 105 females) from the city of Biskra. Their ages ranged between 60 and 85 years (mean age = 70.3, standard deviation = 6.5).

The following exclusion criteria were applied: (a) a previous diagnosis of severe cognitive impairment (such as advanced dementia) according to a medical report or report from the home or association supervisor, (b) non-consent to participate in the study, (c) inability to communicate verbally clearly.

Instruments

1. Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS):

The Arabic version of the scale was used after being standardized in the Arab environment by Shuwayha (2017). The scale consists of 33 items measuring four dimensions:

- **Emotion Perception (10 items):** The ability to recognize feelings in oneself and others (example: "I am aware of my emotions as they change").
- **Emotion Management (9 items):** The ability to regulate and control emotions appropriately (example: "I control my emotions and remain calm even under pressure").
- **Utilization of Emotions (7 items):** The ability to use emotions to facilitate thinking and problem-solving (example: "I motivate myself with feelings of hope").
- **Empathy (7 items):** The ability to understand and respond to others' emotions (example: "I empathize with others' feelings easily").

Responses are distributed on a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The total score is calculated by summing the item scores and dividing by the number of items, where a high score indicates a higher level of emotional intelligence. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) for the scale in this study was 0.84, indicating excellent reliability.

2. Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ):

The Arabic version of the questionnaire developed by Steger (2006) was used. The questionnaire consists of 10 items distributed across two dimensions:

- **Presence of Meaning (5 items):** Measures the extent of the individual's current sense that their life is meaningful and purposeful (example: "I understand the meaning of my life").
- **Search for Meaning (5 items):** Measures the extent of the individual's preoccupation and active pursuit to discover new meaning in their life (example: "I am searching for something that makes my life meaningful"). Responses are distributed on a seven-point Likert scale (from 1 = absolutely untrue to 7 = absolutely true). The score for each dimension is calculated separately, and an overall score for meaning in life can be calculated. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) for the scale in this study was 0.81, indicating very good reliability.

Procedures

The study went through the following stages:

1. **Informed Consent:** Each participant was met individually or in small groups to explain the study's aims in a simplified and clear manner, with an emphasis on voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Data confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. All participants signed an informed consent form.
2. **Application of Instruments:** The instruments were applied individually and collectively in small sessions for association members, in quiet and comfortable places. Research assistants helped participants read items when needed due to vision or concentration problems. The application process took about 25-30 minutes per participant or group.
3. **Data Collection and Analysis:** Questionnaires were collected and coded. Data were entered and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.

Statistical Analyses

To achieve the study's objectives, the following statistical analyses were used:

1. **Descriptive Statistics:** Means and Standard Deviations to describe the sample characteristics and levels of the main variables (emotional intelligence and meaning in life).
2. **Correlation Analysis:** Pearson Correlation Coefficient to examine the strength and direction of the relationship between the total score of emotional intelligence and the total score of meaning in life, as well as relationships between dimensions.
3. **Simple Linear Regression Analysis:** To examine the predictive ability of emotional intelligence (independent variable) for meaning in life (dependent variable).

Results

Results Related to the First Question: What is the level of emotional intelligence and its dimensions?

To identify the level of emotional intelligence and its dimensions among the study sample individuals, means and standard deviations were calculated. As shown in Table (1), the mean of the total emotional intelligence score was (3.45) with a standard deviation of (0.52), indicating that the level of emotional intelligence among the sample individuals was moderately high. Looking at the dimensions, we find that the "Emotion Management" dimension obtained the highest mean (3.56), followed by the "Utilization of Emotions" dimension (3.44), then "Emotion Perception" (3.41), and finally the "Empathy" dimension (3.38). All these means fall in the moderately high level according to the rating levels used in the study.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Emotional Intelligence and Meaning in Life Dimensions (N = 174)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rating Level
Emotional Intelligence (Total)	3.45	0.52	Moderately High
- Emotion Perception	3.41	0.61	Moderately High
- Emotion Management	3.56	0.58	High
- Utilization of Emotions	3.44	0.59	Moderately High
- Empathy	3.38	0.64	Moderately High
Meaning in Life (Total)	3.38	0.49	Good
- Presence of Meaning	3.62	0.55	High
- Search for Meaning	3.14	0.67	Moderate

Note: Rating level for emotional intelligence: 1-2.33 (Low), 2.34-3.66 (Moderately High), 3.67-5 (High). Rating level for meaning in life (7-point scale): 1-2.33 (Low), 2.34-4.66 (Moderate), 4.67-7 (High).

Results Related to the Second Question: What is the level of meaning in life?

It is also evident from Table (1) that the mean of the total meaning in life score was (3.38) with a standard deviation of (0.49), which can be described as a "Good" or

"Moderately High" level in the context of the scale used. When analyzing the two dimensions, it was noted that the "Presence of Meaning" dimension scored high (3.62), while the "Search for Meaning" dimension scored lower (3.14) in the moderate range. This difference indicates that the elderly in the sample feel a clear existence of meaning in their current lives more than their enthusiasm for actively searching for new meaning.

Results Related to the Third Question: Is there a correlation between emotional intelligence and meaning in life?

To answer this question, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated between the total score of emotional intelligence and its dimensions, and the total score of meaning in life and its two dimensions. The results in Table (2) show a statistically significant positive correlation

at the (0.01) level between the total score of emotional intelligence and the total score of meaning in life (r = .52). This relationship is considered strong and direct, indicating that the higher the level of emotional intelligence, the higher the level of meaning in life.

All dimensions of emotional intelligence also showed positive and significant correlations with the two dimensions of meaning in life. The strongest correlation was between the "Emotion Management" dimension and the total score of meaning in life (r = .52), followed by the "Emotion Perception" dimension (r = .48). The "Presence of Meaning" dimension was also more strongly correlated with total emotional intelligence (r = .51) compared to the "Search for Meaning" dimension (r = .37).

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Emotional Intelligence and Meaning in Life Dimensions (N = 174)

Dimension	Presence of Meaning	Search for Meaning	Meaning in Life (Total)
Emotion Perception	.43**	.31**	.48**
Emotion Management	.49**	.28**	.52**
Utilization of Emotions	.41**	.35**	.47**
Empathy	.38**	.33**	.44**
Emotional Intelligence (Total)	**.51****	**.37****	**.52****

** $p < .01$

Results Related to the Fourth Question: Does emotional intelligence predict meaning in life?

To test the hypothesis that emotional intelligence predicts meaning in life, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted, with emotional intelligence entered as the independent variable (predictor) and meaning in life as the dependent variable. The analysis results are summarized in Table (3).

The results indicated that the model was statistically significant, $(F(1, 172) = 48.35, p < .01)$. Emotional intelligence represents 41% of the variance in meaning in life ($R^2 = .41$). The regression coefficient (β) was positive and statistically significant ($\beta = .41, p < .01$), confirming that emotional intelligence positively and significantly predicts meaning in life among the study sample individuals. The regression equation can be expressed as follows: **Meaning in Life = 1.92 + 0.41 (Emotional Intelligence)**

Table 3

Results of Simple Linear Regression Analysis of Emotional Intelligence Predicting Meaning in Life (N = 174)

Independent Variable	R	R²	Adjusted R²	F	df 1	df 2	p-value	β	t-value	p-value (for β)
Emotional Intelligence	.64	.41	.41	48.35	1	172	< .01	.41	6.95	< .01

Dependent Variable: Meaning in Life
Constant in regression equation = 1.92

Discussion

The current study aimed to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence and meaning in life among a sample of elderly individuals in Biskra, Algeria. The results generally confirmed the existence of a positive and strong correlational relationship between the two variables, and also showed that emotional intelligence significantly predicts meaning in life, supporting the study's hypotheses.

Discussion of the Relationship Between Emotional Intelligence and Meaning in Life

The main finding of the study confirmed a statistically significant positive correlation between emotional intelligence and meaning in life ($r = .52, p < .01$). This result is consistent with the theoretical framework that assumes emotional skills facilitate the meaning-making process by improving emotional regulation, enhancing positive social interactions, and providing greater self-clarity (King & Hicks, 2009; Wong & Goodwin, 2022). An elderly person who can accurately perceive their feelings (such as grief over the loss of a role) and understand their causes becomes more able to integrate this experience into a comprehensive life narrative that gives it meaning (such as seeing their new role as a grandfather or a wise person in the family). Similarly, the ability to manage negative emotions prevents them from overwhelming the individual's view of the positives and achievements in their life, thus maintaining their sense of meaning and purpose.

This finding also aligns with previous studies in the Arab context, such as Al-Khatib's (2019) study, which found a strong relationship between the two variables among university students, and studies by Bashir (2022) and Ayyashi (2022), which emphasized this relationship among the elderly. It is also supported by Frankl's

(1963) theory, which emphasizes that humans can find meaning even in the harshest circumstances if they possess the appropriate internal psychological resources, one of which is emotional intelligence.

Discussion of Regression Analysis Results

The result of the simple linear regression analysis is one of the most important findings in this study, showing that emotional intelligence can explain 41% of the variance in meaning in life ($R^2 = .41$). This percentage is considered large and statistically and practically significant in the social and human sciences, indicating that emotional intelligence represents a strong predictive variable for meaning in life among the elderly.

This predictive power can be explained through the following mechanisms:

1. **Emotional Regulation as a Basis for Existential Clarity:** The elderly person's ability to manage their negative emotions (such as anxiety, sadness, anger) gives them psychological space to think more deeply about existential questions, rather than being preoccupied with dealing with their emotional pressures. This psychological clarity makes it easier for them to discover and embody meaning in their daily lives.

2. **Social Relationships as a Vessel for Meaning:** Meaning in old age is often derived from relationships with family, friends, and community. Emotional intelligence, especially empathy and relationship management skills, can enhance the quality and continuity of these relationships, providing the elderly with a rich and stable source of meaning (Carstensen, 2019).

3. **Emotion Perception and Life Narrative:** The ability to perceive and label emotions associated with past and present events helps the elderly build a "coherent life narrative." This narrative, which integrates successes and failures, joy and pain, into a meaningful story, is the essence of the sense of meaning in life (King & Hicks, 2009).

The value of the regression coefficient ($\beta = .41$) indicates that for every one-unit increase in the emotional intelligence score, we expect a 0.41 unit increase in the meaning in life score, holding all other factors constant. This positive and substantial effect reinforces the argument that developing programs targeting emotional intelligence can have a significant return on the existential well-being of the elderly.

Discussion of Variable Levels

Emotional intelligence scored a moderately high level overall. This can be explained in light of the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (Carstensen, 2019), which suggests that individuals, as they age and perceive the limited time remaining, become more selective in their emotional investment and focus on emotionally meaningful goals, leading to improvement in emotional regulation and "emotional wisdom." Accumulated life experiences and facing many emotional situations over a lifetime give the elderly a rich repository of strategies for dealing with their emotions.

As for meaning in life, the high "presence of meaning" dimension compared to the moderate level in "search for meaning" indicates that the elderly in the sample may have reached a stage of satisfaction and acceptance of their life experiences, and may have settled on a clear and stable perception of their life's meaning based on their past and achievements. This aligns with the concept of "ego integrity" in Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, where the strength of "wisdom" emerges in old age when the individual can look at their life with a comprehensive and integrated view, feeling satisfied and meaningful (Erikson, 1982). The decreased motivation for "search for

meaning" may reflect a sense of fulfillment and reaching an existential goal, or perhaps a kind of resignation or decreased energy for actively searching for new meanings.

Practical Implications

The results of this study provide several important practical applications for improving the quality of life of the elderly:

1. **Psychological Intervention Programs:** Design and implement counseling programs for the elderly that intensively focus on developing emotional intelligence skills. These programs can include sessions on training emotional awareness (such as labeling emotions), managing negative emotions (such as anxiety, anger, sadness), and enhancing empathy and social communication skills.

2. **Logotherapy:** Integrate logotherapy techniques derived from Frankl's theory into care programs. The elderly can be encouraged to retrieve positive memories, identify current values that are still important to them, and find new meaningful roles within their families or local community, even if simple.

3. **Training for Caregivers:** Raise awareness and train staff working in care homes and associations, as well as family members of the elderly, about the importance of emotional intelligence and meaning in life. They can be taught how to create an emotionally supportive environment that encourages the elderly to express their feelings and helps them discover meaning in their daily activities.

4. **Social Care Policies:** These results can inform policymakers about the importance of including the psychological and existential dimension within comprehensive elderly care plans, not just the health and material dimension.

Study Limitations and Future Recommendations

Despite the importance of the results, they should be interpreted in light of some limitations:

1. **Correlational Design:** This design does not allow for causal conclusions. Does emotional intelligence enhance meaning in life, or does having meaning in life improve emotional skills? The relationship is likely reciprocal.
2. **Generalization of Results:** Limiting the sample to one city (Biskra) limits the ability to generalize the results to all elderly in Algeria, which is characterized by its geographical and cultural diversity.
3. **Measurement Method:** Relying on self-report measures (questionnaires) may make the results susceptible to effects such as social desirability or self-report bias.

Based on these limitations, the study presents the following research recommendations:

1. Conduct **Longitudinal Studies** to track changes in the relationship between the variables over time and verify causality.
2. Conduct **Comparative Studies** among the elderly in different Algerian regions (north, south, east, west) and in different residential contexts (care home, with family, alone).
3. Use **Qualitative Methodologies** (such as in-depth interviews and case studies) to obtain a deeper and richer understanding of how emotional skills contribute to meaning-making from the elderly person's own perspective.
4. Study other **Mediating Variables** that may affect this relationship, such as social support, physical health, religiosity, and life satisfaction.

Conclusion

This study provides strong empirical evidence of the close correlational and predictive relationship between emotional intelligence and meaning in life among the elderly in the Algerian context (city of Biskra). The results confirm that enhancing

emotional skills is not limited to improving emotional management and daily adaptation only, but extends to form a fundamental pillar in enhancing the sense of meaning and existential purpose, which is a deep psychological need in old age. The elderly person who can understand their feelings, manage them, and empathize with others is better equipped to weave the threads of their past and present experiences into a coherent and meaningful fabric.

In light of these results, investing in psychological and social programs that integrate the development of emotional intelligence and the exploration of meaning is a promising and necessary path to improve the quality of life of this important group in our society. The well-being of the elderly is not a luxury, but rather a reflection of the progress and humanity of society, and studies like this contribute to laying the foundations for achieving this well-being

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