

Residents of poorer nations find greater meaning in life

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While residents of wealthy nations tend to have greater life satisfaction, new research shows that those living in poorer nations report having greater meaning in life.

These findings, published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, suggest that meaning in life may be higher in poorer nations as a result of greater religiosity. As countries become richer, religion becomes less central to people's lives and they lose a sense of meaning in life.

"Thus far, the wealth of nations has been almost always associated with longevity, health, happiness, or life satisfaction," explains psychological scientist Shigehiro Oishi of the University of Virginia. "Given that meaning in life is an important aspect of overall well-being, we wanted to look more carefully at differential patterns, correlates, and predictors for meaning in life."

Oishi and colleague Ed Diener of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign investigated life satisfaction, meaning, and well-being by examining data from the 2007 Gallup World Poll, a large-scale survey of over 140,000 participants from 132 countries. In addition to answering a basic life satisfaction question, participants were asked: "Do you feel your life has an important purpose or meaning?" and "Is religion an important part of your daily life?"

The data revealed some unexpected trends:

"Among Americans, those who are high in life satisfaction are also high in meaning in life," says Oishi. "But when we looked at the societal level of analysis, we found a completely different pattern of the association between meaning in life and life satisfaction."

When looking across many countries, Oishi and Diener found that people in wealthier nations were more educated, had fewer children, and expressed more individualistic attitudes compared to those in poorer countries – all factors that were associated with higher [life satisfaction](#) but a significantly lower sense of meaning in life.

The data suggest that religiosity may play an important role: Residents of wealthier nations, where religiosity is lower, reported less meaning in life and had higher suicide rates than [poorer countries](#).

According to the researchers, religion may provide meaning in life to the extent that it helps people to overcome personal difficulty and cope with the struggles of working to survive in poor economic conditions:

"Religion gives a system that connects daily experiences with the coherent whole and a general structure to one's life...and plays a critical role in constructing meaning out of extreme hardship," the researchers write.

Oishi and Diener hope to replicate these findings using more comprehensive measures of meaning and religiosity, and are interested in following countries over time to track whether economic prosperity gives rise to less [religiosity](#) and less meaning in life.

More information: [pss.sagepub.com/content/early/ .../97613507286.abstract](https://pss.sagepub.com/content/early/.../97613507286.abstract)

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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