

The Dark Side of Purpose: The Interplay of Meaning in Life, Criminal Attitudes, and Deviant Association

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Abstract

This study examined the relationships between meaning in life, criminal attitudes, deviant association, and self-sacrifice for religion. The total population was 354, consisting of online respondents, students, respondents in drug rehabilitation settings, and prisoners. The researchers used Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses to analyze the data. Results revealed that there was a significant relationship between meaning in life and self-sacrifice for religion ($r = .456, p < .01$), and that meaning in life is a significant predictor of self-sacrifice ($\beta = .446, p < .001$). Criminal attitude also positively correlated with self-sacrifice ($r = .329, p < .01$) and significantly predicted it ($\beta = .258, p < .001$). Meanwhile, deviant association was negatively related to self-sacrifice ($r = -.208, p < .01$) and negatively predicted the outcome ($\beta = -.348, p < .001$). The predictors explained 36.1% of the variance ($R^2 = .361$). The results suggest that there are unique relationships between religious self-sacrificial tendencies and each of these characteristics when they are assessed statistically. Because this is a cross-sectional study, the results cannot be interpreted as causal and are more likely associations.

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Introduction

When it comes to meaning in life, people generally mean that they perceive meaning in their lives, that it holds together, and that it has goals that are worth it. While meaning has been considered important for psychological well-being and adequate functioning, striving for meaning is not necessarily linked to positive social outcomes. When meaning comes from dangerous and harmful belief systems, the same motivational process that brings positive goals, commitment, and sense of significance may become involved with negative and socially disapproved behavior. For instance, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire by Steger et al. (2006) distinguishes between experience and search for meaning, treating meaning as a multidimensional psychological phenomenon rather than merely a measure of happiness or life satisfaction. Although meaningful life has consistently been related to psychological well-being, the meaning may differ depending on how individuals structure their life in terms of purpose and ideals (Steger et al., 2006).

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When someone has a strong need to feel significant or useful, the motivational significance of meaning matters. Significance Quest is a theory that suggests humans strive for a sense of personal significance, and this quest can be tied in with ideological pursuits and social groups. Under specific conditions, significant action might lead to a willingness to make extreme commitments, such as demonstrating legitimate behavior or a socially desirable outcome in a social or ideological environment that validates it (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Therefore, meaning in life is not necessarily protective or good. Its effects on behavior may depend on the meaning, which can be expressed through goals, attitudes, and social relationships. The topic should be viewed in light of self-sacrifice. When a person sees an issue, organization, or idea that's really important, they make some sacrifices to support it. While self-sacrificial behavior is one that can happen in many socially valued forms, for the purposes of this experiment, it can include protecting family members, helping others, or serving a community. Willingness to make personal sacrifices for the cause, however, may also be linked to rigid and harmful attitudes and represent a higher level of commitment. Past research on significance motivation has focused on the correlation between meaning, sacrifice, and political violence, indicating that the search for meaning can gain behavioral relevance when certain motivational and ideological conditions are present (Schumpe et al., 2020). This matters because, in the present study, it is not self-sacrifice itself that is viewed as negative, but the psychological and social factors that may relate to self-sacrifice in a religious context.

Yet another area that might account for variations in self-sacrificial behavior is criminal attitudes. Criminal attitudes are generalized beliefs and cognitive orientations that can justify, rationalize, or excuse rule violations, aggression, or antisocial acts. The findings related to criminogenic thinking seem to show that there can be a relationship between criminal associates and criminal thinking, especially for persons with a history of offending. Walters (2015), for instance, reported that criminogenic thinking was statistically predicted by involvement with criminal associates when explaining incarcerated men. This aligns with the general idea that attitudes toward offenses can be shaped in groups and can influence how people interpret and justify their actions. Thus, deviant association matters because behavior and attitudes are not independent. The social learning approach suggests that people can learn other behavioral patterns, meanings, and attitudes from others. Empirical research shows associations between delinquent peer associations, criminal thinking, and future offending-related outcomes. Increased acculturation was positively correlated with delinquent peer association, which in turn affected adolescents' later proactive criminal thinking (Walters,

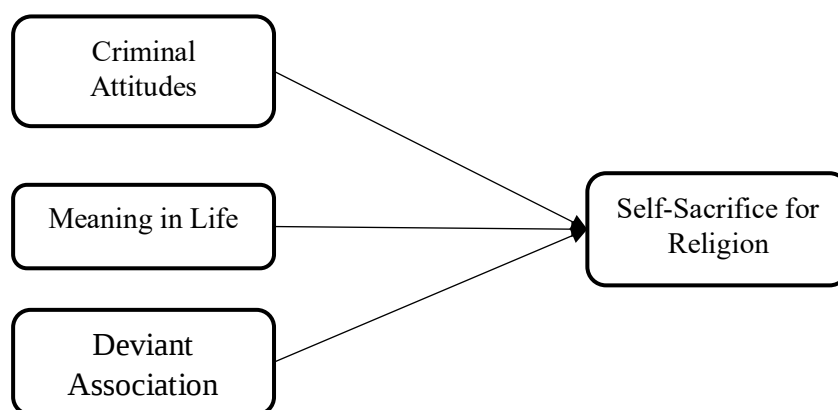
2021). The results indicate that social networks can serve as a setting where certain attitudes or behavioral orientations are learned, reinforced, or even normalized.

The relationship between meaning, criminal attitudes, and deviant association is special because it is possible that these variables may work at the same time instead of singularly. One can feel strongly driven about something and hold attitudes that readily explain why one need not respect and abide by the rules, or be in a social setting where disregarding the rules becomes normal. In this kind of situation, a high sense of meaning need not be associated with conventional or prosocial outcomes. The direction taken by behavior, on the contrary, may be determined by the attitudes and social relationships in the light of which that meaning is expressed. This forms the basis for exploring the less-discussed “dark side” of purpose.

The psychological significance of meaning and self-sacrifice can be added to this context: religion. Religious beliefs can help people find identity, meaning, moral direction, a sense of belonging to a community, and explanations for their life experiences. Meanwhile, religious zeal expends significant personal sacrifice when people think that giving that kind of sacrifice is morally or spiritually important. Also, this is not to say that religion, or commitment to God, necessarily leads to bad behavior. The current investigation, however, has focused on individual differences in the tendency to self-sacrifice for religion and whether this disposition correlates with meaning in life, criminal beliefs, and criminal friends.

Therefore, the present research aimed to explore the connection between meaning in life, attitudes toward crime, deviant association, and self-sacrifice for religion. Data were gathered from participants in drug rehabilitation facilities, college, and online prisoners. The final sample included 354 individuals: 117 prisoners, 49 people from drug rehabilitation institutions, 88 students, and 100 people from the Internet. Results showed that meaning in life, criminal attitudes, and deviant association were related to self-sacrifice for religion and that these variables were significant predictors of self-sacrificial behavior based on the existing literature of both theoretical and empirical studies. The study hypothesized that the three predictors would predict self-sacrifice behaviors and that significant relationships would exist among the study variables. The researchers used correlation analysis and multiple regression to examine these questions and evaluate both bivariate relationships and each variable's unique contribution.

Conceptual Model



- H1: Meaning in life, criminal attitudes, and deviant association combined will lead to high self-sacrificial behavior.
- H2: There will be a significant correlation between meaning in life, criminal attitude, deviant association, and self-sacrificial behavior for religion.

Method

Participants

The population of this study was collected from different locations and different people, i.e., prisoners, drug addicts, and college students. A total of 354 individuals were involved in the study; data were collected from four different places. Participant data were as follows: prisoners were 33.1% (n=117), drug addicts were 13.8% (n=49), students were 24.9% (n=88), and online participants were 28.2% (n=100). Of all participants, 79.7% (n=282) were male and 20.3% (n=72) were female. Based on education, 23.4% (n=83) were bachelor's students, 70.6% (n=250) had done FSc, 5.1% (n=18) had done Matric, and 0.8% (n=3) were masters students. Of the participants, 34.7% (n=123) were married, and 65.3% (n=231) were unmarried. Of the participants, 105 individuals were prisoners, and only 2.5% (n=9) of participants mentioned that they had some type of mental illness. The study followed ethical principles in treating participants, ensuring anonymity, obtaining free and informed consent, and maintaining complete confidentiality. The study used purposive sampling to collect data.

Measurement Instruments

1. Meaning in life

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) was developed by Steger et al. (2006) and consists of 10 items that are measured on a Likert scale. In the present study, the scale's reliability, measured by Cronbach's alpha, was 0.90.

2. Criminal Attitude

We used a six-item scale developed by Bélanger et al. (2025) to measure criminal attitude. The sample items (e.g., “It is acceptable to participate in illegal activities to make a living” and “There are effective ways of earning a living other than using crime”) were reverse-scored; $M = 5.72$, $SD = 1.02$, $\alpha = 0.66$. The responses/answers were recorded on a seven-point Likert scale, with 1 being not agree at all and 7 being very strongly agree.

3. Deviant Association

Deviant Behavior Variety Scale (DBVS; Sanches et al., 2016) is a self-report scale. It has 19 items, with dichotomous (yes/no) responses indicating whether participants engaged in any of the 19 deviant behaviors in the prior 12 months (12-month DBV). Cronbach alpha value of the deviant behavior variety scale is .86.

4. Self-sacrifice for Religion

Self-sacrifice was assessed using the 10-item Self-Sacrifice Scale suggested by Bélanger et al. (2014). For example, “I would be willing to sacrifice my life for a cause that is very important to me,” was responded to on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (do not agree at all) to 7 (strongly agree), etc. The Cronbach alpha value of the instrument was .79

Procedure

Permission was obtained from the authorities of the concerned organization/institution in the initial stage. Students, prisoners, and drug addicts were approached in the second step using a purposive sampling technique. In the third step, participants received a detailed explanation of the position, emphasizing that participation was voluntary and that there would be no academic credit for participating in the research survey. Participants were assigned questionnaires, which took about 15-20 minutes to complete. After data collection, the questionnaire data were finalized, coded, entered into SPSS, and analyzed.

Analytic Approach

SPSS was used for statistical analyses. Descriptive statistics were calculated based on the sample characteristics. Regression analyses showed that meaning in life and the two factors of criminal attitude and deviant association significantly predicted self-sacrificial attitude in connection with religion. Correlational analyses examined relationships among the study variables. Accordingly, the reliability of the scales in this study was acceptable according to Cronbach's alpha analysis.

Ethical approval

We obtained informed consent from participants and explained the study's purpose. Our institute has no such committee, so we followed ethical procedures throughout the process.

Result Study

Table 1. Regression analysis of meaning in life, Criminal attitude, Deviant association, and Self-sacrifice for religion.

Variables	<i>B</i>	95%CI		<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>R</i> ²	ΔR^2
		LB	UB				
						.361	.361***
Constant	23.18	[17.25	29.11]	3.006			
Meaning in life	.717***	[.522	.913]	.099	.446***		
Criminal Attitude	.388***	[.205	.570]	.093	.258***		
Deviant Association	-.313***	[-.419	-.207]	.054	-.348***		

Note. CI = Confidence Interval

*** $P < .001$.

To test the relationship between meaning in life, criminal attitude, deviant association, and self-sacrifice for religion, we used multiple regression analysis. The total model accounted for 36.1% of the variance ($R^2 = .361$) in self-sacrifice for religion. Meaning in life significantly and positively predicted self-sacrifice, $B = 0.717$, $\beta = .446$, 95% CI [0.522, 0.913], $p < .001$. Criminal attitude also showed a significant positive association, $B = 0.388$, $\beta = .258$, 95% CI [0.205, 0.570], $p < .001$. In contrast, deviant association significantly and negatively predicted self-sacrifice, $B = -0.313$, $\beta = -.348$, 95% CI [-0.419, -0.207], $p < .001$. Through this, it was found that there was a positive relationship between both meaning in life and the attitude toward crime, as well as self-sacrifice for religion, while deviant association had a negative relationship.

Table 3 - Evaluation Table of Correlation among Variables of the study model (N=354)

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Meaning in life	25.08	5.29	-	-	-	-	-

Criminal attitude	24.45	5.65	.312**	-	-	-	-
Deviant Association	33.14	9.46	.202**	.194**	-	-	-
Self-sacrifice for religion	40.26	8.51	.456**	.329**	-.208**	-	-

$p < .001$ **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The relationship between the variables of the study was examined by Pearson correlation analysis. Meaning in life was positively correlated with criminal attitude ($r = .312$, $p < .01$), deviant association ($r = .202$, $p < .01$), and self-sacrifice for religion ($r = .456$, $p < .01$). Criminal attitude had positive correlation with deviant association ($r = .194$, $p < .01$), and self-sacrifice for religion ($r = .329$, $p < .01$). Deviant association, on the other hand, was negatively related to self-sacrifice for religion ($r = -.208$, $p < .01$). The correlations generally suggest that, overall, there were positive relationships between meaning in life/criminal attitude and self-sacrifice, and an inverse relationship between deviant association and the outcome.

General Discussion

This study explored the interconnections among sense of meaning, criminal attitudes, deviant association, and sacrifice for religious causes. The results showed that their manifestations with self-sacrifice were not uniform, but that these variables are interrelated. Specifically, there was a positive correlation between self-sacrifice for religion and meaning in life, and criminal attitudes were inversely correlated with deviant association. The regression model accounted for 36.1% of the variance in self-sacrifice for religion, representing a large proportion of variation in individual differences in the outcome from the three predictors taken together.

In the regression model, meaning in life was the most positive predictor of self-sacrifice in the service of religious beliefs. Self-sacrifice had a positive regression coefficient and a standardized beta coefficient of .446 when meaning in life was the independent variable. The correlation between the two variables was also positive ($r = .456$) and relatively higher than the correlations with other predictors. This aligns with theoretical views that significance and meaning drive motivation. Life with high levels of meaning may make individuals more willing to invest time, effort, money, and/or personal sacrifice into things they view as meaningful. Past studies have also shown that, under specific circumstances, meaning-related motivations can merge with a willingness to sacrifice for a cause (Schumpe et al., 2020).

Significance Quest Theory offers a potential explanation as it suggests that the drive to attain and/or maintain personal significance may account for intense engagement with valued goals (Kruglanski et al., 2014).

Meanwhile, the discovery is not understood to mean meaning in life necessarily brings about negative or extreme activity. According to Steger et al. (2006), the search for meaning and meaningfulness were psychologically significant constructs, and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire was originally designed for measuring them. The current research does indicate, however, that when the cause to which one is committed is a religious one and of great importance to the individual, the meaning may be associated with strong commitment. Meaning expression in behavior, in other words, can relate to the intentions and/or social/ideological praxis through which meaning is sought.

Criminal attitude was also a major positive predictor of self-sacrifice for religion. Higher levels of criminal attitudes were associated with increased willingness to sacrifice for religion even after all the other predictors have been accounted for. The bivariate correlation between criminal attitude and self-sacrifice was positive ($r = .329$), and the standardized regression coefficient was positive ($\beta = .258$). This implies that criminal attitudes may be directly associated with the outcome, not just because of meaning in life or deviant association.

It could be concluded that a level of acceptance of breaking the rules may help shape how people assess behavioral boundaries. People with high tolerance for criminal and rule-breaking issues tend to make different judgments than people with low tolerance regarding behavior violations that involve high costs or rule violations. However, the current cross-sectional results do not explain why this relationship occurs. Thus, it is not appropriate to conclude that criminals' attitudes cause self-sacrifice in religion. Interpret the results as a relationship between the two constructs in the present sample.

The deviant association self-sacrifice for religion association was distinct from the other predictors. Deviant association was negatively correlated with self-sacrifice ($r = -.208$) and was still a significant negative predictor in the regression analysis ($\beta = -.348$). Interestingly, the relationship between deviant association and both meaning in life ($r = .202$) and criminal attitude ($r = .194$) was positive. This trend shows that the variables don't just move up or down in tandem. However, deviant association remains significantly related to the outcome once the other predictors are accounted for.

The negative correlation of deviant association and self-sacrifice should be interpreted with

Caution. Perhaps, social environments that involve deviant relations are not necessarily the same kind of ideological or religious reinforcement necessary for religious self-sacrifice to occur. Alternatively, the construct of deviant association may reflect a type of social involvement that is less religious. With the current design, however, these explanations remain speculative because the mechanisms of negative association are not directly examined.

Future studies should therefore investigate whether the association varies by peer-group category, level of religious activity, ideological dedication, or the character of the deviant association. It is noteworthy that there was a positive correlation between the variables of meaning in life and criminal attitude. The relationship was statistically significant ($r = .312$), indicating that in this sample, individuals who felt more meaning in life tended to express higher levels of criminal attitudes. From a purely positive psychological standpoint, this finding seems to conflict with the notion of meaning. The concept of meaning alone, however, does not indicate whether the person's purposes and beliefs take a constructive approach to society. The significance-quest perspective helps clarify these distinctions; the desire for significance may become tied to specific pathways of ideology and/or behavior depending on the social environment and the way of looking for significance that is legitimate (Kruglanski et al., 2014).

There was also a positive correlation between meaning in life and deviant association ($r = .202$). While this relationship was small, the evidence suggests a somewhat stronger association with deviant others corresponds with reports of greater meaning in life. This discovery further reinforces the separate nature of the psychological experience of meaning from the social directionality in which meaning is embodied. Having meaning does not guarantee that an individual will act in a prosocial, neutral, or socially harmful way, but it does add motivation and structure.

The findings also partially validate the hypotheses of this study. The second hypothesis, concerning meaning in life and its strong relationship to the three predictors: criminal attitudes, deviant association, and self-sacrifice for religion, was supported, as all three of the predictors were related to meaning in life. The first hypothesis suggested that the conceptualization of meaning in life, criminal attitude, and deviant association would jointly predict self-sacrificial behavior. According to the regression results, the three variables contributed statistically to predicting self-sacrifice and explained 36.1% of its variance.

It is important to note, however, that there is a methodological difference in the other half of the first hypothesis expression. The regression analysis indicates the joint contribution of the three variables in predicting, but it fails to account for an interaction among the

variables. Thus, these results suggest an additive multiple-predictor model, but not an interaction or moderation model. If, for instance, the interest lay in whether the association between meaning in life and self-sacrifice would increase with higher levels of criminal attitude, an interaction analysis would have been needed.

Study findings should also be considered alongside methodological characteristics. The data were collected from prisoners, drug rehabilitation centers, students, and the internet. This is a heterogeneous sample, which means that individuals from differing social contexts were included, but exposure to these samples is limited due to it being a purposive sample and therefore limits the extent to which it can be generalized to the larger population. Also, the study is cross-sectional, so no inferences can be drawn about temporal or causal links. For instance, the results do not explain if there is a causal link between meaning in life and self-sacrifice, if a high level of religious involvement affects the sense of life's meaning, or that another unmeasured factor accounts for both.

Future Implication

Another issue is how to interpret deviant association. Given the descriptive, statistical nature of this analysis, the negative coefficient should not be read as proof of a causal mechanism whereby deviant association decreases self-sacrifice. Depending upon how the measure was coded and the specific characteristics of the sample, the direction of the finding can also differ. This relationship could be better understood by replication with larger samples, if possible, based on probability samples, and more elaborate measures of religious commitment and peer group.

Conclusion

The overall results indicate that self-sacrificial commitment in oneself is correlated with meaning in life, and that criminal attitude as well as deviant association are disassociated with self-sacrificial commitment in oneself and living a meaningful life. The findings support a more complex notion of purpose that meaning without purpose can account for the social direction of behavior. Rather, psychological importance can sometimes matter as much as the attitudes and social interactions that lead to a goal. Future research might build on this by identifying and examining mediation and moderation, subdividing the concept of meaning in life and contrasting the different types of self-sacrifice for prosocial, religious, ideological, and potentially harmful purposes.

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