

## *Original Paper*

# Meanings of Life

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### ***Abstract***

*This study aims to explore the meaning of life for the interviewees from a more real-life perspective, thus trying to expand the answer to the question of the meaning of life. It goes beyond understanding the meaning of life from the perspective of vague and unclear philosophical concepts. This study analyzes the content of the face-to-face interviews by using the ikigai theory, which demonstrates the influence of cultural formulation, social negotiation, and institutional channeling on the formation of individuals' meaning of life. Finally, an idea is provide that genetic factors may also influence the formation of meaning in one's life.*

### ***Keywords***

*meaning, life, ikigai, interview*

## **1. Introduction**

There are many different answers to the question of what the meaning of life is. Some people put the meaning of their lives on faith, such as in shamanism, which honors nature and puts the meaning of their lives on the spirits they trust (Yu, 2020). Others are looking for the relationship between religion and the meaning of life and trying to explain the meaning of life from the perspective of religion. For example, Deng, in her study of religious culture and the meaning of life, finds that religion has both a guiding role and a negative role in the meaning of life and points out that seeking the positive meaning of life has become the mainstream of contemporary religious culture (Deng, 2009). Some people take love as the meaning of their lives. And in the view of philosophers, life may be meaningless (Joske, 1974). All of the above attribute the meaning of life to some vague concepts, such as love, faith, or meaninglessness. In order to find out the meaning of life more clearly and concretely, this study will deeply investigate someone's personal experience. It will explore their actual meaning of life from their personal experiences by asking them hypothetical questions to allow them to make choices. In the

analysis part, Gorden's Ikigai Theory is used to analyze the ikigai of the interviews from three aspects: cultural formulation, social negotiation, and institutional channeling (Gorden, 1996). Gorden defines ikigai as the things that tie you to the world around you. It has more deeply linked the self to the social world. Of course, the exploration of answers to the meaning of life is never-ending. There are fewer cases to analyze in this study, but the answers can help us figure out the meaning of life.

## 2. Interviews

Interviewer: Sherry (S)

Interviewee: Gu and Liang (L)

### 2.1 Gu

Gu, male, 28 years old, bank account manager. He was one of my customers who used to ask me for advice about love, but through chatting, we found that each of us had a lot in common in terms of our views about spiritual practice. Then we gradually moved from a customer relationship to a friend relationship. When I made it clear that I would like to do an interview with him, he said that he would be happy to be interviewed.

S: What do you think is most important to you in your life? Or what is your pursuit in life?

Gu: From work, at the moment, it's to be able to work on the front line and then work my way up to the position of bank president, and through my own continuous refinement and learning, help more and more people, such as my staff and the people around me. I mean to make things better for them. By helping them, I was able to impact each of their families. At the same time, I could enjoy the sense of achievement and satisfaction brought by the success of others. I can realize my self-worth in life through my work. In other aspects of my life, for example, I would like to have a soul mate who will accompany me and make progress together! This companion means a friend, but it would be best if the companion was my wife. As for my family, I would like my parents to be healthy and safe.

S: You've mentioned several aspects, and which aspect do you think is the most important?

Gu: Which aspect is the most important? I think it's the family—my own family. Only when you have a good family can you influence other people. If you can't get your own family good, you can't pursue those things outside. What you say about helping others or how to do so is vague. You only put your own family to be good, and then you can go to influence more people.

S: Let's make a hypothetical situation where family and your job can't go hand in hand. Then which one would you choose?

Gu: That depends. You see, I was sent to other cities for work, and now, after two years, I chose to come back. I don't think I can leave home for too long. It's just a matter of time. I think I may be able to focus a little bit on my work for a certain period of time so that my career can become better, but in the end, I will still choose to go back to my family. I can't leave my family behind all year. I must be back with my family.

S: I feel like the most important thing for you is still family, right?

Gu: Yes, family is more important.

S: Why do you think family is the most important? Does it have anything to do with your own life experience?

Gu: Based on my life experience, I think there will be some influence. Because my family itself belongs to a more traditional Chinese family, and the parents' faith is also Buddhism. I was always taught that I must have filial piety and then take care of the family. And after seeing many people and things, including their own experiences, I think the family is very important. Some people may be quite prosperous on the outside, but when they return home, they are alone and very lonely. Some people may even be separated from their wives, although they are very prosperous outside, but the family behind them is not so good. I feel that family can help me in my spirit. We Chinese are all about inheritance and focus on family ties. It's not like in the West, where I think they're talking more about independent individuals, but we still value the connection between people. Family brings a sense of belonging, and no matter what happens outside, you still have to find a place to belong.

S: You have mentioned spiritual practice, if you need to make a choice between your family and your spiritual practice—that is, you can't have a happy family and at the same time go on this path of spiritual practice—then what would you do?

Gu: I don't think it's a good idea to leave the family behind and go purely into spiritual practice unless everyone inside the family supports me. I don't think it's very reasonable to say I must leave my family behind to pursue my own path of spiritual practice. I need to take care of the people around me. And if they feel it's okay and say go ahead, I think I'll go.

S: Do you think your pursuit has changed from your life experience?

Gu: Yes. In the past, I didn't think much about the meaning of life. But from work experience, life experience, and after reading a lot of books, I have some new visions of the world and of life. And then, going back to my life, I found that my pursuits are constantly changing.

S: And what were your previous pursuits?

Gu: I can't remember.

Gu: In the past, my pursuit was to run a big business and make a lot of money. And my pursuit focused more on money. Now it's more of a spiritual pursuit. It's more about altruism. And in the past, I was just thinking about myself. Now it's more about helping others.

S: Do you love your job at the moment?

Gu: I like it. I think my personality since I was a kid is actually shy. I'm not very good at this kind of sales work. In fact, looking back, I would not have thought that I would embark on this road of sales when I was a student in college. Then I went into the bank as an account manager, and now I think I like this job more and more. This job allows me to grow. Every day I would meet bosses from all walks of life. After talking with them, I would think about why some businesses are successful, why some are not. Then I would share these experiences with the staff around me and help them grow together. I would feel very happy when they did well in their performance. Frontline work is actually different

from administrative positions. I think I will stay in position unless I get old and can't do it anymore. Because only on the front lines can I experience the sense of achievement that I want. For example, the bank has new employees coming in every year, and I find it more meaningful to help them grow up by teaching them through my own experience. It will make me feel fulfilled and happy.

Gu: But family is the first. The first thing is certainly to solve the problem of family food and clothing. If this job cannot even bring me a good income and I just pursue my own value, I think it is not very reasonable. You know the consumption is very high. I first want to solve the problem of bread, followed by spiritual pursuit. I think I am not that kind of real practitioner.

## 2.2 Liang

Liang, a male, 25 years old, special operations soldier. He graduated from the military school two years ago, and after graduation, he worked in the special operations force. He is not only my customer but also my friend and student. Once, he also consulted me about romantic relationship problems. He learned tarot divination from me, so we gradually became friends.

S: What do you think is most important in your life? Or what is your pursuit in life?

L: I think the most important thing is probably my family. But when you ask me what my pursuit is, I think there are two stages. The first stage is definitely to have a family first and settle down. The second stage is the realization of personal values. The ultimate goal is to serve people and make the world peaceful and better.

S: So how are you going to realize the personal values in your daily life?

L: I think it's through work. Because I'm currently in the military and will eventually become a regional civil servant. My goal is to serve the people.

S: Do you think it is possible to go through the two stages at the same time?

L: Yes.

S: What if it's not possible to do it at the same time? What if your family and your desire to realize the value of your life through your work can't co-exist, and you have to choose one. Which one do you choose?

L: I choose the first one. I choose my family. In my understanding, I can only help others if I take care of my own family and live well for myself.

S: So by family, you mean including your parents, your partner, and your children, right?

L: Yes.

S: And what do you think led you to your current pursuit?

L: I think that people have many attributes in society. We present different identities to different people. The only one thing that allows me to relax is my family. I do not need to pretend in front of my family.

S: So would you consider yourself working for your family?

L: A large part of it is.

S: If your current job doesn't allow you to realize your life value, but this job can bring you a good salary to support your family, and make your family's life better, would you choose this job?

L: I will choose.

S: So do you think the most important thing is your family?

L: You could say that.

S: So can I ask what it is, or what experiences have made you feel that family is most important to you?

L: Because my mom and dad have always fought since I was young. I lived in an inharmonious family. They fought every day. I didn't like this atmosphere very much. So I think a harmonious family atmosphere is very important to me.

S: I find it interesting that in the same situation, different people will make different choices. Some people may make different choices than you. Some people may choose not to have a family in the future to avoid the risk of having a family with such a disharmonious atmosphere. Because family and marriage may be like a gamble for some people. But in your case, you will choose to go after a family with a harmonious atmosphere.

L: I must get married.

S: Why?

L: I can't go through life without getting married, not so much because of the pressure from my family or from my parents. Even if I never get married in my life, my parents probably won't impose their will on me. But as for me personally, I still have a longing and desire for a good family. Because no one is going to be with themselves for the rest of their lives, my parents won't be with me for the rest of my life, and my best friend won't be with me for the rest of my life. I sometimes scared of being alone. I need to have the people I love by my side. I didn't get a harmonious family atmosphere, so I want it now.

S: And what kind of future state of life do you most want?

L: The most wanted state of life is to have enough money—not too much—and then have the time to accompany the family to go out and travel. Then, in daily life, there is no disease or disaster, just plain and simple. Having my own family and my own loved ones by my side is my wish. The significance of my life is that there are people who love me and I love, and we have done something for each other. I just want to make this trip through life less lonely and difficult. I think this is the meaning of my life.

### 3. Analysis

The analysis is mainly based on the theory of ikigai theory, which uses cultural formulations, social negotiations, and institutional channelings to explore the individual's meanings of life. In the course of the interviews, I found it interesting that both men eventually came to think of their families as their ikigai, which was unexpected. These two men are familiar friends of mine. Gu always talks about his spiritual practice. Before the interview, I thought he would consider spiritual practice his ikigai. But what I didn't expect was that he considered his family his ikigai. And when both of them talked about their ikigai, they both mentioned that they wanted to realize their own self-worth through their work. Gu hopes to help other people grow, thus realizing his own value in life. Liang also wants to serve the

public through his work. The idea that both of them want to realize their own self-worth by helping others is strongly related to the cultural background of Chinese collectivist society. And the altruism that Gu mentions in the interview also contrasts with Western individualism, as he believes that Chinese society emphasizes the connection between individuals. His statement reflects the influence of China's collectivist culture on the way he realizes his personal values. Liang, who is a soldier and a member of the Communist Party. He mentions serving the public in his narrative. And this purpose is formally the mission of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Furthermore, I found that both of their jobs enable them to help people, thus realizing the pursuit of helping others realize their own values. From another point of view, their jobs provide them with the opportunity to realize their values. Although they mentioned that they wanted to realize their self-worth in life, when I asked them to choose between work and family, both of them made a quick choice to choose family. They mentioned in the interview that only when they take care of their families can they serve others better. This is very much related to traditional Chinese culture. There is an old saying in China: to keep the family in order, to cultivate the spirit, to protect the country, and then to peace the whole world. In this old saying, the stability of the family is put first. To some extent, the fact that they prioritize the family is influenced by traditional Chinese culture. And in the interview, both of them mentioned that they want to treat their home as a harbor they can rely on, and they believe that a harmonious family atmosphere is crucial. The difference is that Gu developed this idea mainly because he witnessed the disharmonious families of people around him. His parents told him from a young age that he should be loyal to his parents and responsible for his family, so he believes that a happy family is important. For Liang, he grew up in a family full of fights. So in order to make up for the regrets he suffered during his childhood, he currently desires to have a happy family. Both of them are influenced by the people around them in their desire to have a happy family.

It is interesting to note that when I asked Gu to choose between his spiritual practice and his family, he quickly chose his family. He believed that the support of his family was important to him and that he would not prioritize his spiritual practice if he did not have the support of his family. This also shows the influence of the opinions of the people around him on his *ikigai*. Moreover, Gu shows in the interview that his *ikigai* has changed, and he explains that this is due to his experiences that have led to such a change, such as reading and working. From his changes, we can see that the *ikigai* is influenced by the culture and the people around him. When he was growing up, the people around him were changing, and the things he experienced were changing. And by reading books, the ideas in the books are also influencing his values. During the interview, I asked Liang a question: Why didn't you choose not to get married to avoid the possibility of a disharmonious family? He said that because he had not gotten a happy family before, he wanted it now. I realized that different people may make different choices when faced with similar problems. For example, I have similar childhood experiences with Liang, but I would choose not to get married. The reason for such different choices may be attributed to the degree of unhappiness experienced in childhood. Perhaps the unhappiness I experienced was deeper

than that experienced by Liang, which led me to have no expectation of family life while he still has a longing for family life. But I don't think the degree of unhappiness can be the only reason for the completely different outcomes of the choices. On the other hand, I would put it down to an inherent difference in thinking. Perhaps this difference in thinking has something to do with genes or temperament types. For example, in the study of the consumption preferences and consumption decisions of consumers with different temperament types, the researchers found that temperament type affects consumers' consumption choices (Bai & Zhang, 2008). This may be the reason why different people have different practices in almost the same situations. In a nutshell, factors like temperament and genetic reasons could also influence one's ikigai.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study explores how the meaning of life is more closely linked to reality. In this study, hypothetical questions were raised during the interviews to find out the respondents' ikigai. Both respondents indicated that their ikigai was their family. This analysis applies Gorden's ikigai theory to understand the reasons for the formation of ikigai among the two interviewees in terms of cultural formulations, social negotiations, and institutional channeling. And a new idea has been proposed at the end of the analysis. In addition to the three aspects of Gorden's theory, genetic factors may also influence one's choice of ikigai.

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