

**Is Knowing Who You “Really Are” Connected to Feeling Like Life Has Meaning?  
Perceived True Self Knowledge and Feelings of Purpose, Mattering, and Comprehension**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this research is to study the connection between ease of true self-knowledge and meaning in life, with an updated measure used to understand meaning in life. The Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale (MEMS) uses a newly developed, three faceted idea of meaning in life that includes subconstructs of mattering, comprehension, and purpose in its conception of meaning. The participants will consist of Bates College students of all four class years who will take an online Qualtrics survey. The survey will replicate the measure used in Schlegel et al. (2011) Study 2 to evaluate participants' ease of true self-knowledge but will use the MEMS to study meaning in life rather than the Meaning in Life Questionnaire that has been used in past research. The study will also control for overlap between true self-knowledge and actual self-knowledge, positive affect and negative affect, measured by the Scale of Positive and Negative Experiences, and self-esteem, measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. I expect that ease of true self-knowledge will significantly correlate with all the subconstructs of meaning in life, but ease of true self-knowledge will significantly predict only comprehension when the other predictors are included in a hierarchical regression. Implications for the study of meaning in life will be discussed.

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Figuring out who one is in the world is a common part of human existence. Inherent to this search is the notion that we have a *true self*. The idea that human beings have a true self that is something that differs from who they are day to day has been around since 350 BCE when Aristotle said that the highest form of human excellence could be reached when one lives their life in truth with their spirit, also known as eudaimonia (Johnston, 1997; Schlegel et al., 2009). The true self is defined by Schlegel et al. (2011) as, “who a person really is, regardless of their outward behavior” (p. 745), while the actual self is defined as, “who you are around most people, even if this isn’t who you really are” (p. 747). Existing research on self-reported true self-awareness has found that it is related to higher self-esteem, self-actualization, vitality, mindfulness, active coping, and decreased defensiveness (Harter, 1992; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Lakey et al., 2008 as cited by Schlegel et al., 2011)

Meaning in life is a complex construct, and so far, the field of psychology has created and used ambiguous definitions and measurements for it. Recent work on meaning in life studies have found that there are actually three facets to meaning in life. These three facets are purpose; comprehension, which is also referred to as coherence; and mattering, also known as significance. Mattering and significance refer to having a sense that life has inherent value and is about having a life worth living (Martela & Steger, 2016). Purpose refers to having a direction in life and feeling like you have a sense of core goals and aims (Martela & Steger, 2016). Coherence and comprehensibility refer to one’s life making sense (Martela & Steger, 2016). Researchers such as Martela and Steger (2016) and George and Park (2017) have found that the three facets of meaning describe different dimensions of the human experience. For the purpose

of the current study, I will use the definition for meaning in life that was created by King et al. (2006, p. 180):

“Lives may be experienced as meaningful when [1] they are felt to have significance beyond the trivial or momentary, [2] to have purpose, or [3] to have a coherence that transcends chaos.”

Some researchers have been interested in the relationship between meaning in life and the concept of the true self. Study 2 from Schlegel et al. (2011) measured the association between subjective ease of thinking about words that are associated with one’s true self and meaning in life and found that there is a significant relationship between ease of true self-knowledge and meaning in life. They predicted and found that subjective ease of generating words that were associated with the true self could predict meaning in life. This study, along with other previous research on this subject have used unidimensional measures for meaning in life, such as the Presence subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) by Steger et al. (2006) to measure the existence of meaning in individuals’ lives. New research on measurement methods of meaning in life have found that unidimensional measures conflate the different facets of meaning with each other (George & Park, 2017). Another limitation of many existing measures of meaning is that they use the term “meaning” in the scale items, which leaves it up to the participants to determine what meaning in life means (George & Park, 2017). For example, the first item in the MLQ is “I understand my life’s meaning.” (Steger et al., 2006).

An updated meaning in life measurement, known as the Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale (MEMS), has been found to have precision over pre-existing measures of meaning in life because it includes the three subconstructs of meaning in life as different facets within the measure. Researchers like Martela and Steger (2016) and George and Park (2017)

have concluded that MEMS is more conceptually precise than measurements of meaning that have been used in the past. The researchers stated that it is important to utilize this measurement for current and future research on meaning in life because it separates the three facets of meaning that are often conflated (Martela & Steger, 2016; George & Park, 2017).

The current study is an adapted replication of the second study in Schlegel et al. (2011) on ease of true self-knowledge and meaning in life, as it utilizes an updated measure used to study meaning in life. Schlegel et al. (2009) used the Presence subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ). The current study uses the Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale under the same premise of the Schlegel et al. (2011) study to see if there are any differences in the relationship between ease of true self-knowledge and the three facets of meaning in life. My first hypothesis was that ease of true self-knowledge would correlate positively with all three facets of meaning. That is, having easy access to who one truly is should relate to thinking one's life makes sense, that one has purpose, and that one's life is significant.

I will also conduct three hierarchical regressions using ease of true self-knowledge to predict each of the three subconstructs of meaning while controlling for other variables that have known relationships to meaning in life. Self-esteem and positive and negative affect have been found to be associated with meaning in life (Costin & Vignoles, 2020; King et al., 2006) and thus controlling for these variables will allow me to find out if ease of true self-knowledge relates to meaning in life over and beyond these other constructs. I also controlled for ease of actual self-knowledge, and the amount of overlap between true and actual self-knowledge, following the approach of Schlegel et al. (2011). I expected to find that ease of true self-knowledge would predict comprehension, over and above the effect of the control variables, because comprehension and coherence refer to having an understanding of and making sense of one's life

and the things that happen in it (Martela & Steger, 2016). Having a sense of who one truly is can help individuals have a sense of comprehension in their lives. I had less firm predictions regarding mattering and purpose. Ease of true self-knowledge could predict mattering above and beyond the other variables because part of understanding who one truly is may lead one to have a sense that they are unique and special, and this sentiment would lend one to believe that their life is of significance. Regarding purpose, one can feel like they have a good sense of who they truly are and still feel a sense of aimlessness and lack of purpose in their life, so it is an open question if ease of true self-knowledge would predict purpose after controlling for the other variables.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The research sample will include 100 undergraduate college students from Bates College, a small liberal arts college in the Northeastern portion of the United States with about 1,800 students. The sample will be generated through email listservs and Psychology 101 students that will be incentivized with course credit to participate in the survey.

### **Materials**

To measure ease of true self-knowledge, the survey will include a research method used by Schlegel et al. (2009). The same definitions of true self and actual self used in the Schlegel et al. (2009, p. 748) study will also be used in this study. The true self-definition will be as follows:

“Your true self is who you believe you really are. Specifically, we’d like you to think about the characteristics, roles or attributes that define who you really are—even if those characteristics are different than how you sometimes act in your daily life.”

The actual self-definition will be as follows:

“Your actual self is who you are in your daily life. Specifically, we’d like you to think about the characteristics, roles or attributes that define who you are in your daily life—even if those characteristics are different than who you really are.”

Participants will be asked to generate a list of 6 words to describe both their true and actual selves (12 words total). To analyze actual self and ease of true self knowledge, the participants will be asked two questions immediately after making each list. The first question will ask them how easy it was to generate that list and the other will ask how difficult it was to generate the list (the question asking about level of difficulty will be recoded so that higher scores indicated more ease). They will be rated on a 7-point scale ranging from *extremely easy* to *extremely difficult*. The average of these two ease measures will serve as the measure of ease of self-knowledge for the actual self and true self. They are referred to as true self ease and actual self ease. A coder will then analyze how many matching or nearly matching words there are in each participant’s lists. Words will be marked as matching if they are identical, nearly identical, or if they were listed as synonyms in the Collins American Thesaurus, an online thesaurus. The coder will keep track of the number of words (out of 6 words in each list) that overlap for each participant. The degree of overlap will be analyzed in order to control for conflation of the true self and actual self. This is done to ensure that participants have separate self-concepts for their true self and actual self. For example, a person with a completely separate self-concept would have 6 words describing their true self that are all different from the 6 words that they used to describe their actual self. Someone with completely overlapping self-concepts would use the same or a very similar set of 6 words to describe their true self and actual self. Another reason the degree of overlap will be analyzed is because the degree of overlap can be related to the ease of self-

description. By controlling for the shared variance between self-description ease and true and actual self overlap, I will be better able to analyze perceived self-knowledge.

The Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale (MEMS) will be used as a basis for the measure of meaning in life in the current survey. The MEMS includes three subconstructs of meaning: comprehension, purpose, and mattering. The 15 statement MEMS will be adapted to include two additional reverse-phrased items used by Costin and Vignoles (2020) in order to create a measure with a sufficient number of reverse-phrased items to ensure that acquiescent response styles are controlled for (Costin & Vignoles, 2020). The MEMS already has a reverse-phrased item that pertains to mattering, but no reverse-phrased items for comprehension or purpose. Sample items for comprehension include “My life makes sense” and the reverse-phrased sample item, “My life feels like a sequence of unconnected events”. Sample items for purpose, the second being the reverse-phrased item, include “I have certain life goals that compel me to keep going” and “I don’t know what I am trying to accomplish in life”. Sample items for mattering include “Even considering how big the universe is, I can say that my life matters” and “There is nothing special about my existence”. Participants will respond using the scale 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 7 (*very strongly agree*).

Participants will then be given the Scale of Positive and Negative Affect (SPANE), which assesses subjective feelings of well-being and ill-being in order to control for any mood effects on meaning (Diener et al., 2009; Diener et al., 2010). It is a commonly used measure to study positive affect and negative affect. The scale asks about the amount of time in the last four weeks that the positive or negative experiences and feelings occurred (Diener et al., 2010). It was created on a 5-point scale but was adapted to a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*very rarely or never*) to 7 (*very often or always*) to keep the response scales all on seven points (Diener et al.,

2010). Participants will rate how often they felt 6 positive mood adjectives (e.g., *happy, joyful, pleasant*) and 6 negative mood adjectives (e.g., *sad, afraid, angry*).

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) measure, created by Rosenberg (1965) measures feelings of self-worth and self-acceptance. It will be used in this survey to evaluate self-esteem and to control for the possibility that thinking about the true self may enhance self-worth, and in turn influence meaning in life. There are 10 items on the scale, 5 of which are reverse-phrased. An example of an item on the scale is, “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”. A 7-point scale will be used to measure the RSES that ranges from *very strongly disagree* to *very strongly agree*.

### **Procedure**

The survey for this research study will be conducted on Qualtrics, an online survey platform. Participants will be told that they are participating in a study that is evaluating personality types in order to conceal the true nature of the study. Informed consent will be obtained from each of the participants, and they will be told that they could discontinue participation in the study at any time. The participants will then be given the measure of ease of true self-knowledge from Schlegel et al. (2009) with the order of true self and actual self questions randomized in order to control for any order effects. This will be followed by the MEMS, in which the order of mattering, comprehension, and purpose subscales will be randomized. Next, participants will be given the SPANE and RSES scales. Demographic questions such as age, gender identification, and ethnic identification will be asked following all of the scales. Afterwards, participants will be given a question asking, “What do you think this study was about?” in order to check the effectiveness of the deception. Finally, the participants will be debriefed about the deception used in this study and will be told that the study actually

evaluates the relationship between ease of true self-knowledge and meaning in life. Participants will be thanked for their participation and then told how to receive compensation in the form of course extra credit for psychology classes.

### **Results**

Responses from the survey will be analyzed using SPSS, a statistical analysis software system. I will conduct bivariate correlations of all study variables. I will analyze the correlations between true self ease, actual self ease, the overlap variable, and meaning in life variables, as these were all positively correlated in the Schlegel et al. (2011) study. Next, three hierarchical regression equations will be conducted with true self ease as the predictor variable. All other variables (actual self ease, true self-actual self overlap, positive affect, negative affect, and self-esteem) will be used as control variables. The outcomes of interest are the comprehension, purpose, and mattering subscales of the MEMS. I will evaluate if true self ease is still a significant predictor of meaning in life for all three facets of meaning in life, above the effects of the other variables. I predict that true self ease will be positively correlated with all three facets of meaning. For the regressions, I predict that true self ease will significantly predict comprehension (and perhaps mattering) above and beyond the effect of the other predictors.

### **Discussion**

True self-knowledge contributes to individual well-being (Schlegel et al., 2009), and feeling like one's life is meaningful has been found to be linked to many psychological and physical benefits (Costin & Vignoles, 2020). If ease of true self-knowledge and feeling like you are living a meaningful life have been found to have such a positive effect on the overall wellness of humans, it is a deeply important finding to investigate the intricacies of. New approaches to meaning in life emphasize the multifaceted nature of this construct (Martela &

Steger, 2016). The results of this study will further our knowledge of the differential levels of importance that feeling like one knows their true self has on the three subsets of meaning. This study will also further the psychology field's knowledge of the potential benefits of using a multidimensional approach to studying meaning in life.

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