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By Kenia Cristiana de Lima Alencar & Marta Helena de Freitas

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Keywords: *existential vacuum, meaning of life, mental health, psychology, qualitative approach, logotherapy, psychotherapy, spirituality, religiosity, healthcare.*

GJHSS-H Classification: *LCC: BF698*

UNVEILINGTHEDEPTHSOFEXISTENTIALINQUIRYAQUALITATIVEEXAMINATIONOFPSYCHOLOGICALLITERATURE20002023

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Kenia Cristiana de Lima Alencar [α] & Marta Helena de Freitas [σ]

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Results: Of the 264 articles selected in Part 1, 191 quantitative articles were excluded, leaving 73 articles with a qualitative or mixed approach, initially classified as follows: 46 theoretical/qualitative, 17 empirical/qualitative, 7 mixed and 3 interventions. The most prominent aspects covered were: logotherapy, as the theoretical framework adopted in the articles; the context of healthcare, as the study target; the study of contemporary man as the audience, the concept of meaning of life was more cited and explored in the articles than the concept of existential vacuum, involving thematic categories more focused on this construct. Notwithstanding, this concept exhibited less variation in denominations (8 resulting and 5 subcategories), while existential vacuum showed greater heterogeneity (19 different expressions). The importance is highlighted of the concept of meaning of life to psychotherapy and its mediating role between religiosity/spirituality and positive aspects of life.

Keywords: existential vacuum, meaning of life, mental health, psychology, qualitative approach, logotherapy, psychotherapy, spirituality, religiosity, healthcare.

I. Introduction

The topic of existential vacuum and meaning of life, the target of preoccupation about human existence, and which was once the subject of the study of philosophy, has gained prominence in scientific discussions over the last two decades, as was evidenced in the earlier study "Exploring Existential Questions: A Comprehensive Review of Psychological Literature (2000-2023) – Part1" (Alencar & Freitas, 2023).

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The milestone of the Covid-19 pandemic was a catalyst and driver of the investigations into these themes, when man got scared, faced with the breadth and magnitude of human finitude, revealing sentiments of anxiety and despair given such an uncertain and menacing context. This prompted a large-scale search about the dimension of meaning and existence, resulting in a large number of scientific productions on the theme, with an emphasis on the quantitative approach as it was necessary to measure the existential state of contemporary man faced with a global crisis of such enormity (Alencar & Freitas, 2023).

This was redolent of the manifesto delivered by Edmund Husserl (2002) in his "Crisis of European Humanity and Philosophy", foreseeing the present-day issues with the crisis of meaning. Similar questions prevailed in his time, when Husserl stated that the modern sciences had distanced themselves from the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) and the problems of humanity, losing humanity's sense of meaning. In the quest for absolute truth, this science reduced the world to plain facts, only concerned with quantifying and measuring it, becoming strictly objectivist, obliterating subjectivity and the notion of meaning. Thus, the job of Husserl's phenomenology was to study the significance of experiences, in other words, the meaning of human life. This philosophy inspires and directly supports the proposal of the present study, which is to investigate how contemporary psychology dealt with the study of existential questions, unveiling its implications for the significance of life experiences. The philosopher questioned the sovereignty of the natural sciences (explanatory in nature and a description of laws) over the sciences of the spirit (sympathetic, historical, individual and social in nature), as if they were distinct, disjointed objects, as the scientific world only edifies itself based on its surroundings (*Lebensumwelt)*. His short essay, produced in 1935, and entitled the Crisis of Humanity, is reverberating 88 years later with the advent of new crises: the Covid-19 pandemic, which extrapolated the level of the *physis* and became humanitarian, and the level of wars, which returned to the theater of Europe and the Middle East, snuffing out so many lives. In other words, in his time, Husserl was already warning of the importance that the theme of the meaning of life was rekindling for an understanding of

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the essence of the spirit and reflections on the soul and, consequently, put in check the need for the completeness of psychology. In this way, it has become necessary to consider not only the rationality of the *logos,* understood as reason and analytical discourse, but also the creative activity of the spirit, understood to be esthetic and emotional expression, the subjectivism, and the *mythos*, conceived as sensitivity, a synthetic, emotive and narrative discourse.

The present study focuses on the existential questions addressed in qualitative studies arising from a prior meta-analysis of the scientific output in psychology (Alencar & Freitas, 2023) on the topic in question, between 2000 and 2023. As such, the main aim is to understand how contemporary Psychology has addressed the topics of *existential vacuum* and *meaning of life* over the last two decades, observing two fundamental axes. The first being horizontal in nature, which follows on from the extension study and whose principal results have already been described in the previous article, including a quantitative analysis of the following variables: a) year of publication; b) theoretical approach; c) context; d) target audience. The second is vertical in nature, proposing to delve deeper into the issues, including a qualitative analysis of the following variables: e) conceptual categories, and f) thematic categories, highlighting the relationships or implications of existential questions in psychotherapy and/or the topics of religiosity and spirituality.–This last aspect is justified by the observance, in the present day, of a strong tendency to associate the concept of spirituality with the movement that is searching for existential meaning (Freitas, 2024; Koenig et al., 2024; Freitas, Leal & Nwora, 2022), at the same time that the role of religion is being increasingly questioned as to whether or not it is a driver of meaning (Krok, 2015; Villani et al, 2019; Jung, 2015; Zarzycka, Tychmanowicz & Krok, 2020). On the other hand, the integration of study and practice has, as recently indicated by Pargament (2023), characterized a kind of third wave in the evolution of the psychology of religion and spirituality, and in this is included, of course, psychotherapeutic practice.

As demonstrated in the first phase of this same study, reported in the previous article "Exploring Existential Questions: A Comprehensive Review of Psychological Literature (2000-2023) – Part 1" – a higher frequency of publications was found resulting from quantitative studies in Psychology in the contemporary world, unmasking the concern about quantifying and assessing the existential state of contemporary man. This in itself, in some way, already indicates what was, in a way, "prophesied" by Husserl in respect of what was once modern science, and its repercussions for the future. The motive force for the development of the present investigation is a study conducted by Alencar & Freitas which showed that the prevailing scientific paradigm in contemporary psychology favors the language of *logos,* understood to be objectivist, rationalist and mathematizable, focusing on a nomothetic investigation. Similarly, it indicated the need for qualitative investigations, affording direction to the present review for a better understanding of the existentialist issues, complementing rational discourse with idiographic investigations focusing on the specifics and the variety of the subjective world. On the other hand, Husserl's proposition dates back to the origins of this same scientific claim – the dichotomy between naturalistic objectivism and transcendental subjectivism, where the philosopher pointed to the need for science to broaden its field of vision to go beyond the role of the distant observer, but also to focus on things as they are and, consequently, for a better understanding of human problems. Thus, Husserl's phenomenology drives the current study, which not only seeks to extensively map existentialist questions but also aims to contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon, attempting to delve into its very nature. Hence the focus of the analysis presented here, to concentrate exclusively on theoretical and qualitative works found in the preliminary data survey.

As far as the importance of extension studies goes, in order to determine the scope and frequency of the phenomenon being studied, it has to be recognized, however, that strategies focusing on psychological naturalism and on objectivation of human experience are also not sufficient to handle the complexity of the topic in question. In other words, it is also necessary to characterize the study of intentional experiences in a quest to understand the nature of the phenomenon of the meaning of life and existential vacuum, so as to result in concrete measures for the mental healthcare of contemporary man. More than ever, this has become a necessity at times of acute crises, such as those that unfolded in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, or even the wars and terrorist actions we have witnessed over recent years. These crises assume particular characteristics within the context of the pragmatism and technicism of the philosophy of digital *dataism* (Han, 2018) and/or the superficial nature of liquid modernity (Baumann, 2004). Therefore, it has become essential to delve deeper into qualitative or mixed-method studies, not only for the purpose of mapping but also to understand how contemporary psychology has appropriated this primordial question of existence, the purpose of which is elaborated upon in this article.

Seeing as the meaning of life and/or existential vacuum are primordial to the care of mental health, through their relationship with the impulsion for human life and/or psychic suffering (and its respective elaboration), a brief historical and conceptual description of both constructs is initially presented here.

Up until the postwar periods (first and second world wars), when discussions about the constitution of man began anew, the ideas of vacuum and meaning

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were restricted to the domain of philosophy. (Vieira & Dias, 2021, p.2). Accordingly, it also starts to be incorporated by psychology, in particular through the humanist movement that rose up against the prevailing models, namely behaviorism and psychoanalysis (Ponte & Souza, 2011), respectively indicated as mechanistic, deterministic and detractors of the human values of freedom and choice. The conceptions of this movement can, for example, be seen in the existentialist humanism of Rollo May who, in his work entitled 'Psychology and the Human Dilemma", originally published in 1967, declared that man's fundamental problem in the mid 20th century was precisely existential vacuum, described as a sensation of the incapacity to do anything meaningful for oneself or for the world. Given this perspective, he sought to characterize the human being as a free being, responsible for his own actions, involved in a psychology that would help to understand and elaborate the crisis of meaning and the respective dilemma between subject and object, a paradox inherent to the human condition (May, 1953/1994).

Also from a humanist, existential and phenomenological perspective, on the other side of the coin, on the continent of Europe, the postwar period also witnessed the emergence of the conception of Viktor Frankl (1946/2019), one of the most researched agents in the present day, who places emphasis on the side of presence, directing his theory towards the study of the meaning of life, through which he develops the psychotherapeutic approach of logotherapy.

In historical and philosophical terms, the "meaning of life" construct was originally addressed in philosophy, presented in the perspective of Friedrich Nietzsche (1872/2019), as the desire for power, in other words, the desire to live life. Meanwhile, psychology couched it as a desire for pleasure, from the Freudian point of view (Freud, 1929/ 1996), signifying the search for pleasure and satisfaction of our needs. Alfred Adler, an Austrian psychologist, coined the term *desire for power* (1932/2010), as a search for superiority and the realization of all human potential. From the point of view of Viktor Frankl (1946/2019), however, it was denominated *desire for meaning* (Frankl, 1969/1988), which accompanies man through the different stages of life and includes the ultimate meaning of transcendence. It was through the psychotherapeutic contributions of this Viennese psychologist that his study came to prominence, being widely disseminated and researched. Based on his experience of life in nazi concentration camps, Frankl (1969/1988) developed a method of therapy called *logotherapy,* focusing on that which gives meaning to human existence.

Also in the sphere of cognitive psychology, in the second half of the 20th century, the notion of "meaning-making" started to gain visibility. The expression was initially employed by Postman and Weingartner (1969) – as the title of a chapter in a book where they adopted a critical perspective with regard to the educational process – to refer to knowledge as something actively created by people based on the way they experience new situations and incorporate new information into their previous knowledge, allowing them to construct and attribute meanings to life events, to relationships and to themselves. Some of the psychologists involved in the development, inspired by the Piagetian perspective, like Kegan, Robert (1980) for instance, continued using this expression which ended up becoming a key concept for many subsequent texts in clinical psychology and development. And as demonstrated in a survey conducted by Park, Crystal (2010), the aforementioned term has gained over the years a diverse theoretical focus, especially in the area of the so-called positive psychology.

However, conceptually, it is necessary to clarify the two expressions used to refer to meaning, as follows: *meaning in life* and *meaning of life*. Notwithstanding the similar roots, the two expressions mean something different (Aquino, 2021; Fuhrer et al., 2023). The former refers to the meaning that a person acquires throughout life or to how much meaning he/she may experience in their own lives, while the latter refers to a wider ranging concept, alluding to the significance of life as a whole, as well as the significance of human existence. Despite the different acceptations, both expressions were the subject of study in this work since, whether privately or universally, they signal the concept of meaning.

Consequently, it can be seen that *existential vacuum* and *meaning of life* are phenomena that go hand in glove, given that the former refers to the perspective of absence while the latter to the perspective of presence. Both constructs were and continue to be explored in psychology and, historically, as was mentioned above, emphasis was sometimes placed on the side of absence, as in the humanist psychology of Rollo May (1953/1994), and on other occasions the role of presence was emphasized, as noted in the logotherapy of Viktor Frankl (1946/2019) and, more recently, addressed as an essential cognitive function that accompanies human development, as seen in cognitive and/or positive psychology (Kegan, 1980; Park, 2010).

By way of an historical, conceptual and philosophical contextualization of the briefly presented existential questions, in solidarity with the Husserl's proposition, we shall explore *existential vacuum* and *meaning of life* in the upcoming sections of this article. In the same way that the malaise of our era has recently been in evidence, primarily due to the pandemic crisis and the advent of successive wars, the depth of the existentialist investigation in present-day psychology-related literature is revealed.

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II. Method

This systematic review is the result of a bibliographic search via the concept of existential vacuum, meaning of life and their correlates, carried out on five databases: CAPES Periodicals Portal, APA PsycArticles, SCOPUS, SCIELO, and PePSIC, as described in detail in the previous article: Existential vacuum and meaning of life – Part 1 (Alencar & Freitas, 2023).

The CAPES portal was chosen as the database for this study on account of its national and international coverage. It is the go-to reference for scientific studies in Brazil as well as being a portal that encompasses a broader range of databases, and is widely used in the academic milieu in the country. APA PsycArticles is a database specific to psychology and with international coverage, offering public articles available in full, and a go-to reference for the area of psychology in Brazil. SCOPUS is a database with international coverage and is regarded as the largest database for abstracts and citations in peer-reviewed literature and also a reference in Brazil and, along with SCIELO, is included in the criterion for *Qualis* rating (quality rating adopted in Brazil for scientific journals), grade A1 (highest quality, international level of excellence); and PePSIC, which covers the whole of Latin America, including Brazil, with content specific to the area of psychology, also widely disseminated throughout the academic milieu. So, the combination of these databases provides a broad scope in scientific research, enabling the identification of scientific publications, both regionally and internationally, particularly in the field of psychology.

In the second phase, the continuity of the meta-analysis was outlined. In terms of eligibility criteria, only studies employing a qualitative or mixed-methods approach were considered, using either theoretical or empirical procedures, as exhibited in Table 1. For the qualitative approach, naturistic studies were considered that seek an understanding of the phenomenon. In the study's Method, the data collection instruments were analyzed, such as interviews (unstructured, structured or semi-structured), observation, ethnography, among others. In addition, analytical methods were employed such as the phenomenology of Amedeu Giogi; content analysis; discourse analysis, and so on (*e.g.*, Olofsson et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the mixed-methods approach considered studies that combine the qualitative and quantitative approaches, seeking not only to understand the phenomenon but also to quantify it in order to understand its extent and its reality. This study method makes use of data collection and analysis tools that may involve both psychometric instruments, such as semi-structured surveys, and also the use of statistical and content analysis (*e.g.,* Manrique, 2011). In addition, in the theoretical study process, studies were considered that were based on a bibliographic and documentary survey, with analysis of theories, thematic and conceptual discussions, literature reviews, systematic and integrative reviews, etc. (*e.g.*, Martinez-Calderon et al., 2023). The procedure for the empirical study involved articles based on facts that were either observable or obtained through experiments or interventions (*e.g.*, Vähäkangas et al., 2021).

In the data extraction process, these criteria were identified through a reading of the abstract, introduction and method of each study, highlighting the aim of the study and the data collection and analysis tools employed. An example of this process is shown below, in Table 1. It should be stressed that, in the article selection process, in order to minimize possible bias in the study, the triage was performed by the first-named author under the supervision of the second-named author. In the event of disagreement, the selected articles were referred to a third arbiter.

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Table 1: Data Extraction

Year	Title of Article	Abstract	Aims	Method / Data collection and analysis tools	Reference
Qualitative Approach					
2021	Older migrants' experience of existential loneliness	Background: With rapidly ageing population worldwide, loneliness among older adults is becoming a global issue. Older migrants are considered being a vulnerable population and ethical issues are often raised in care for elderly. A deeper sense of loneliness, existential loneliness is one aspect of loneliness also described as the ultimate loneliness. Making oneself understood or expressing emotions, have shown to be particularly challenging for older migrants which could lead to experience of existential loneliness. Ageing and being a migrant are potential triggers for experiencing existential loneliness. There appears to be, however, little known about being a migrant experiencing existential loneliness in old age. / Research design: Qualitative study. Participants and research context: Data were collected through interviews (n ¼ 15) with older migrants in Swedish nursing homes or senior citizen centres. A thematic analysis was performed to analyse the data..." *Keywords*: Experience; existential loneliness; interviews; migrants; older adults.	Aim: This study explored older migrants' experience of existential loneliness.	A qualitative descriptive study was performed to understand the experience of existential loneliness among older migrants. Data were collected through interviews 30 and analysed thematically using the method of Braun and Clarke.	Olofsson et al. (2021)
Mixed Approach					
2011	Description of the Meaning of Life in Delinquent Adolescents in the City of Medellin	The aim of this research was to compare the meaning of life's intensity in offender teenagers in Medellin city, Colombia. The methodology had a mixed descriptive design. The sample consisted of 44 young offenders who answered the Purpose In Life test (PIL), developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick, consisting of one party to collect quantitative and two other parties to collect qualitative information. The Results show a low rate of existential vacuum in the teens surveyed. The more time spent in a social rehabilitation institution, the greater the intensity of the meaning of life. The family (real and ideal) is important as a core value around which to build their sense of life. This suggests some grounds for thinking a model to explain the conclusions reached. It argues that the construct "meaning of life" has different levels of complexity that reflect various aspects mentioned below: the desire to live, aim or purpose of life that gives the proper orientation of each existence, the meaning that each one attributes to his life and his different values that govern it, and finally, the analysis of meaning in general. *Keywords:* Meaning of life, existential vacuum, Delinquent Adolescents.	The aim of this research was to compare the meaning of life's intensity in offender teenagers in Medellin city, Colombia.	The methodology had a mixed descriptive design. The sample consisted of 44 young offenders who answered the Purpose In Life Test (PIL), developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick, consisting of one party to collect quantitative and two other parties to collect qualitative information. In the quantitative part, (part A), the PIL test determines the degree of intensity of the meaning of life. Parts B and C are qualitative	Manrique (2011)
Theoretical Procedure					
2023	Meaning and purpose in life, happiness, and life satisfaction in cancer: Systematic review with meta-analysis	*Objective:* To summarize current evidence on the potential cross-sectional and longitudinal association between meaning or purpose in life and subjective happiness or life satisfaction among cancer patients. *Methods:* A systematic review with meta-analysis and meta-regression was conducted. CINAHL (via EBSCOhost), Embase, PubMed, and PsycINFO (via ProQuest) were searched from inception to 31 December 2022. In addition, manual searches were performed. The risk of bias in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies was assessed using the Joanna Briggs Institute Checklist for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies and the Quality in Prognosis Studies tool, respectively. Certainty in the evidence was judged using the Grading of Recommendations, Assessment, Development, and Evaluations approach. Meta-regressions and sensitivity analyses were performed to explore potential sources of heterogeneity. *Keywords*: cancer; happiness; life satisfaction; meaning in life; meta-analysis; purpose in life; spirituality; systematic review.	*Objective:* To summarize current evidence on the potential cross-sectional and longitudinal association between meaning or purpose in life and subjective happiness or life satisfaction among cancer patients.	A systematic review with meta-analysis and meta-regression	Martinez-Calderon et al. (2023)

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Empirical Procedure					
2021	The search for meaning in life through continuing and/or transforming the bond to a deceased spouse in late life.	Bereavement is an ongoing process of negotiation and meaning-making in which widows and widowers make sense of the changed nature of their relationship with their deceased spouse. We analyzed the experiences of meaning in life among older widows and widowers (aged 65+) using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; see Smith et al. in Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research, Sage, 2009), with the following question: How do widows and widowers search for meaning through continuing and/or transforming their bond to their deceased spouse? The results demonstrate that some of the widowed persons sought meaning through rituals or various means of after-death communication with their deceased spouses. Other participants transformed the bond, for example, through clearing out their deceased spouse's belongings or a process of reconciliation…" *Keywords:* Bereavement · Meaning in life · Continuing bond · Transforming bond ·Widowhood · Late life	The aim of the paper is to answer the following question: How do widows and widowers search for meaning through continuing and/or transforming their bond to their deceased spouse?	"Conducting the semi-structured interviews in pairs also enabled researchers to scope interdisciplinary aspects within one interview meeting. A guide was prepared to serve the needs of the multidisciplinary research team (theology, nursing, social sciences, and law)... To grasp the experiences linked to bereavement and meaning seeking in the midst of the grieving process, we chose a method designed for this purpose, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)."	Vähäkangas et al. (2021)

Table 2 outlines the study plan containing the variables investigated, both quantitatively and qualitatively. As far as the quantitative analysis is concerned, a descriptive appraisal of the data was performed, indicating extent, distribution and emerging trends of the variables under consideration, namely: year of publication, theoretical approach, context and target audience. For this phase, visual resources were used such as: flow diagram, column graph, bar chart and pizza graph, using Microsoft Excel.

Table 2: Variables Searched

Variables Searched		
Quantitative Analysis		
1	Year of publication	
2	Theoretical approach	
3	Context studies	
4	Target Audience	
Qualitative Analysis		
5	Concepts	
6	Topics	6.1 Theme of existential vacuum and meaning of life with religiosity and spirituality
		6.2 Themes of existential vacuum, meaning of life and their implications for Psychotherapy

In the qualitative analysis phase, conceptual categories were employed through a cataloguing of the concepts emanating from the articles, and thematic categories containing thematic nuclei. For the conceptual category, tables were created containing the conceptual definitions extracted from the articles in the form of direct citations. In the thematic categories, meanwhile, tables were employed with a set of initials identifying the topics, and extracts from the articles were presented in the form of direct citations in order to illustrate the themes addressed. Complementarily, as a thematic subitem, the topics of religiosity and spirituality were presented as well as psychotherapy, related to *existential vacuum* and *meaning of life*. Both tables contain a description of the absolute and relative frequencies of each item, using Excel tools, with the aim of ascertaining contemporary trends. In addition, for the conceptual and thematic categories, the word cloud resource was employed, provided by the Prezi software application.

The variables displayed in Table 2 were considered relevant to this review as they are in line with the study proposal, namely to obtain an understanding of how contemporary psychology has handled existential questions. It is sought, therefore, to determine which approach has stood out over time, how it dealt with the issues and its efficiency and pertinence. Moreover, seeking to understand the extent of the phenomenon, considering the context in which it was investigated and the population that took part in the study, potentially unveiling a more unilateral or heterogeneous character in the studies conducted. In addition, how the concepts possess dynamic attributes, changing over time and with the setting, it has become essential to analyze the definitions and the enhancements effectuated in this period. Special

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attention is drawn to the constructs of *meaning of life* and *existential vacuum*, considering their lexical ambiguity and diversity of labels. The identification of categories enables a verification of the content emerging from these studies, potential patterns of meaning and trends present in terms of the treatment and destiny of these constructs.

III. Results

Of the total of 264 articles selected and analyzed in the first phase of the study (Part 1, Alencar & Freitas, 2023), 191 were excluded in this second phase, all of which had a quantitative approach. This left a total of 73 articles, distributed as follows: 46 theoretical/ qualitative articles, 17 empirical/qualitative, 7 mixed-method and 3 interventions, as can be seen in Figure 1, with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow diagram, adapted for this study.

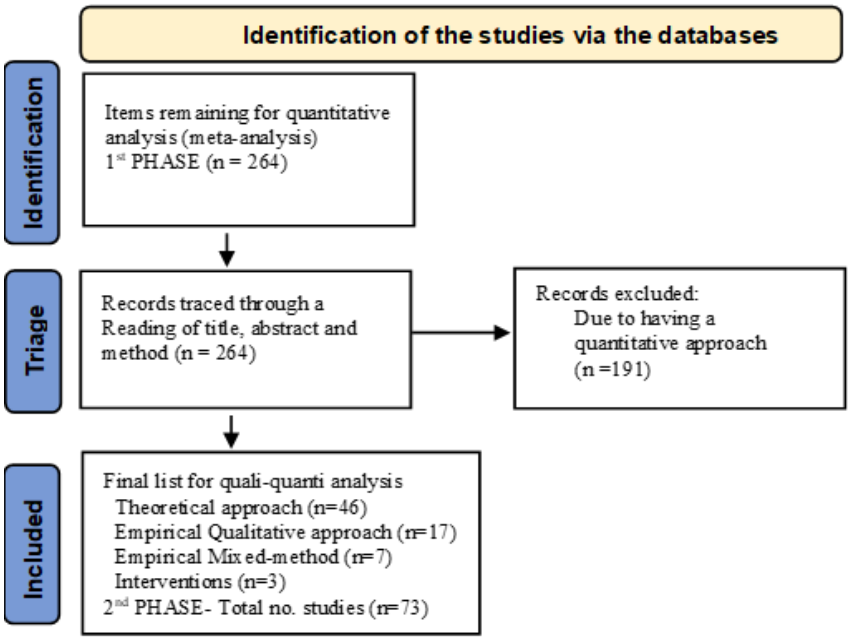


Figure 1: Flow Diagram – Procedures for Identification and Selection of Articles

NB. Model adapted from the PRISMA flow diagram. (Page et al., 2020).

a) Year of Publication

Figure 2 shows the evolution of the qualitative and mixed-method studies on this theme over the course of the period in question (2000-2023). 2021 was the highlight with 10 published articles, followed by 2018 with seven, and 2023 with six. It should be noted that the peak of publication occurred precisely during the Covid-19 pandemic.

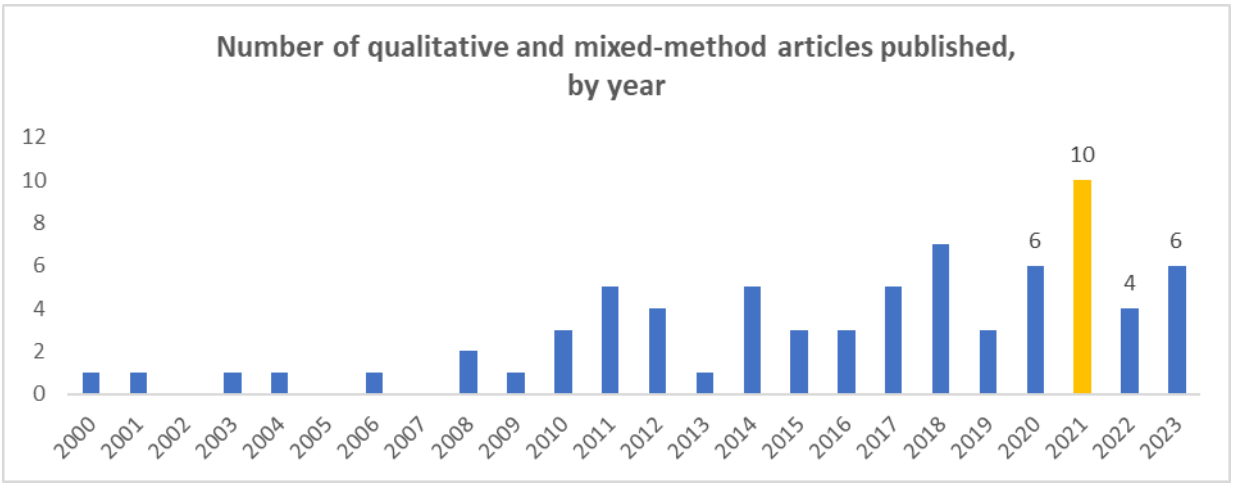


Figure 2: Distribution of global Publication of qualitative and mixed-method Articles, by year

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Figure 2a shows the distribution of the methodologies employed over the course of the 23 years (2000 to 2023), signaling a peak of production in 2021, with four theoretical articles, four empirical qualitative articles and one intervention. A greater constancy of theoretical publications can also be observed during this period as well as a concentration of empirical qualitative articles between 2019 and 2023, with an average of two articles a year.

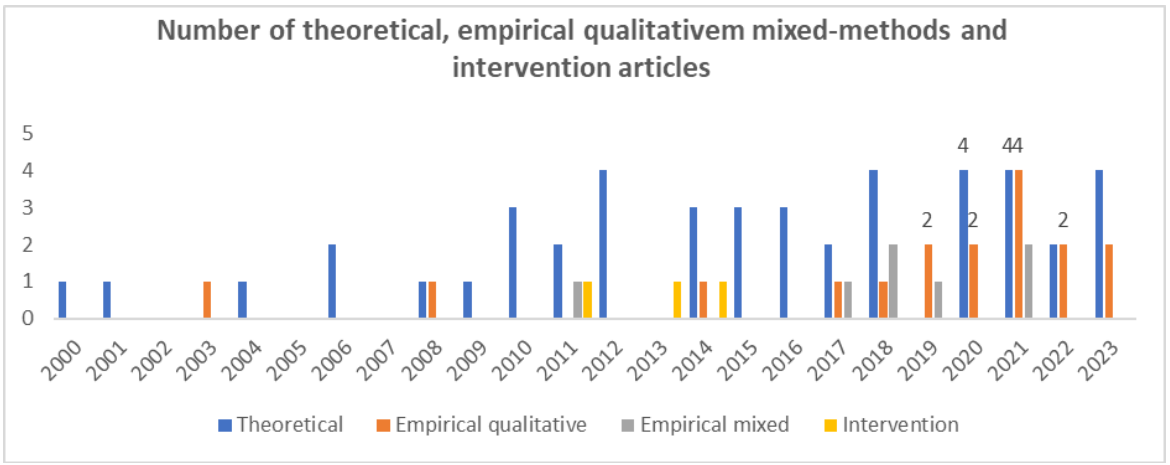


Figure 2a: Distribution of methodologies employed throughout the period of 23 years

b) Theoretical Framework

Regarding the theoretical framework adopted in studies about meaning of life and existential vacuum, logotherapy was predominant, accounting for 35% of the total number of articles. Existentialist approach and Phenomenology approach came next, representing 12% and 9% of studies, respectively. Then come Psychoanalysis and positive Psychology, each with 6% of the total, and humanistic approach and sociology come next, each with 4%. Then, Behavioral and Hermeneutic approaches come each with 3%. The remaining frameworks, such as the person-centered approach, interactional and genetic, ontology, systemic perspective, Jungian analytical, among others, are less frequent, with 1% of the total number of articles analyzed, as depicted in Figure 3.

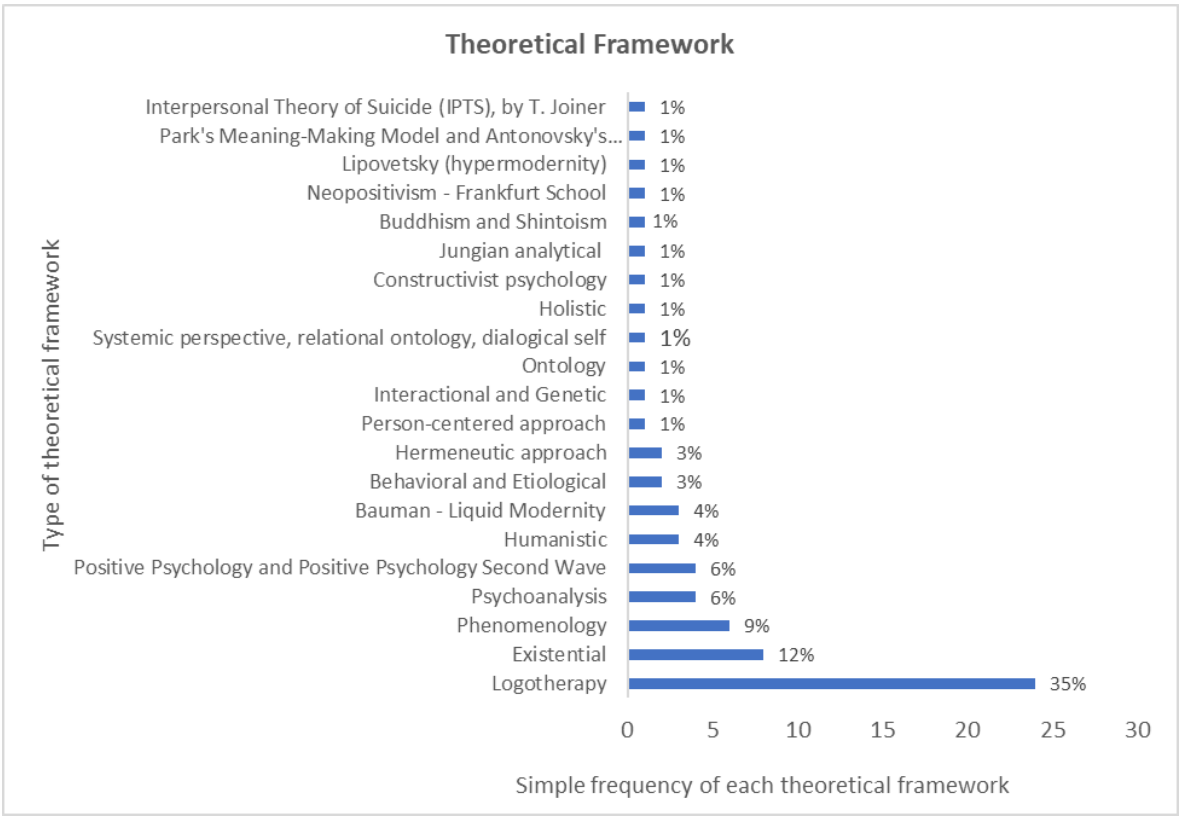


Figure 3: Graph of Frequency of Theoretical Framework Concepts Employed in the Articles

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c) Concepts Employed in the Articles

Tables 3 and 4 exhibit the principal conceptual categories that emerged from the selected articles. Table 3 is about the concept of meaning of life. Table 4 designates the concept of existential crisis. Each category is explained by one citation (column two), followed by the respective reference (column three). In addition, the absolute and relative frequencies (in relation to the total number of articles) are indicated in the columns Absolute Freq. and Relative Freq.

In view of the conceptual complexity and atomization surrounding the topic in question, for the designation of Table 3, the expression "meaning of life" was adopted rather than "meaning in life" considering that the former expression has a greater breadth of scope, encompassing existential meaning in a broader perspective.

Table 3: Conceptual Categories – Meaning of life

Meaning of Life						
	Categories		Example	Reference	Absolute Freq.	Relative Freq.
1	Meaning of life		" (...) the meaning of life, is something broader and, for this reason, it can only be understood when life fully unfolds, from conception to death." (p.1044)	Aquino, T. A. A. de. (2021).	36	52%
	Subcategories of Meaning of Life	1.1 Search for meaning	"(...) is about the motivation or direction that individuals develop to obtain Meaning of life." (p.3)	Vieira, G. P., & Dias, A. C. G. (2021).	4	6%
		1.2 Presence of meaning	"(...) is about understanding and identifying if individuals have a clear, defined meaning of life" (Steger et al., 2006). (p.3)	Vieira, G. P., & Dias, A. C. G. (2021).	4	6%
		1.3 Desire for meaning	"(...)refers to human beings' genuine and prime motivation which, if frustrated, can lead to illness, which underpins a science of curing." (p.1043)	Aquino, T. A. A. de. (2021).	10	14%
		1.4 Super-meaning	"(...) ultimate meaning, which encompasses the totality of existence. God as "the interlocutor of our most intimate soliloquies." (p.81)	Carrara, P. S. (2016).	2	3%
		1.5 Need for meaning	"Human need to search for harmony seemingly lost." (p.186)	Amatuzzi, Mauro Martins. (1999).	1	1.5%
2	Meaning in Life		"(...) relates to the meaning of the moment, as, latent in each situation, the human being may reveal a value (demands of the moment) through consciousness (*Gewissen*)." (p.1044)	Aquino, T. A. A. de. (2021).	3	4%
3	Meaning of the world		"(...) the meaning of the world (cosmos) would be beyond rational comprehension, penetrating the perspective of faith or intuition in the unconditional meaning of life." (p.1044)	Aquino, T. A. A. de. (2021).	1	1.5%
4	Desire for Pleasure		" (...) deals with the hedonist conception that preaches the principal that all living beings move towards pleasurable experiences and distances themselves from painful ones." (p.306)	Aquino et al. (2014).	3	4%

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5	Desire for Power	"conceives the desire for power (Nietzsche, 1996) as a guiding principle of existence. For this author, the nature of the being comes from the effort to exercise larger amounts of power. Adler (1931/1998) via the human being in relation to the social milieu and derived form this his desire for superiority." (p. 306)	Aquino et al. (2014).	3	4%
6	Construction of meaning of life (meaning-making model)	" the meaning of life construction model (Park & Folkman, 1997; Park, 2010, 2013) deals with the tools that people use to construct/ structure MoL when faced with stressful situations capable of causing a breach in the cohesion and meaning of their lives, not proposing a new definition for the concept."	Vieira & Dias, (2021).	1	1.5%
7	Maintenance of meaning of life (meaning-maintaining model)	"The meaning of life maintenance model proposed by Heine et al. (2006) assumes that people construct the meaning of their existence based on their expectations and learning about relations established with the environment, in other words, the world has meaning as long as it meets the expectations/beliefs that the individual nurtures about it (Heine et al., 2006; Proulx, 2013; Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012; Proulx, T., & Inzlicht, M. (2012).	Vieira & Dias, (2021).	1	1.5%
8	Terror management theory	"is not a theory about MoL as such, however it deals with the way in which people cope with the constant and imminent awareness of their own mortality, contributing to an understanding of MoL (Greenberg et al., 1986; Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., & Solomon, S. (1986)."	Vieira & Dias, (2021).	1	1.5%
			Total	69	100%

The table above sets out eight variations in denomination found in the articles with regard to the concept of meaning of life: meaning of life, meaning in life, meaning of world, desire for pleasure, desire for power, meaning-making, meaning-maintenance and terror management theory. The first two vary in terms of semantics, the former being more extensive, related to existence and totality, while the latter is more uncertain, related to moments in life. On the other hand, the last two terminologies possess a more immanent acceptation than the first two, with desire for pleasure being an expression coined by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1929/1996), and desire for power coming from the lexicon of Alfred Adler (1932/2010), or desire for power, as coined by philosopher Nietzsche (1872/2019). In addition, four subcategories of the main construct emerged that designate different stages of meaning of life, namely: desire for meaning, necessity, search, presence and super-meaning, the ultimate *telos* of the construct in question. An analysis of the citations extracted from the articles, and reproduced in column two to illustrate the definition relating to each expression, helps to underline one of the findings of this meta-analysis: the most frequently used expression by the authors was "meaning of life", with 52% of the results, followed by "desire for meaning", with 14%. The frequency of the other expressions was broadly similar, ranging from 1.5% to 6%.

Table 4 exhibits the conceptual categorization of the expression "crisis of meaning". As with Table 3, presented above, this term was employed to designate the aforementioned table as it was more comprehensive than those that focus on "absence" of meaning, which varies in degree and frequency throughout the texts read. Thus, the term "crisis" appeared to be more dynamic doing greater justice to the content of the group of texts analyzed.

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Table 4: Conceptual Categories – Crisis of Meaning

Crisis of Meaning					
Categories		Example	Reference	Absolute Freq.	Relative Freq.
1	Existential void	"(...) Thus, the existential vacuum, the sensation or anxiety that there is still something to be done and that nothing, that no action fully realizes man, is something intrinsic to his being. It is part of his *actus essendi*, his act of being and his act of existing." (p.392)	Pichler (2016).	14	25%
2	Anxiety	" (...) we may understand anxiety to be a symptom of the very human condition of the creature, reflecting on the condition of the frailty of his existence, thereby understanding "the self experience of the I as the infinite spirit even though, simultaneously connected to finitude, temporality, corporeality" (Garaventa, 2011, p.11)" (p.15)	Rosa & Pulino, (2020).	5	9%
3	Despair	(…) despair is a phenomenon of the spirit, something related to the eternal, and which, consequently, contains something eternal in its dialectics" (p.45)." "(...)Despair, contrary to what may be imagined, is not rare but rather "a completely universal phenomenon" (Kierkegaard, 2008, p.47). Despair does not live in those who recognize they are desperate, therefore. Even in those who do not recognize their despair, they are still desperate as it is inherent to the human condition." (p.11)	Rosa & Pulino, (2020).	1	2%
4	Existential loneliness	"(...) Existential loneliness may be understood as the immediate awareness of being fundamentally separated from other people and from the universe, principally through the experience of himself as mortal, or particularly when in crisis, experiencing not being treated (communicated with) at a profound human level (in other words, authentic), and usually experiencing, therefore, negative feelings, i.e. emotions, moods, such as sadness, hopelessness, regret, lack of meaning or anxiety." (p.5)	Bolmsjö et al. (2018).	13	23%
5	Demoralization	"Introduced for the first time in psychiatric literature by J. Frank, demoralization was defined as a specific set of symptoms arising from a persistent failure to deal with internal or external stress that a person and those close to that person expect he/she is capable of coping with. Its distinctive characteristics, not all of which need to be present in a single individual, include feelings of impotence, isolation and despair." (p.2 of 12)	Costanza et al. (2020).	2	4%
6	Existential crisis	"Existential crisis is a phenomenon characterized by the intensification of ruminant thoughts related to existence and inexistence (LEE 2008)." (p.231)	Elekes (2017).	1	2%
7	Profound boredom	"(...) profound boredom occupies the philosophical reflections of Heidegger as an affective hue characteristic of the culture in the world of technique." (p.931)	Dutra (2012).	2	4%

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8	Pathologies of emptiness	Pathologies of emptiness, unlike the qualifying categories of nosology, consist of ways of living typical of contemporary culture, heavily demarcated by a loss of imaginative capacity (pre-symbolic), which casts the individual into a kind of emptying of meaning and sensitivity, in which what prevails is only the void which cannot even finds words or images capable of expressing it. "(...) contemporary forms of falling sick, understood as different manifestations of the lack of existential meaning." (p.170)	Ratto (2015).	1	2%
9	Existential frustration	"Victor Frankl diagnosed post-modern man's psychological malaise as existential frustration." (p.66)	Carrara (2016).	4	7%
10	Absence of meaning	"Absence of Meaning in Life - Yalom (1980) states that there is no meaning inherent to life, beyond the meaning, objectives and values that a person creates for himself. Thus, the experience of living a full life with purpose assumes a strong narrative vision of himself and a sense of direction (Frankl, 1959)." (p.5)	Liu et al. (2023)	1	2%
11	Existential boredom	"Moreover, the difference should be stressed between the boredom of common sense – the situational – and existential boredom. The former is the state of being bored and blaming another for the difficulty of action. The latter is being bored and is related to existential vacuum." (p.164)	Appel-Silva et al. (2006).	1	2%
12	Existential vacuum	"The sensation of absence of meaning and emptiness, denominated "existential vacuum" by Frankl, appears frequently in consulting rooms. For Frankl (1989, p. 26) "there are patients who go to see the psychiatrist because they have doubts about the meaning of life or because they already despaired of finding, in general, a meaning for life". (p.156)	Silveira et al. (2015).	2	4%
13	Noogenic neurosis	"The existential vacuum does not fit the concept of psychogenic neurosis. It does not have its origins in intrapsychic problems. Nor does it present as an effect of neurosis. Victor Frankl characterizes it as noogenic neurosis, different from what classic psychoanalysis defines as neurosis. It arises out of moral or ethical problems about existential issues." (p.70)	Carrara, P. S. (2016).	4	7%
14	Fertile void	"Van Dusen (1977) presents comparisons between Western and Oriental cultures, stating that, in the Orient, the void is comfortable and familiar, capable of having a maximum value in itself and making productivity possible, in contrast with the Western world in which the empty space means wastefulness – unless it is filled with actions, since it is very common in Western society to also fill these spaces with objects or even allow the actions of the objects fill the spaces of individuals. The author goes on to say: "The void is the center and the heart of therapeutic change" (p. 165)	Appel-Silva et al. (2006).	1	2%
15	Void	"The poet, in his eternal quest for the ideal object, suggests an encounter with the void. We are talking about an emptiness that can be creative, expansive and transforming." (p.192)	Carneiro & Abritta (2008).	1	2%
16	Unsupported loneliness	"(...) Vieira defines unprotected loneliness as "that which makes me feel I'm not alone, though abandoned, scared, phobic, empty and ready to collapse into the dimension of human, psychic survival (...)" (p.193)	Carneiro & Abritta (2008).	1	2%

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17	Situational boredom	"is the state of being bored and blaming another for the difficulty of action."	Fukumitsu et al. (2012).	1	2%
18	Anthropological vacuum	"(...) it becomes necessary to ascertain two components: the anthropological and the social. The anthropological component is the loss of meaning, in other words, the things that filled the day-to-day of individuals start crumbling and life begins to dismantle."	Fukumitsu et al. (2012).	1	2%
19	Social vacuum	"Meanwhile, the sociological component of the problem of the emptiness of human life is expressed through the stripping away of interpersonal relationships, which causes personal ties between men to disappear. This emptying provokes the exclusion of the other and further exacerbates the individualism preached by contemporary society (Giovanetti, 2002)."	Fukumitsu et al. (2012).	1	2%
			Total	57	100%

The above table presents the variations in terminology used by authors to refer to the concept of crisis of meaning. A total of 19 variations were noted that refer to how the different degrees or situations where symptoms of vacuum or of a threat to the meaning of life are experienced, e.g. feelings of anxiety, despair, loneliness, frustration, boredom and demoralization (as a group of negative feelings); existential vacuum or void, and absence; pathological conditions such as crisis, neurosis and pathologies in general. In addition, two expressions were noted that were different from the rest when referring to vacuum, with a positive meaning, such as fertile vacuum and void, per se. These acceptations of vacuum/void have a positive, driving significance, unlike the other semantics, which demonstrate negative tendencies and possess a more demotivating significance. As with the previous table, a citation was presented for each expression extracted directly from the articles with the aim of illustration, followed by the respective references.

It was observed that the most frequently employed terms were "existential void", with a relative frequency of 25% and "existential loneliness", with 23%. In second place come the terms "anxiety", and "existential frustration" / "noogenic neurosis", with a frequency of 9% and 7%, respectively. The remaining terms ranged from 2% to 4%. In addition, in a comparison of both the above tables it was found that the concept of meaning of life, with 69 references, was more frequently cited in the articles than the concept of existential vacuum, with 57 mentions.

Figure 4, a word cloud (as devised by Prezi), represents a visual resource to provide a better perception of the impact of the concept of meaning of life than the other concepts employed in the articles. The predominance of this concept can be clearly seen as the most targeted construct throughout the 23 years of studies in Psychology, that were traced in the present review. The morphological configuration of this visual resource is the product of statistical data obtained for each expression appearing in the image, showing that the highest absolute frequency belonged to the concept of meaning of life. In second place, just below the central point, can be found the expressions *existential vacuum* and *existential loneliness*, indicating two distinct designations for the idea of crisis of meaning, which are employed in equal measure in the articles. This shows that, while there is just one example of the use of the expression *meaning of life*, the term *existential vacuum* is revealed in different forms, showing that the definition and comprehension is more complex, The composition of this visual resource – the word cloud – follows the rule of thirds, heavily used by painters and photographers when conceiving their images, where the object in focus, in the case of the expression *meaning of life*, is located at the intersection of imaginary lines. This rule derives from the areal ratio, a mathematical pattern found in nature that was incorporated into the graphic arts, among others.

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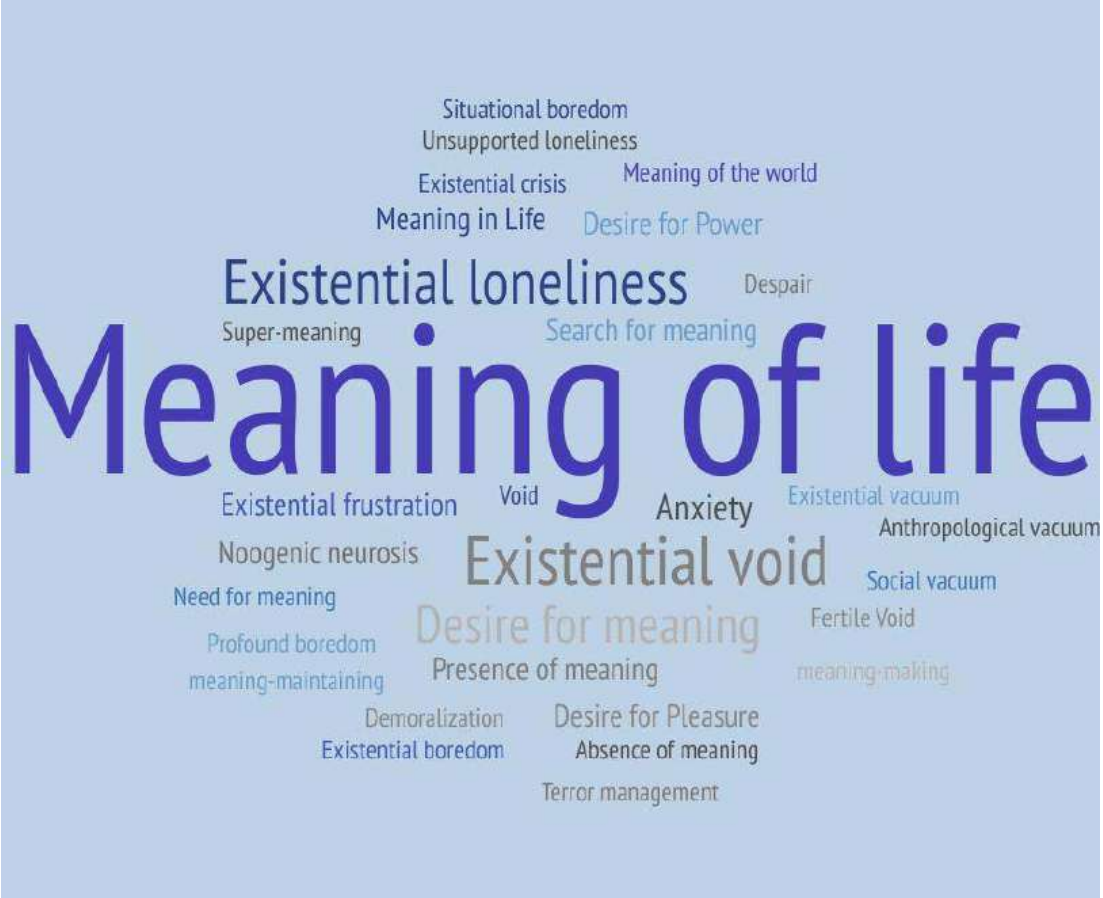


Figure 4: Word cloud – meaning of life

d) Context in which the Study was Conducted

In relation to the contexts addressed, in 28% of the articles this category does not apply as they are articles of a theoretical nature, in which no specific population is studied, for instance: theoretical/ conceptual studies that analyze the concept of meaning of life, its evolution and contributions from philosophy and a variety of approaches in psychology (*e.g.*, Vieira & Dias, 2021); an article which presents a conceptual map in order to understand logotherapy and the concept of meaning of life (Santos, 2016); meta-analysis analyzing the relationship between constructs like *presence of meaning* and *search for meaning* (*e.g.*, Li et al., 2021); literature reviews that analyze the principal works of Viktor Frankl (*e.g.*, Roehe, 2006), and reviews that analyze the concept of *existential loneliness* (*e.g.*, Bolmsjö, 2018). Studies involving healthcare in general represent 22% of all included articles. The generic category *contemporaneity* accounts for 12% of results. Then come the following domains: Psychotherapy with 11% of articles; education 8%; domiciliary 7%; legal, nursing homes and Brazil correspond to 3% each. Other contexts such as Africa, streets and wars are the least frequent at around 1%. (Figure 5a).

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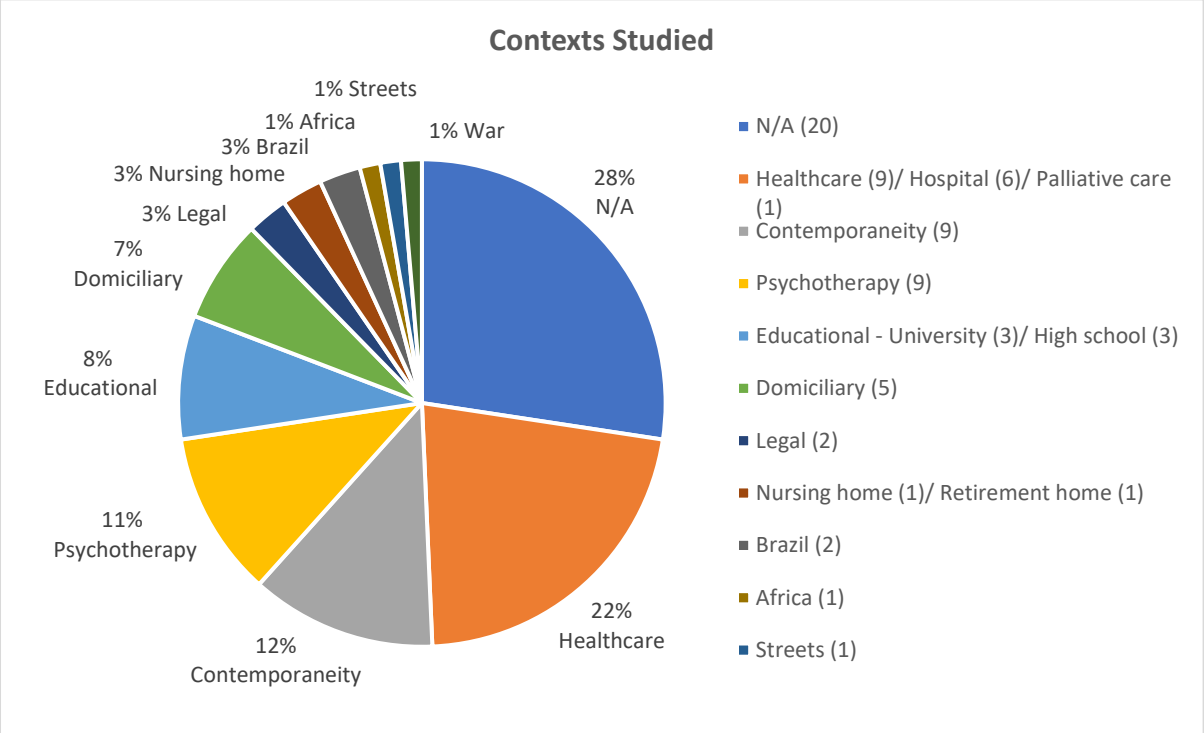


Figure 5a: Graph of Contexts Studied

The above graph is a representation of the contexts studied, demonstrating a large diversity in studies (11 variations) involving the theme of *existential vacuum* and *meaning of life*. It is clear that the context of Healthcare, including both hospital and palliative care, was the most explored, with 22% of the results (16 articles in total). The generic category entitled Contemporaneity was also well represented with 12% (10 articles), as was the context of Psychotherapy, with 11% (9 articles), indicating a preoccupation in present-day studies with man's state of mental health in this era.

e) Population Studied

As far as the target audience of the studies is concerned, the Not Applicable category applied to 29% of articles selected. The generic category we have called *contemporary man* has the highest target audience level, at 12%. Next come patients with cancer and the elderly, each with 7%; Psychotherapists, with 5%, and widows/widowers and students, each with 4%. The other categories, such as: people in palliative care, teachers, adult offenders, health professionals, prostitutes, Brazilians and adults command a smaller representation, with 33% in total. The Others category includes immigrants, refugees, spouses, people with intellectual disability, patients with HIV, people with borderline personality disorder, Africans and people with Hikikomori, severe social withdrawal. (Figure 5b).

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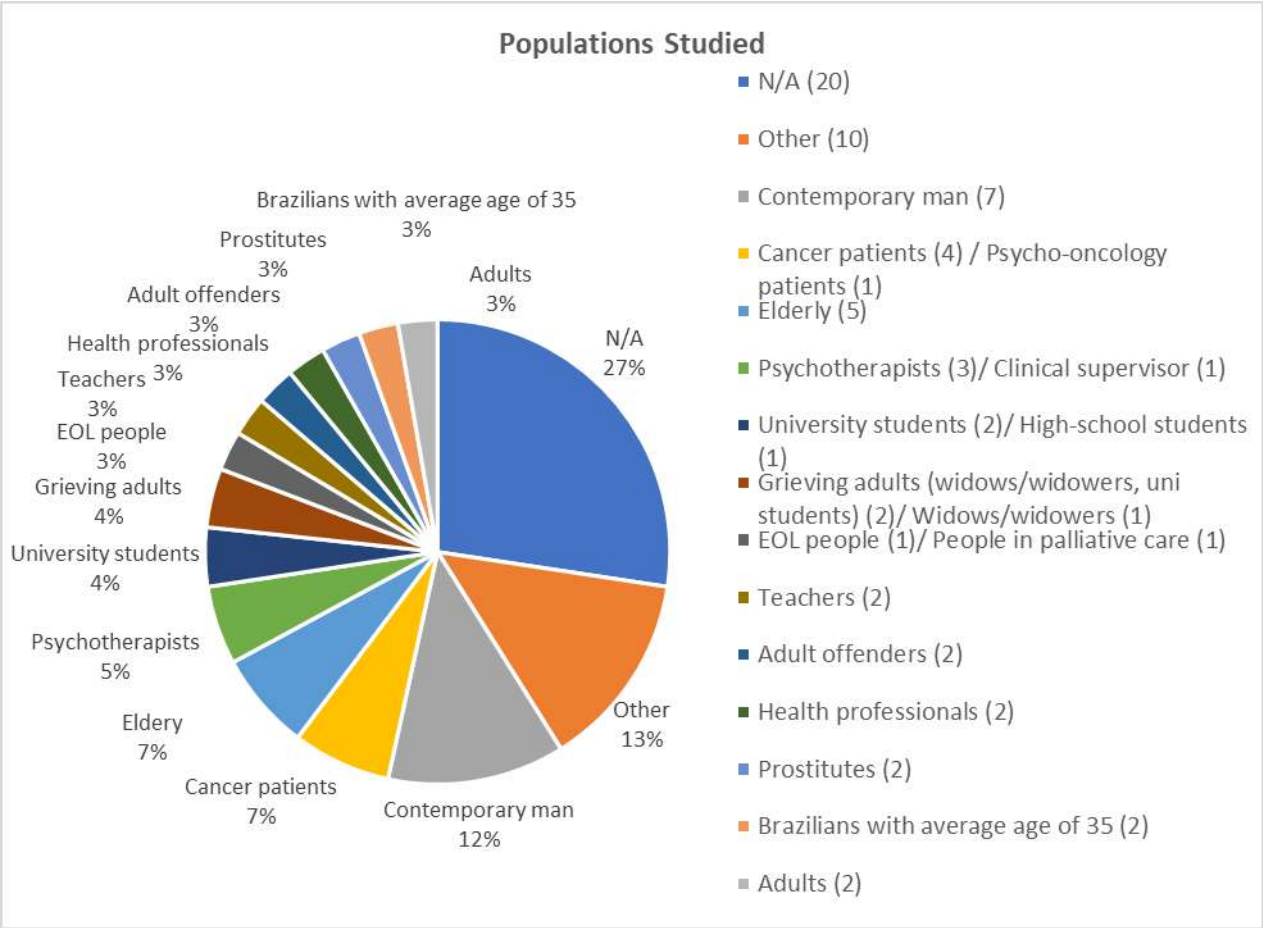


Figure 5b: Graph of Populations Studied

The above graph represents the number of populations studied, as found in the selected articles. It can be seen that the theme of *existential vacuum* and *meaning of life* involve a diversity of populations, comprising 19 different types of target audience. The most prominent category was Contemporary Man (12%, and 7 articles), indicating concern about the profile of present-day man. This category was followed by cancer patients and the elderly, with identical results (7%, each with 5 studies). Both these populations bring to the fore the relationship between finitude and meaning of life, as those people in a critical state of health may present with greater end-of-life perception, similarly for the elderly, as they are passing through one of the last stages of the life cycle, and may perceive with a greater degree of finitude.

f) Topics Covered in the Articles

Another categorization resulting from the qualitative analysis was the grouping of the themes appearing in the articles. After recording and analyzing these themes, a coding was devised in order to group articles with similar subject matter. These codings and categories are displayed in Table 5, in respect of the construct of *meaning of life*, and Table 6, regarding the construct of *crisis of meaning*. These tables also exhibit examples extracted in the form of direct citations[1] from the selected articles, and the relative and absolute frequencies are determined.

Accordingly, seven categories were classified as follows: "1-Psyc" (psychotherapy), comprising articles that report on studies into psychotherapy and meaning of life, encompassing psychotherapeutic approaches focusing on the meaning of life, such as logotherapy, positive psychology and existential therapies. This classification also includes articles relating to clinical practice centered around the construct of *meaning of life* and articles that include psychotherapeutic strategies for the treatment of psychic suffering, with *absence of meaning*.

[1] Note that the citations in the present article are unofficial translations to English of the original texts, and the articles not produced initially in the Portuguese language were translated first into Portuguese before being translated into English.

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A second category was coded and denominated "2-Sour" (sources), showing articles exploring sources of *meaning of life*, such as: human relations, intersubjective relations, spirituality, religious experience, awareness of finitude, literary expressions and art. This category also includes an article that analyzes the reasons for existential vacuum.

The third category was designated "3-Efft" (effects), which encompasses articles that study the effects and outcomes of the meaning of life, such as satisfaction with life, subjective wellbeing and improvement in mental health. The same classification also comprised articles that mention the effects resulting from *crisis of meaning*, like consumerism, suicide, borderline personality disorder, etc.

The fourth category was labeled "4-Lexp" (lived experience) which includes articles that describe lived experiences of meaning of life in diverse populations, such as family members of critically ill patients, offenders, mothers with children in the ICU, etc. This category also includes articles that described lived experiences of existential loneliness in the elderly, immigrants and people with partners in end-of-life situations.

The fifth category was entitled "5-Inst" (instruments) and includes articles that study theoretical bases for the development of measurement instruments or literary reviews of psychometric instruments used to measure *meaning of life*.

The sixth category was given the name "6-Conc" (concept), including articles focusing on analysis, definition and conceptual evolution, focusing on both the side of presence, with meaning of life, and also the side of absence, in other words, existential vacuum.

The seventh category was denominated "7-Copi" (coping), designating coping with existential vacuum. It comprises articles that explore strategies such as educational resources, support from family pets, literature and poetry, to deal with the crisis of existence. This differs from the category of Psychotherapy inasmuch as it explores existential vacuum coping strategies deriving from other non-psychotherapeutic sources.

Table 5: Thematic Categories Employing the Notion of Meaning of Life

Thematic Categories – Meaning of Life						
No.	Code	Category	Example	Reference	Absolute freq.	Relative freq.
1	PSYC	Psycho-therapy and meaning of life	*Example 1:* "(...)Frankl proposed as his central theme for an understanding of the human being and the consequent therapeutic intervention, the question of the meaning of life. In his way of thinking, the desire for meaning (logos) is man's main motivation. Hence the name of his theory: Logotherapy." (p.311)	Roehe (2006)	16	35%
			Example 2: "This article describes six principles of research to revitalize human psychology and make an impact on conventional psychology based on Gergen (2016) and DeRobertis (2016). He shows how Wong's study and therapy centered around meaning are an extension of humanistic/ existential psychology and indirectly impacted conventional psychology by following six principles. Moreover, it also shows how the in Wong's second-wave, positive psychology (2011) is capable of furnishing a new humanistic vision to directly impact conventional psychology." (p.2)	Santos (2016)		
2	SOUR	Source of meaning of life	*Example 1:* "(...) therefore, the aim of this study was to explore empirically the relative importance of various types of relationships as the sources of meaning and, in particular, why relationships are important to common people in relatively collectivist African contexts." (p.1)	Wissing et al. (2020)	9	20%
			Example 2: "(...) child prostitution can be understood as a mechanism capable of producing meaning to their life stories, representations of resistance and survival of a condition of loneliness and disgust." (p.22)	Molina (2003)		

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3	EFTT	Effects (outcome) of meaning of life	*Example 1:* "An approach directed towards resources that aim to identify positive psychological constructs has attracted recent interest in psycho-oncological studies. For example, having meaning and a purpose in life has been positively correlated with feelings of subjective happiness and satisfaction with life (in other words, the cognitive evaluation of life itself based on self-selected patterns) among people with cancer."	Martinez et al. (2011)	12	26%
			Example 2: "This study identifies a strong link between the presence of meaning in life and greater subjective wellbeing in which, although the search for meaning in life may be adverse to subjective wellbeing, the outcome is small and conditional." (p.1)	Li et al. (2021)		
4	LEXP	Experience of meaning of life	*Example 1:* "The proposed aim is to describe the meaning of life of a group of adolescents who recently entered an institution for resocialization or social reintegration, compared with a group of adolescents ready to leave the institution after undergoing a process of psychosocial intervention." (p.115)	Manrique Tisnés (2011)	5	11%
			Example 2: "This study emerged out of a reflection about life experiences as a nursing professional. The aims were to understand the meaning of life for a family member of the critically ill patient, faced with the Tragic Triad: guilt, suffering and death; and to identify the content of their meaning of life, grounded on Existential Analysis." (p.547)	Braitt Lima & Oliveira (2008)		
5	INST	Instruments for measuring Meaning of life	*Example 1:* "The "meaning of life" (MoL) construct has aroused the interest of clinicians who work in the area of psycho-oncology and end-of-life care. It has become a topic of scientific investigation in which diverse approaches of evaluation were applied. Aims: We are presenting a comprehensive, systematic review of the evaluation instruments that exist for Meaning of Life (MoL)." (p.2)	Brandstätte et al., (2012)	2	4%
			Example 2: "To summarize, we are presenting an initial report on the development and validation of the GMRI, as a psychometrically promising tool for evaluating meaning created in the context of loss. We are hoping that other researchers will collaborate with us to improve and apply the measure, contributing to the growing bank of evidence on the role of reconstruction of meaning as a prominent topic in adaptation to grief." (p.71)	Gillies et al., (2015).		
6	CONC	Analysis, definition and conceptual evolution	*Example 1:* "This article explores the paths to meaning of life as a construct over time, discussing the contributions that the concept received from diverse psychological theories, including the recent tripartite meaning of life model." (p.1)	Vieira & Dias (2021)	2	4%
			Example 2: "This article aims to show the evolution of the concept and how studies have been dealing with the subject in the area of the development of aging adults." (p. 270)	Sommer-halder (2010)		
				Total	46	100%

The above table shows the different thematic categories found in articles addressing the concept of *meaning of life*. It was observed that the most studied topic was "Psychotherapy and meaning of life", with a relative frequency of 35%. In second place, with 26%, was the category "Effects/outcomes of meaning of life", followed by the topic "Sources of meaning of life", with 20%. Of less significance were the categories "Measurement instruments" and "Conceptual analyses", each with 4%.

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Table 6: Thematic Categories about Crisis of Meaning

Thematic Categories - Crisis of Meaning						
No.	Abbrev	Category	Example	Reference	Absolute Freq.	Relative Freq.
1	PSYC	Psycho-therapy and existential vacuum	*Example 1:* "The purpose of this communication is to reflect upon the psychic suffering that arises from working in the contemporary psychoanalytical clinic, and its implications, through the symptom whereby the symbolic is captured by the existential vacuum." (p.157)	Maggi (2018)	2	7%
			Example 2: "The present study aimed to validate a proposal for the prevention of existential vacuum in a group of adolescent students. In this regard, the purpose was to promote a sense of awareness in terms of the search for meaning and, consequently, to prevent the sensation of a lack of meaning in life, based on the theory of logotherapy." (p.147)	Aquino et al. (2011)		
2	SOUR	Reasons for existential vacuum	*Example 1:* "The aim of this text is to analyze some of the reasons for the human existential vacuum, as a bottomless pit, that is to say, no matter how much man looks to realize himself in all his dimensions, he will never achieve a full life, the total happiness he so craves, because there is always a need to look for new projects and fulfilment." (p.388)	Pichler (2016)	1	4%
3	EFTT	Effects (outcome) of existential vacuum	*Example 1:* "Boredom may be understood as a discomfort that is conveying that the need for meaning is not being satisfied. To eliminate this discomfort, the symptoms must be attacked instead of attacking the disease itself, and we look for all kinds of substitute meanings." (p. 164)	Fukumitsu et al. (2012)	8	30%
			Example 2: "The philosophical/psychological analysis of the consumerist disposition comes from the assumption that the unrestrained search for the acquisition of material things, regardless of qualitative hierarchization, springs from a subjective attempt to symbolically fill a level of existence deprived of internally vacuous substantiality." (p.27)	Bittencourt (2011)		
4	LEXP	Experience of existential loneliness	*Example 1:* "However, as far as we know, there seems to be little understanding about being a migrant who experiences existential loneliness in old age, which contributes to an understanding of existential loneliness among older migrants. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the experience of existential loneliness in older migrants." (p.1184)	Olofsson et al., (2021)	9	33%
			Example 2: "Therefore, empirical studies in general are needed and, in particular, studies that explore the experiences of older people who are closer to death. Moreover, the exploration of other types of perspectives, such as those of loved ones, may also generate a more profound understanding of the phenomenon. So, the aim of this study was to explore existential loneliness in the frail and elderly (>75 years old), as interpreted by their loved ones." (p.2 of 9)	Bolmsjö et al. (2018)		

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5	CONC	Analysis, definition and conceptual evolution	*Example 1:* "To analyze the concept of existential loneliness (EL), we have created a general outline of the concept based on an in-depth reading of the literature. We then tested this general outline for internal coherence, identifying the key notions that together form a picture of the concept of EL, analyzing the interrelationships." (p.143)	Ettema et al. (2010)	3	11%
			Example 2: "When we talk of the existential vacuum of Frankl (1991), it is appropriate for us to revert to the concept of despair in Kierkegaard (2008). For this Danish author, "(...) despair is a phenomenon of the spirit, something related to the eternal which, as a consequence, contains something eternal in its dialectics" (p.45). Kierkegaard's vision (2008) attracts attention with regard to the desperation to be something which is only possible based on the relationship of man with the eternal. Thus, the despair would be something that enables man to think of his Ego. Despair is the spark of the eternal and can only be thought of if we consider "man within the category of spirit" (Kierkegaard, 2008, p.46)." (p.11)	Rosa & Pulino (2020)		
6	COPI	Coping with existential vacuum	*Example 1:* "(...) one aspect in the work and life of the Individual deserves a more analytical look: coping with the existential vacuum - the profound fear of the idea of death and the complete absence of intrinsic meaning that the natural world presents, included therein, for the poet, the human social world where he feels eternally out of place." (p.1)	Souza (2018)	4	115%
			Example 2: "This article proposes to discuss the educational limits and possibilities for coping with the existential vacuum that ravages the contemporary human landscape, in the form of a culture of image." (p.161)	Ratto (2015)		
				Total	27	100%

The above table describes the results related to the thematic categories used in the articles to speak about the concept of existential vacuum. Note that the themes most explored were "Experiences of existential loneliness", with 33% of the results, followed by "Effects/outcomes of existential vacuum", with 30%. In third place came "Coping with the existential vacuum", with 15% and, in fourth place, "Conceptual analysis", with 11%. The categories "Psychotherapy and Existential vacuum" and "Reasons for the vacuum" were less productive, with 7% and 4% respectively, unlike the results presented in these same categories when focusing on *meaning of life*. Moreover, the topics found in the selected articles focused more on the aspect of the meaning of life, with an absolute frequency of 46 articles, versus 27 with emphasis on the emptiness of existence. Curiously, the topic of measurement tools for existential vacuum did not come up in the articles studied, which may be a subject for potential exploration.

Using an artistic resource and statistical bases, the word cloud displayed in Figure 6 more clearly shows the thematic prominence in the study and its proportionality in relation to the other topics. Accordingly, it is evident that there is a subtle emphasis on the topic of the effects of existential vacuum and meaning of life, followed by the theme of Psychotherapy.

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Figure 5: Word Cloud

g) *Articles which addressed the themes of existential vacuum, meaning of life and their implications for Psychotherapy*

Of the 73 articles selected, 18 dealt with the relationship of the constructs of *meaning of life* and *existential vacuum* with psychotherapy. Of these, 10 articles that were theoretical in nature (*e.g*., Medeiros et al., 2020; Nassif et al., 2010) and one practical (e.g. Aquino et al., 2011) entertained the implications of logotherapy for psychotherapy. These articles call into question the role of meaning of life in clinical practice, evidencing the importance of discussing this topic for whoever may be seeking therapy. Not only this, however, but they also argue in favor of incorporating and implementing the principles of logotherapy in the clinical supervision process (Nassif et al., 2010), highlighting the ideas of Viktor Frankl with regard to the therapeutic process. His ideas reflect on the relationship between therapist and patient, in which he signals the importance of the posture of the therapist who must be open to the patient's view of the world, the importance of the values of both the therapist and the individual receiving the therapy, and an understanding of the therapeutic process as a learning of responsibility (Rohe, 2006).

In addition, one of the practical articles sought to evaluate a proposal for intervention to prevent existential vacuum in adolescents (Aquino et al., 2011). Similarly, another article that was practical in nature discussed a model of psychotherapy based on meaning, created by William Breitbart, the North American psychiatrist, who took his inspiration from the theory of Frankl, to treat patients undergoing palliative care (Moncayo & Breitbart, 2014).

Articles using existential/humanistic approaches, two of which were theoretical (*e.g*. Vos et al., 2015; Wong, 2017) and 2 qualitative/empirical (*e.g*., Hill et al., 2017; Constanza et al., 2020) also discuss the importance of working with *meaning of life* in their therapies, a request which may come expressly from the clients themselves or even indirectly, with the topic going beyond the psychic suffering, such as depression, obsession and the like (Hill et al, 2017). In addition, there was also an attempt to study the results of different existential therapies in patient treatment, with the purpose of understanding the efficacy and pertinence of existential therapy (Vos et al, 2015; Constanza et al., 2022). Moreover, there was also discussion about the course of humanistic psychology with the idea of regaining its rightful place inside traditionalist psychology in order to offer significant contributions to both research and therapeutic interventions (Wong, 2017).

Articles using a psychoanalytical approach (Maggi, 2018) and constructivist approach (Vos et al.,2017) discussed, respectively, the challenges of the psychoanalytical clinic in treating the existential vacuum problem by evoking the resource of symbolic function, and discussion about the significance of meaning in clinical practice, unfolding as: roles of meaning in

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psychotherapy, its influence on the evolution and recuperation of the subject being therapized and on the required clinical skills.

h) Articles that reported the theme of existential vacuum and meaning of life with religiosity and spirituality

Of the selected articles, six introduced the topic of religiosity and spirituality related to *existential vacuum* and *meaning of life*. Of these, two theoretical articles (*e.g.,* Carrara, 2016; Rohe, 2006) and one mixed-method article (Noronha et al., 2018) discussed logotherapy as a theoretical framework for addressing the question of spirituality and meaning of life. These articles address the pertinence of Victor Frankl's perspective on the topic of mental health, religiosity and spirituality, pointing to this as a positive force in healthcare, surmounting the negative view of religion and psychology. In similar vein, in the mixed-method article (Noronha et al., 2018), it is concluded that *meaning of life* and spirituality contribute and provide support for an existential construction.

As for the articles with humanistic influences, an integrative review (Silva et al., 2020) based on positive psychology indicates the need for further investigation in this area, particularly with the production of psychometric instruments focusing on the peculiarities of Brazilian culture, and which accentuates the correlation of the theme with positive concepts such as quality of life and subjective vitality. Meanwhile, Barros et al. (2021), also using a framework of positive psychology, accentuated the correlation between religiosity and *meaning of life*, insofar as its absence might indicate dissatisfaction with life. In the article that introduces Eric Fromm's psychoanalysis with humanistic influences (Amatuzzi, 1999), the significance of religious experience in the search for meaning and lost harmony is addressed.

IV. Discussion

The aim of the present review was to evaluate the literature published over the last 23 years in the area of Psychology, on the topic of *existential vacuum* and *meaning of life*, according to the content in articles of a qualitative and mixed-method nature. Based on an analysis of the 73 articles selected in the second phase, the chief discoveries of the study can be summarized as follows: a) there was an increasing trend of distribution of qualitative studies conducted between 2000 and 2023, with a production peak in 2021, a period marked by the Covid-19 pandemic; b) logotherapy stood out as the theoretical framework adopted in the studies, followed by phenomenology, bearing in mind that there is a diversity of frameworks, encompassing 21 types, as well as the fact that it reveals the interdisciplinary nature of the theme, with contributions from the areas of philosophy and sociology; c) in terms of the concepts most frequently employed, there is a greater emphasis on the *meaning of life* construct than on *existential vacuum*; d) in the contexts studied, in addition to the categories that are not applicable, healthcare and contemporaneity stand out; e) as the target audience, a diversity of populations can be observed, the standout being contemporary man and cancer patients; d) in the thematic categories, the study of the effects and consequences of *existential vacuum* and *meaning of life* stand out, as does the association between these constructs and psychotherapy, and, lastly f) the emergence of the variables *religiosity* and *spirituality*, related to the *meaning of life*.

Among these discoveries, the influence of constraints such as crises and wars is conspicuous, characterized as a point of inflection in the course of history, dictating new paths in the scientific milieu, with an accentuated need for existential responses. Consequently, our attention is drawn to the fact that the existential turning point highlights the topic of religiosity and spirituality, notably in a contemporary society that is more secular, unveiling a reappraisal of the topic. Also prominent is the huge interest in logotherapy, in the settings of healthcare (hospital, palliative care), home care, psychotherapy and legal assistance, unveiling an avid desire for meaning. This desire attested to the predominance of studies addressing this construct and not *existential vacuum*. In parallel, the emergence of phenomenology and approaches of an existential, humanist nature are somewhat surprising as they are making their mark in the scientific milieu, signaling a nascent concern of men of science with subjective questions, particularly in the Brazilian context. Lastly, the topic of psychotherapy is also garnering attention, gaining clearer, better defined dimensions, showcasing psychology as a science

Moreover, it can be seen that there is a diversity of approaches in Psychology (logotherapy, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, positive psychology, behavioral, Jungian analytical psychology, to name but a few) that are involved with the topic in question, highlighting the multiple aspects of this theme. These approaches have different conceptions about the understanding of the human being. Psychoanalytical, behavioral approaches stem from the idea that man is a driven being, whether through his unconscious (psychoanalysis), or through experience and conditioning (behavioral). On the other hand, existential humanist and phenomenological approaches stem from the principle that man is a being with freedom and autonomy, the author of his own choices. Despite the differences, they offer unique insights into existential questions.

Psychoanalysis understands the vacuum as a primordial void that will always be present as man is seen as a hiatus (Amaral, 2010). As for meaning, in this theory, it is the result of a search for pleasure (Freud, 1929/ 1996). With a different focus, the central theme of

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logotherapy is the idea that the primary motivation of the human being is desire for meaning. This meaning exists in the life of human beings and needs to be found, regardless of the circumstances (Frankl, 1969/1988). Phenomenology, meanwhile, focuses on the study of phenomena and their signification. Moreover, it is guided by the idea of the teleology of intentional experiences, that is to say, it relates to the aims of human actions and the giving of meaning (Husserl, 1935/2002). From a different perspective, positive psychology emerges as a more pragmatic approach, whose proposition is the quest to reinforce positive aspects and human virtues. Meaning of life, from this perspective, is conceived as a fundamental component in the acquisition of psychological wellbeing and mental health (Almeida et al., 2022).

Moreover, approaches derived from Zigmund Bauman's sociology of liquid modernity, as with others arising out of Gilles Lipovetsky's philosophy of Hypermodernity and the Neopositivism of the Frankfurt School, also staked their presence in the study of *existential vacuum* and *meaning of life*, confirming the topic's multidisciplinary nature. These approaches complement those in the area of psychology as, in addition to providing philosophical foundations and support, they also contribute to the understanding of collective experiences and the cultural values of social organization, after all, psychology also focuses on the social sphere. The Frankfurt School focused on the study of the cultural Industry, with a critique of the capitalist system (Duarte, 2007). By imposing a third power, the media of mass culture, this system contributes to the formation of a man whose senses regress and whose intellectual capacity is reduced, making him passive, permissive, resigned and molded by what the system offers. Lipovestky (2005) also criticizes the hedonistic, capitalist model, hyper-consumption, and adds the question of temporality, pointing out the contemporary obsession with time, evidencing the sense of urgency. Bauman (2004), meanwhile, furnishes the concept of liquid modernity and accentuates the trait of fragility and superficiality of contemporary human relationships. All of these approaches, in conjunction, contribute to a better understanding of the man of our time, and his search for meaning, by supplying contextual data and characterizations, as well as important psychic constraints to be considered in psychological evaluations, in psychodiagnosis, and in clinical treatment. After all, as Ortega y Gasset (1914/1966, p.322) put it, "I am me and my circumstance". In other words, they help to understand the human being, not only as a subject separated from the world, nor as a being composed of only biochemical and physiological attributes, but also a being-of-the-world who possesses a physical, psychic, transcendent, social, historical and cultural dimension.

According to the present systematic review, in conceptual terms, it was ascertained that the side of presence has been the most frequent target of studies, which was accentuated in the initial database search process. For instance, it was noted that, according to the search conducted on the SCOPUS database, 165 records were located relating to the meaning of life, versus 53 concerning existential vacuum. This proportion was also repeated in the other databases studied. By way of a curiosity, it should be mentioned that the records found based on the term "*meaning in life"* were so robust, with over one thousand results, that it was necessary to restrict the search by adding the descriptor "*mental health"*. These disparities in the number of findings for both expressions suggest that there is a contemporary tendency for studies to lean towards the side of presence and, therefore, meaning. As it is a construct that drives and motivates mental health, it emphasizes human potential, as evidenced in the emergence of positive psychology as an approach, which appears in 4th place in the Results section, behind logotherapy, existentialism and phenomenology. Complementarily, cultural reasons may also have an influence on this tendency, seeing that the scientific output in Brazil was very high regarding this theme, coming in second place with 21% of publications, behind the USA with 38% (Alencar & Freitas, 2023). Roberto DaMatta (1986), a Brazilian anthropologist, talks about *Brazilianness* in his work entitled "What to make of Brazil?", describing it as a way of being and perceiving reality. This social identity reveals the logic of sociability and the traits of a happy, affective, creative people, which uses strategies that involve good humor to deal with problems and adapt to adverse situations, accentuating a way of being that focuses on congeniality and the positive side of life, even in dramatic situations.

Thus, of the articles found in this second phase, it was possible to observe that there is greater emphasis on publications containing the terminology "meaning of life" or "meaning of/in life", registering 36 mentions in the articles, while "existential vacuum" amassed an absolute frequency of 14 mentions, as depicted in the Results section, in Tables 1 and 2. Adding together the term *meaning of life* and its derivatives, in total there were 66 mentions, against 54 references to the term *existential vacuum* and derivatives. In other words, it may be concluded that there is greater emphasis on investigations on the side of presence than on the side of absence, which signifies that, in the present day, there is a greater concern about the meaning of life and search for meaning than there is with existential vacuum.

Another aspect which came to the fore in the analysis of concepts was the fact that, in order to make reference to the construct *meaning of life*, there is greater unity and coherence of terminology, the only variation being the semantics of the expressions

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"meaning of life" and "meaning in life". Besides these, other expressions such as "desire for power", coined by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1872/2019), and "desire for pleasure", introduced by Sigmund Freud (1929/1996), were also related to the construct. The expression *meaning of life* also unfolded into subcategories, capable of being understood as different stages of life that comprise: need for meaning, desire for meaning, search, presence and super-meaning.

Despite there being less uniformity in terms of the forms of expression of the construct *meaning of life* as opposed to the construct *existential vacuum*, it is of the utmost importance to mention that that there is a difficulty with regard to its conceptual definition due to an atomization that has taken place in modern times. There is a historical/conceptual evolution that goes from the Aristotelian conception of meaning, passing through the framework introduced by Viktor Frankl (1946/2019), and various outcomes with a multidimensional perspective in order to give full account of the concept, its dynamism and complexity, as well as emphasizing, obviously, its polysemic characteristics. Therefore, as it is a psychological construct of extreme relevance to mental health, it is also seen as a challenge for researchers, it being necessary to obtain further semantic, conceptual and cultural clarification, which will result in the performance of fresh studies, both theoretical and empirical.

On the other hand, the concept of existential vacuum presented a variety of terminology, with the identification of 16 variations, which can be classified as sentiments associated with the emptiness, such as: anxiety, despair, loneliness, frustration, boredom and demoralization; existential states: void, vacuum and absence; and pathologies: crises, neuroses and pathologies in general. Besides these cited frameworks, whose semantics focus on the negative aspect, two positive variations were identified, denominated vacuum, by itself, and fertile vacuum, as contributors to a state that drives human action. This variety of denominations reflects the difficulty in embracing, defining, unifying and universalizing the construct of *existential vacuum*, that is shown to have a polysemic, multidimensional and multi-categorical character that is difficult to understand and to measure. It also seems to be an abstruse concept, ineffable even, in scientific studies, given the diverse nomenclature. It is worth highlighting that the concept of *existential vacuum* was the predominant one in articles in relation to the other expressions found referring to the construct. It should also be pointed out, however, that this predominance evidently also reflected a bias with the descriptors used, as within it was the concept of "existential vacuum" but not that of "meaning-making". The latter, as has been seen, appeared little in the results of this survey. In fact, its study would merit a separate literature review, bringing up-to-date the one previously conducted by Park (2010) a little over a decade ago.

The contexts related to healthcare, contemporaneity, psychotherapy and education were the ones most targeted when studying the theme. Similarly, in terms of target audience, there was an emphasis on the categories of contemporary man, cancer patients and the elderly. When comparing this piece of data with the results obtained in the first part of the study, which registered adults, in general, and university students, in particular, as the target audience, it can be seen that, for the present topic, there is no specific population to be studied, it being such a matrix-based, universal theme that affects diversity and heterogeneity of populations. Highlighted in both phases was the concern with contemporary man as a subject convalescing from psychic suffering with crisis of meaning. This trait was also conspicuous in the theoretical frameworks of philosophy and sociology, pointing to a context that conditions a type of psychism of contemporary man with his consumerist, utilitarian tendencies, drained of meaning.

The classification into themes also reinforces the emphasis on the study of the concept of *meaning of life* in that, of the 73 articles selected in this phase, 46 focused on the study of the *meaning of life*, associated with other variables, while 27 focused on the study of *existential vacuum*. Accordingly, seven category types were classified, with a preponderance of articles emphasizing the topic of psychotherapy and *meaning of life*, followed by articles that explored the topic of the effects and outcomes of the meaning of life, such as satisfaction with life and subjective wellbeing. On the other hand, regarding the concept of *existential vacuum*, the emphasis was on articles that explored the topic of the experience of existential loneliness, understood to be the awareness of being alone and isolated in the world, experiencing the feeling of nothingness and with an intense perception of the inevitability of death. Thereafter frequently emerged the topic of the effects and outcomes of the *existential vacuum*, such as consumerism, boredom, borderline personality disorder and even suicide. Curiously, the thematic nucleus concerning instruments for measuring existential vacuum did not come up in the study, highlighting its complex, apophatic dimension in the sense of absence, of that which does not materialize, difficult to systematize. Thus, it is a topic with the potential for further study.

In the articles that articulated the variables *existential vacuum*, *meaning of life* and psychotherapy, the importance was stressed of including this topic in the therapeutic process, whether it be a direct request from the subject being therapized or as a matrix on which diverse layers of psychic suffering are revealed (Martínez & Flórez, 2015). The logotherapy approach

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also gained prominence by directly addressing the question of meaning, arguing for the incorporation of the principles of logotherapy in the clinical process (Nassif et al., 2010). Also highlighted is the efficacy of therapies with existentialist bases in the treatment of mental health, as well as how the rightful place of such approaches is being reclaimed in the scientific sphere of traditionalist psychology (Wong, 2017). Once again, with the emergence of the relationships between *existential vacuum*, *meaning of life*, spirituality and religiosity, the logotherapy approach is mentioned as an adequate and pertinent response. The Franklian theory soothes the relationship between spirituality and psychology and sees in this relationship a driving force of meaning. (Aquino, 2021).

It should be stressed that the present study is subject to potential limitations. In the first place, regarding the databases, some of them, for example PEPSIC and SCIELO may have contributed to the higher frequency of articles from Latin America, and in particular Brazil, insofar as the APA favored results for the USA and Canada. Similarly, restricting the number of languages to three may have exerted a bias in the results. If languages such as German and French were to be added, perhaps more articles from the European continent would have been forthcoming, reflecting different cultural trends and biases in their studies and the respective results.

However, even with the potential limitations, the information uncovered in this review demonstrates that there is a growing interest in approaches in psychology of an existential humanist nature, for studies of qualitative issues focusing on the lifeworld, for a better understanding of the subjectivity, intersubjectivity and peculiarities of each individual. They provide a fruitful field for inspiring naturistic studies that deal with the understanding of the phenomenon. They also provide a solid foundation for the development of fresh theories and epistemologies that may be efficient in dealing with the human psyche, and its application in clinical practice. This strongly favors the in-clinic therapeutic process, which deals directly with the peculiarities of each individual. Moreover, the *meaning of life* construct, as a motive force in mental health, deserves to be explored in all of its complexity in order to obtain greater clarity, both for the researchers and for clinical psychologists. In addition, they are also important for studies that aim to associate this construct with other variables, such as religiosity and spirituality, which have gained ground in the scientific world, even attracting the attention of other areas such as Medicine. Great concern over contemporary man is also evident given the growing number and complexity of forms of psychic suffering which have materialized in the form of symptoms of anxiety, suicidal ideation and depression, regarded as the malaise of the 21st century by the World Health Organization. In parallel, the construct of *existential vacuum* also revealed its complexity given the diversity of appellation evident in studies of a theoretical, conceptual nature, and its absence in the area of theoretical studies of psychometry which demand clear and precise definition of the phenomenon to be investigated. Moreover, the topic of psychotherapy in its connection with the notion of *meaning of life* has become more prominent, signaling the greater visibility of this field in the academic and social world, contributing to the creation of public policies that consider psychotherapeutic practice for the population and for a greater recognition of Psychology as a science. Also worthy of note is the higher proportion of studies on this topic in the years corresponding to or immediately subsequent to the Covid-19 pandemic.

V. Final Considerations

The mapping and the broadening in issues of a qualitative nature performed in this second phase of the systematic review of the constructs *existential vacuum* and *meaning of life*, reinforced certain information that had already surfaced in the previous phase, namely:

- The Covid-19 pandemic as a Catalyst and Motive Force of Studies on the Theme of Existential Questions

As described above, the Covid-19 pandemic was another historical factor that brought into the discussion the dilemmas of human existence, particularly with questions of life and death, with an emphasis on the abyss of human finitude, accentuating the symptoms of fear, panic, anxiety and despair, faced with such a menacing scenario. It was a turning point that alerted the scientific world to the importance of existential vacuum and meaning of life which, in another era, had already been presaged by Edmund Husserl, when he signaled the danger of the course of modern science in considering only the objective aspects of existence. In this way, it may be concluded that, although the pandemic has certainly provided impetus to scientific studies on the topic, in qualitative studies on the meaning of life or existential vacuum, the pandemic conditions in themselves were not necessarily thematized. In fact, as evidenced in both articles (Part 1 and Part 2), the peak of production occurred precisely in 2021. However, it was noted that few studies of a qualitative or mixed-methods nature confirmed a relationship between *meaning of life* and the pandemic as the central axis of study. In other words, publications increased during this period but the content was not directly related to the pandemic. It did have repercussions for other topics related to *existential vacuum* and *meaning of life*, outside of the pandemic, as was observed in the themes that were explored in most depth: consequences of existential questions and psychotherapy and *meaning of life.* In addition, as qualitative studies require a longer time to come to

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fruition, it is possible that new articles thematizing the pandemic will be published in the next few years.

In fact, via the graph depicting the distribution of methodologies over the period of 23 years, exhibited in the Results section, a shift can be observed in the type of studies performed as a consequence of the pandemic: a greater constancy and concentration of articles on existential issues using the empirical qualitative method. The same graph also demonstrates a more homogeneous and linear configuration in the publication of theoretical articles on the theme throughout the period of study, while the empirical qualitative studies were concentrated around the period between 2019 and 2023 (with an average of two articles a year), with a peak of production occurring in 2021 (four articles), matching the performance of the theoretical articles. In terms of content studied, these same articles also reveal a trend: studies that addressed experiences of *meaning of life* and *existential vacuum*, with a particular focus on the expression *existential loneliness*. The experience of *meaning of life* was studied in widows and widowers (Vähäkanga et al, 2022), in people with intellectual disability (Garcia & Pereira, 2021) and mothers with children in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) (Silva et al., 2021). Similarly, the experience of existential loneliness was studied in various populations, for instance: elderly migrants (Olofsson et al, 2021); spouses with an end-of-life partner (Larsson at al., 2020) and elderly subjects in diverse states of health (Larsson et al., 2023; Carr & Fang, 2023; Edberg et al., 2023). This suggests that there is a tendency, nowadays, to look to understand the existential state of the human being, unfolding a scientific interest in subjectivity, a necessity underlying the sciences ever since the modern era, which was pinpointed by Husserl, some 88 years previously.

- The Emphasis on the Logotherapy Approach in Scientific Studies of a Qualitative and Mixed-Methods Nature

The emergence of logotherapy may be considered a historic landmark that symbolized and materialized a change of course in studies in psychology and psychotherapy, denoting the transition from objectivity to subjectivity. Logotherapy attracted attention back to a period in history when man started to be conceived, not only as a spectator of the world, but also as a subject who constructs his own reality and who possesses direction, a meaning. In this era, the dilemmas of human existence came to the fore, such as life and death, eternity and finitude, determinism and freedom, stressing the importance of teleology and surfacing concerns about existential issues, not just with instructive and causal issues. The aforementioned approach, which, in principle, was seen to be a possibility for complementing currents in psychology, was empowered and continues inspiring new epistemological constructions in psychology, as was determined in the psychotherapeutic model introduced by William Breitbart, the North American psychiatrist (Moncayo & Breitbart, 2014), as well as providing inspiration to other areas such as education. It must be stressed that logotherapy, by emphasizing the human being's noetic dimension, broadens the conception of man as a biopsychosocial being, as well as the conception of health, understanding it as something beyond the absence of illness and a complete state of wellbeing, also including the meaning of transcendence, of going back to something or someone. In this way, it bears witness to the dimension of spirituality, not pathologizing religious experience but rather seeing it potentially as something which promotes health.

As a means to illustrate how logotherapy influences and impacts the field of psychology, several studies have provided important data to corroborate this information. The study conducted by Aquino (2011) sets out a proposal for intervention to prevent existential vacuum in adolescents, through the application of the logotherapy theory, the requirement being the reintroduction of *logos* in group meetings. This study reveals how the theoretical logotherapy model is applicable to the concrete world, with an adaptation of philosophical language to narrative language. Thus, the study highlighted the efficacy of the proposition, giving youngsters the tools to build a new network of meaning. Moreover, it represents an advance on the clinical boundaries in the consulting office, expanding the strategy to a community experience. In parallel, in the study by Kroeff (2011), some views of logotherapy as psychotherapy are presented. Among Its characteristics, it is emphasized that logotherapy tends to be more prospective than retrospective because, by focusing on the meaning to be realized, It shifts Its attention more towards the future dimension. Similarly, it tends to be less introspective, stating that the meaning to be realized lies in the world and in encounters with others. Additionally, regarding the therapist's role in logotherapy sessions, it is specified that there is no specific protocol involving methodological rigidity, but there are certain stipulations. For example, the therapist should work to broaden the patient's field of vision and awareness of issues related to meaning and values. It is also recommended that he/she acts with a certain degree of improvisation and individualization, depending on the patient. The central point in the clinical practice focuses on the "I-Thou" relationship (Frankl, 1967, as cited by Kroeff, 2011, p.72), meaning the therapist-patient relationship, through the technique of Socratic Dialogue[2], inspired by Greek Antiquity. From a different

[2] Socratic dialogue is a therapeutic technique using questions to extract from the individual undergoing therapy their own ideas, what they think and what they believe. This technique was inspired by

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perspective, the article by Nassif et al. (2010) argues in favor of incorporating the principles of logotherapy into clinical supervision, regardless of the theoretical orientation of those involve. The author claims that logotherapy, which stems from principles of collaboration and which promotes proactive, adaptive attitudes, contributes to a better therapeutic encounter and clinical supervision.

- Emphasis on Studies on the Concept of *Meaning of Life*

Meaning of life, far more so than *existential vacuum*, has been the target of studies in psychology over the last 23 years, revealing a scientific kick-start that focused on the potentiality of the human being and his healthy aspects, and not just on psychopathologies, with *meaning of life* being a driver of mental health. It also showed itself to be more systematized and unified than the concept of *existential vacuum*, though it is still the butt of conceptual confusion, given its contemporary, multidimensional nature. Thus, it is a type of construct that merits deeper theoretical exploration for a more effective appropriation by researchers and clinical psychologists.

- Emergence of Themes: *Spirituality and Religiosity and its Correlation with Existential Constructs*

Meaning in life this was identified as a mediator between religiosity, spirituality and positive aspects like psychological wellbeing and satisfaction with life. This fact highlights the theme of spirituality and religiosity introducing two important variables for consideration in programs of intervention and the therapeutic process, as they are related to the *meaning of life* and satisfaction with life. Simultaneously, they are phenomena deriving from the symbolic construction of man's struggle with the world around him, in other words, phenomena which constitute culture, an important aspect to be considered in clinical practice, particularly Brazilian culture where there exists such a diversity of religious beliefs.

The article by Aquino (2021), entitled "Religion, spirituality and health: a logo-therapeutic perspective" introduces important insights into the incorporation of these perceptions into clinical practice by psychology professionals. In it, the author borrows Frankl's perspective of religiosity, considering it to be a healthy dimension of the human being, thereby decreeing a more harmonious posture between psychology and religion. In the contemporary setting, this posture appears to be more antagonistic than empathetic. In this way, in psychotherapy, when this issue is raised spontaneously, the therapist, rather than rejecting the topic for a variety of reasons, should welcome it as a healthy dimension, as it is considered a motive force for meaning, not to mention its potential for therapeutic success. Complementarily, the article also accentuates the attributes the therapist should assume faced with the emergence of the theme, such as exercising tolerance and patience (Frankl, 1992 cited by Aquino, 2021). Another significant contribution of logotherapy is the non-pathologization of the religious experience. It is the duty of the therapist to adopt an adequate posture so as not to belittle the experience, without repressing it, nor to impose dogma, just let it come out as a form of expression of human existence.

- *Effects and Implications of the Existential Vacuum and Meaning of Life*

Also prominent is the theme of the effects and implications of *existential vacuum* and *meaning of life* as constructs that trigger discomfort or psychic suffering and wellbeing, respectively. This emphasis shows that both constructs can be considered key elements for a better understanding of existential issues in clinical practice, and may be demotivating, as in the case of a vacuum, or a motivating force, as in the case of meaning, in mental health. Accordingly, they show themselves to be basal elements and may, therefore, come to be a required subject for study in the area of psychology, not only in terms of academic training but also in research studies and clinical practice.

- *Psychotherapy and its Relationship with Existential Questions*

The theme of psychotherapy is also highlighted, particularly approaches of an existential, phenomenological and humanist nature, showing it to be an area full of potential to offer strategies of prevention, care and coping with the crisis of meaning. Equally, it can also provide the stimulation for the meaning of life, through interventions and models that stimulate adaptability and human potential. It should be noted that there is still only a modest progress being made in studies with these approaches in the processing of qualitative data, particularly when compared to the outcome obtained in the previous article, where the studies, despite being existential and humanistic in nature, favored psychometric data. This shows that it is an area that deserves to be explored and studied, with great potential for satisfying the demands of man in his lifeworld, of his subjectivity, his peculiarities, as a way to rehumanize. This scientific attitude, unlike conventional attitudes, whose object of study is generic and universalizable man, shows itself to be a source of multiple possibilities to deal with the problems of man and society, through a separate path that complements rational understanding, that seeks intuitive rationality and the discourse of *mythos*. Therefore, the possibility of reinterpreting the development of new epistemologies in psychology which are seen to be sufficiently effective and creative to deal with existential questions in an

Socratic maieutics, which literally means giving birth to ideas (Reale, 1992).

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increasingly complex world in constant transformation, will be left to future studies.

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