



Meaning Making Among Older People in the Bible Belt in the Netherlands

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Abstract

In this ethnographic study, we examine how older Calvinist Protestants in a conservative rural area of the Netherlands experience "meaning in life." We aim to contribute to current research on meaning in life within social and religious contexts. Here, we specify the concept of meaning in life as connectedness. The latter is broadly interpreted as an overarching conceptual component of existential meaning. Indeed, connectedness appears to be of paramount importance in these older villagers' experiences of meaning in life. All three authors of this paper collaborated during fieldwork. We analyzed documents such as local newspapers, websites, and (church) newsletters. We visited farms and attended local meetings and gatherings such as church- and community-services, and we conducted qualitative interviews with 29 people. The outcomes of our research point to three forms of connectedness: (1) social connectedness; (2) physical connectedness; and (3) transcendent connectedness.

Keywords: aging; existential meaning; religious communities; connectedness; the Netherlands

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Introduction

The question, “What makes life meaningful?” touches upon certain fundamentals of human existence and has puzzled many people since time immemorial. Such existential questions are traditionally connected to religion or spirituality or the lack or loss of it (Krause 2008; Park 2017a, 2017b). In this article, we examine how older people in the Netherlands experience meaning in life. In old age, questions of meaning gain an increased urgency because of the losses aging individuals tend to experience and the increasing confrontation with finitude (Krause 2008). In this paper, we examine the interaction between social and cultural context, religious and spiritual outlook, and experiences of meaning in life of older people. The following study is based upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted among older people in a village¹ in the Netherlands. This village is situated in the so-called “Bible Belt,” an area stretching from the southwest to the northeast of the country. The Bible Belt is referred to this way in colloquial speech as well as in the media because of the area’s high concentration of practicing Protestant residents, including many orthodox Protestant Christians (Sobotka and Adigüzel 2002).

The village in which we conducted our fieldwork is characterized by a 15th century Bonifatius church tower, which is situated in a spacious, flat landscape scattered with dairy farms. In addition to this iconic church, there are two churches of other Protestant denominations in the village. These newer churches were constructed at the beginning of the 21st century because the original buildings could no longer accommodate the increasing crowds during Sunday services. The village of our study has 1,800 inhabitants, and each of the three churches currently has around 500 registered members. This illustrates that, although the Netherlands is rapidly becoming more secular, not all areas of the country are experiencing a decline in church attendance.² The old church is considered rather conservative and one of the new churches is considered very conservative orthodox. The latter orthodox church and the non-orthodox church are regional, meaning that people from surrounding villages also come to attend the services. Some villagers, however, do not feel comfortable in any of these three churches and prefer a church community in a neighboring village or town. Therefore, Sunday mornings usually have a weekly rush hour. By bike, car, walker/wheelchair, or on foot—young and old come and go in all directions to attend church services.

This paper draws on an ethnographic study that was conducted in the village between 2014–2019. This study set out to explore the lives of older people, many of whom have spent their entire lives in this village. Our aim was to better understand the qualitative conditions for aging well in a small rural community.³ We found that our data generated valuable insights into what constitutes—or stymies—

older people's experiences of meaningfulness. By presenting the results of our ethnographic study in this context, we hope to add to current research on meaning in life and particularly the role of social and religious contexts in older people's experience of meaning in life. We argue that ethnographic case-studies, which offer conceptual clarification through the exploration of lived experiences (Neuman 2014), can contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon of meaning in life.

Meaning in Life

The theme 'meaning in life' or 'existential meaning' is often a topic of interest for various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Currently, studies on this topic have been slightly increasing. However, they are usually related to formal and informal care-settings or focus on the *lack* of meaning that some people suffer during old age, resulting in somberness, despondence or, in some cases, a death wish, as for instance in Dutch studies about people who believe their lives are completed and no longer worth living (Wijngaarden van, Leget, and Goossensen 2014). Studies on the actively shaping and reshaping of meaning in daily lived experiences are seldom related to aging. This is startling because older people aged 65 and above are at a stage of life where their responsibilities related to work and family—often experienced as significant and meaning-generating—begin to decrease or change in nature (Edmondson 2015). In addition to changes in social dynamics, older people (65+) are often more radically confronted with transiency and finitude, for instance through loss of beloved ones or one's bodily fitness. Such confrontations may inevitably result in existential questions (Baars 2012).

Victor Frankl was an Austrian Jewish psychiatrist and neurologist and a survivor of the Holocaust during World War II. As a result of his personal experiences in concentration camps, he wrote and published his first work on meaning in life shortly after the war ended in Europe (Frankl [1946] 2006). Frankl became a founding father of contemporary theory on existential meaning or meaning in life, and his insights evoked an upsurge of studies on this theme. Despite this increase, however, more recent publications on meaning in life demonstrate conceptual uncertainties while some academics are still attempting to grasp the notion (Krause 2008; Laceulle 2018; Martela and Steger 2016).

Recent studies conceptualize existential meaning as a multidimensional construct (Steger 2012). Psychologist Crystal Park (2017a), for instance, distinguishes a person's "global meaning system" from their "situational meaning." A global meaning system consists of cognitive, motivational and emotional dimensions that provide people with an encompassing framework to interpret their lives. Global meaning systems are always socially shared and individually appropriated by each person sharing the context from which it evolves. Religions or political ideologies constitute examples of global meaning systems. Situational meaning, on the other hand, occurs in people's daily lives when events or circumstances generate meaning issues that require adaptation or reinterpretation of one's beliefs, motivations or emotions. Global meaning is more "enduring," whereas situational meaning is more "immediate" and "transient" (Park 2010; Steger 2012). Situational meaning relates to people's lived experiences and how they appraise these experiences. Park (2017a) further explains that the appraisals of these experiences interact with their global meaning system, in the sense that some situations necessitate renewed reflection on the accuracy of one's global meaning system. This implies that, for instance, a religious conviction may influence a person's evaluation of experiences, but that individual experiences may also influence or change their religious conviction and thus a person's global meaning system.

Psychologist Dmitry Leontiev (2017) underscores meaning as a relational phenomenon. He uses the metaphor 'mycelium' to indicate hidden and visible connections of different dimensions that relate to existential meaning. Psychologists Rebecca Schlegel and Joshua Hicks (2017) point to the collective

aspect of meaning by mentioning shared sources of meaning, among which are social relations and systems of meaning, such as religions and worldviews. Although experiences of meaning are personal and individual, Schlegel and Hicks perceive culture as “the ‘ultimate’ system of meaning” and they conclude that “a greater consideration of the role of culture seems warranted” (2017, 30). In particular, because current studies of meaning are predominantly situated in Western, individualized, secular countries, and existing measures of meaning show little cultural sensitivity.

Drawing on work by psychologist Roy Baumeister (1991) and others, professor of Humanism and Worldviews Peter Derkx (2013) distinguishes seven dimensions of existential meaning. In summary, people must experience (1) *purpose* in life, (2) *moral worth*, and (3) *self-worth*, including self-respect and self-acceptance. In addition, people need to experience that their life is under (4) *control* to a certain extent. They must also experience (5) *coherence* or comprehensibility, (6) *excitement*, including wonder or curiosity, and last but not least (7) *connectedness*. With these dimensions, Derkx aims to exhaustively cover the various meaning-making experiences in people’s lives. This exhaustiveness, however, allows for some overlap and the various dimensions are not exclusive per se.

Although Derkx’s (2013) model provides valuable insights into the components that make for an experience of meaning in life, the importance of the social and cultural dimension that Schlegel and Hicks (2017) and Park (2017b) emphasize remains underexplored. This is an omission, particularly since experiences of meaning interact with “both the fundamental embodied nature of human existence and the fundamental socio-cultural constitution of identity” through, for instance, housing, relations with beloved ones, and cultural ideals (Laceulle 2018, 25). This calls for a more socio-culturally sensitive approach to meaning in life. As such, meaning in life should not merely be conceived of as a psychological condition attributed to passive recipients. Rather, in our understanding, meaning in life is a situated lived phenomenon that is not only experienced but also actively created through daily activities and relations. In other words, meaning is *made* within the socio-cultural context of people’s lived experiences.

In a more recent empirical exploration of the seven dimensions, however, Derkx et al. (2020) found that connectedness is probably the most fundamental component for experiencing existential meaning. The authors specifically make a distinction between the importance of *social* connections, which they describe in terms of significant contacts with other people and/or society, and the connections with an “*impersonal other*” such as “. . . with God, with nature or with a positively valued transcendent reality” (2020, 42). Further unraveling the nature and role of these different types of connectedness could be helpful in addressing the socio-cultural dimension of meaning, both as experience and as an act of meaning-making. In this paper, we have chosen to focus on connectedness, which we broadly interpret as an overarching component of existential meaning.

Methods

Although consensus about theories on existential meaning is still lacking among scholars, Park (2017b, 70) claims that existential meaning, particularly situational meaning, is “ripe for empirical inquiry.” Research methods and approaches, however, are still being explored and assessed. For instance, Psychologist Paul Wong (2017) suggests taking people’s lived experiences into account. Additionally, Schlegel and Hicks (2017) point to self-report, informant report, and behavioral data as a useful way to gain insights. Socio-cultural contexts appear important, and academics perceive meaning in life as at least partly and often mainly as a subjective phenomenon. Hence, a qualitative holistic approach with combinations of various methods current in ethnography seems appropriate (Patton 2015).

Ethnographic fieldwork in the village of our study started in 2014. Fieldwork was initiated and coordinated by the first author, Pien Bos. Bos was a native to the area. All three authors spoke the language (mother tongue) and collaborated during fieldwork. We analyzed local newspapers, websites, and (church) newsletters, flyers, (document analysis), etc. We attended local meetings and gatherings such as church-services, community services, and the board meetings of associations for older people. We also visited farms and attended funerals. During these participant observations, we also conducted qualitative interviews with 29 people (which included five couples) and engaged in dozens of informal conversations. For ethical reasons, we obtained informed consent from our informants. We anonymized their names and excluded the name of the village. The names of informants mentioned in this article thus are pseudonyms.

Our sampling strategies changed over time. In the beginning of fieldwork, we used convenience- and snowball-sampling strategies. For instance, we sampled people with whom we informally spoke when attending public meetings, church services, and other events. Later on, we sampled more purposefully for diversity, based on criteria such as religious denominations, family-settings (including intergenerational settings), gender, childlessness, or former occupation (including farmers). We interviewed non-orthodox, rather orthodox, and very orthodox people.⁴ Our participants were all members of a religious (church) community. We interviewed some people several times. These interviews were mostly life-stories because, as cultural anthropologist Sarah Lamb (2008) denotes, “. . . telling a life story, ‘like other forms of talk or communication’ is part of life as lived, for it is lived and experienced, at least during the moments of telling” (16). Life stories are appropriate for research on meaning in life because meanings tend to run through life stories and can best be studied through their analysis (McAdams 2011).

In the summer of 2018, we organized a focus group-discussion in the village’s meeting hall and invited all interview-participants. Five women and six men attended. During this focus group, we shared and discussed our findings in order to validate them. This method also provided our informants with an opportunity to comment on our findings or refute conclusions. The interactions that followed were meaningful data as well and are incorporated into our analysis as such.

Five Different Spheres

To structure our findings, we distinguish people’s connectedness and how it emerged in five different spheres: (1) the village community, (2) church communities; (3) clubs and associations, (4) the family-sphere, and (5) a transcendent sphere. In the first four spheres, we present patterns that stemmed from all our ethnographic sources (documents, observations, interviews). In the fifth sphere, we rely on one specific case (male 90+) who is exemplary of a highly secluded minority of extremely orthodox Protestants in the Bible Belt, to which researchers do not easily gain access. We consider this villager to be an ‘extreme case’ in two respects: (1) he experienced severe social exclusion throughout his life, and (2) by practicing Puritanism, he is on the extreme end of a spectrum from liberal Protestantism to orthodox Protestantism. Selecting extreme cases often lead to new observations and understandings (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim 2016; Patton 2015), and discussing this case in detail provides us with insights into the fifth transcendent sphere, which could not easily have been achieved otherwise.

1. Village community

When strolling through the village, a certain flag attached to many people’s homes tends to catch a visitor’s attention. The flag’s design was created during a village-flag competition held some years ago. Three youngsters won the competition because, according to the jury, they managed to embed a symbol

of the historical perspective of the founding family of the village into its natural environment. The flag seems to remind the villagers that they are inheritors of a shared past. Hans (77)—who also has the flag waving in his front garden—told us about his past in the village:

[In those days,] the doctor had a tiny car, and when the doctor drove in the direction of my home and I walked there, I was allowed to drive with him for a little while. Well, from the start, you feel a huge bond with such a village.

Hans is a retired journalist and shares his childhood memories in an eloquent way. Above, he described how “it takes a village to raise a child” and implicitly argued how this social norm was put into practice and how he felt acknowledged by this—in his eyes—notable person offering him a ride. Hans’s experience of social connectedness is informed by positive memories from his childhood. A hint of melancholy, however, appeared to color his feelings. He told us that many of his loved ones passed away, and he began to withdraw from clubs and activities as he grew older. The people who were young back then have now grown up; Hans is unknown to them. “You are easily forgotten,” he explained.

Changes in social embedding related to aging seem to affect Hans’s connection with the village. Yet, he does not want to leave. He wants to purchase a stairlift as soon as it begins to take him longer than five minutes to get upstairs. Also anticipating a decline in their health and mobility, Marlies (64) and her husband Tim (66) rebuilt their house and made it “walker-proof” last year. Likewise, Els (76) and the two married couples, Ada (74) and Bert (85) and Eva (86) and Ties (91), are pleased to have the facilities they need on the ground floor. This enables them to remain in their respective houses.⁵ The aging villagers to whom we spoke are attached to their houses and the village. Many of them were farmers or come from a farming family, and they were born and raised in the same rural setting they still inhabit. As such, their homes are full of markers that trigger memories. Bets (83), a farmer’s wife, explained, “My husband died in the same room and in the same bedstead where he was born.” Even the local graveyard is mentioned—sometimes explicitly, but more often indirectly or implicitly—as a preferred future destination, which illustrates a deep sense of belonging to the physical setting. Marlies (64) explained:

I was born and raised here, so I think I belong here. . . . Also when I am dead, I belong here in the cemetery. . . like my parents are buried here. Actually, I never visit their grave (*laughs*), but I think they ought to be buried there.

The physical environment, the house, soil, and the physical setting as a whole seem to inspire a sense of connectedness. The meaning of such material surroundings transcends social relations. But social connections with one’s fellow villagers are also considered to be of the utmost importance, and they think about balancing these social relations. Adjustments in houses illustrate a desire to remain independent as much as possible as they grow older. Laurens (68) explained how “handling one’s own affairs” lies at the heart of how the villagers live. As such, living independently is valued, and “burdening” or asking for help outside one’s family circle is not—even when someone else is willing to help. According to Ties (91), however, showing interest in each other and looking after each other are great benefits in the village. To him, it is not only family-members and neighbors who look after each other, but villagers in general, who happen to “. . . know much of each other. . . . I’ve been raised here, of course, and I have lived here for 91 years. Yes, everyone knows Ties.” An orthodox newspaper confirmed Ties’s experiences with informal care among villagers:

Before, people did not greet each other on Sundays, but this has changed and nowadays people also greet each other on Sundays. According to the villagers, the inhabitants are

tolerant and kind. One villager: "Supermarkets or grocery-stores have almost disappeared here, yet villagers shop groceries for each other."

In our observations, people seemed to notice each other and, although this is generally appreciated, there is also a dark side to the large amount of social control. Els (76) has never really left the village, not even for a job, because she has always had to work at home. Els is a registered church-member of the old church, but not a regular visitor of the church-services. People we spoke to believe that she is an exceptional lady in the village because she regularly goes to the pub on her own. In her living room, a sign hanging above her fireplace reads: "The 'nice' thing about living in a hamlet is. . . That when you really have no idea what you are doing. . . Someone else, however, does!" She explained that she feels connected to the village and would never want to leave because she knows "everyone and everything." She wants to "grow much older here." Yet, she dislikes the fact that people talk behind each other's backs:

. . . But you learn to deal with it, you know. It has always been this way. If you hear something from someone, you shouldn't pass it on. Because that isn't nice for the other one. . . . But there are people who do this, you know. I never do that. I just think, "If I'm allowed to know something, they will come and tell me themselves."

Because of the gossiping, Els has had to grow "a thick skin" and emphasized that she will not let people interfere with her life. Thus, if she wants to go to the pub, then she goes to the pub regardless of whether people regard it as something "not decent" for women to do. She stated, "If men are allowed to go there, then why would I not be allowed to go there? I do nothing wrong, do I?" Both for those who want to tell her how to live and for God's "personnel," Els seemed to have only one message: "I will not let others tell me how I should live." By responding to and weighing both the pros and cons of living in this tight village community, she appears to actively make meaning of her ambivalent social position.

According to Laurens (68), who moved from a neighboring village 35 years ago, "standing beside each other" is a norm that stems from Christian values, which help form the foundation of life in the village and its region. The value that he considers to be the most important is charity, or the love for one's neighbors, which he defines as "being concerned about each other." Some villagers express this value in certain daily practices, such as driving a person to the hospital or helping each other with groceries. According to Jos (77), charity is a highly regarded and widespread value in his village.

During the interview, Laurens (68) burst into tears as he recounted how one family explicitly denounced him as a homosexual when he decided to become an elder in the church council. When Laurens decided to stand firm and continued to prepare himself for the post, the family left the church. Laurens found it difficult to cope with the situation, but he explained that someone else backed him up:

Then a man, who always sat in front of me [in church], came on the radio. . . to explain what happened. He said, "A married couple left the church because of a homosexual man. Unbelievable." And he told me this on Sunday morning. He sat in front of me, turned around, and laid his hand on my knee, saying: "Laurens, I'm so happy that you have stayed." That was unimaginable.

This incident seems to have made a huge impact on Laurens, and it was decisive for him to continue living in the village. This example demonstrates that it was meaningful for Laurens to feel accepted in his church community, and he explained how the experience with the man from his church resulted in feelings of being part of the village community as well. The separate church communities of the three

churches, however, also have their dynamics.

2. Church communities

It is an unwritten rule in the village that people comply with Sunday's rest, meaning that washing cars, mowing lawns, drying laundry, or any other outdoor chores are not appreciated. This tranquility, however, is suddenly interfered with on Sunday mornings when the church bell calls people from their homes. During morning services, hundreds of members chatting with each other before the service starts occupy the church pews. We observed that aging villagers feel socially connected by engaging with their church communities or, as one informant articulated, their "church family." Ben (71) and his wife Froukje (71) stressed that their church community should also be understood as a social community to which most of its members actively belong. They attend church with their "tight group," then linger afterwards and have coffee together. Because Froukje and Ben feel socially connected this way, they do not really fear a future in which they are left to fend for themselves: "Even if it's only from the . . . church community, then you're being looked after. There's always a bit of care you have for each other."

Aging people also connect with others through religious work. For example, Ben was asked to become a mentor for youngsters who want to continue the catechesis—education in bible-texts and instilling religious values—after they reach 18 years of age. As a mentor, he helps these young people read and interpret Biblical texts:

I find it special that a person of 71 years has been asked to do it [*laughs*]. To do that. And then there's a whole band of those youngsters gathering. . . of 20, 22 years of age, who participate enthusiastically. Who really appreciate it. So, yes, then you feel that you can still add your value. And I do find that important. I'm not being pushed away like "my time's over." That you can also mean something in this way.

It seems that Ben finds meaning in his mentorship in two related ways. The first is that, by fulfilling his role of mentor he can help to ensure that youngsters continue to practice their faith. Evangelization is generally an important mission for Christians in this village and also for Ben. The second way can be understood as a mission of social connectedness. Namely, by mentoring younger pupils, Ben bolsters their involvement with his church and its community, guarding this social sphere from a potential outflow of the younger generations in the nearby future.

Jos (77) and Inge (74) explained that, as soon as they moved to the village, they were automatically registered with the church because it belongs to the same denomination as the one in their former town. After some years, however, certain differences in the religious experience appeared too great for Jos and Inge to overcome. Jos did not "feel at home" in a black suit (the common Sunday dress code), so he wore a grey suit. Because of this provocative act, Jos explained that he was regarded—or regarded himself—as rather unorthodox. Furthermore, Inge told us that she did not experience the heavy tone during services as pleasant; in fact, it sometimes kept her from attending services.

Eventually, Jos and Inge decided to leave this church community by withdrawing their formal membership. But much more than a formality, leaving a church is related to a rejection of social relations and religious convictions. People experience and perceive such withdrawal as a statement that similarly resembles a divorce (see Paulus' case below in the section '*Transcendent sphere*'). So, their process of leaving was accompanied by painful confrontations, incidents, and emotions. Eventually, however, they connected with a less orthodox church community in the village. This time, their endeavor led to

a more favorable outcome. During the interview, they explained that they were now “wonderfully taken care of” by their new community. Here, they felt more at home because they could profess their faith in a way that felt safe and that their fellow members of the church community approved. Jos explained how he experienced a thoroughly meaningful sense of belonging with this church community because the people share comparable beliefs in God and the afterlife. Not everyone in the village, however, appreciated the progressive character of this church. One informant called it a “shoddy church” (*een flutkerk*). In his eyes, the fact that this church is led by a female minister contradicts the Bible, where it is written that women are not allowed to occupy formal religious positions. Thus, within the social spheres of the church communities we explored, meaning is made in socially connected ways that can be affected by religious perceptions but feelings of security as well.

3. Clubs and associations

Many of the older people join and contribute to one of the village’s neighborhood associations. It is noteworthy that such a small village is divided into ten different neighborhood associations. To get an impression of its functions, the statement of one of the clubs says: “. . .we mutually sympathize with each other’s ups and downs, new members are welcomed, the ill and some older people are visited; if someone throws a party and we are invited as a neighborhood association, then we join in.”

An activity overarching the neighborhood associations is the “Community Dinner.” Every month, about 70 people, aged 55 and over, gather in the village-hall. Weddings, funerals, line-dance evenings, bingo, and the like are also held there, but the Community Dinner is an event that is exclusively organized for older people. The website mentions that the goal of the dinner is “to organize a meal in order to foster social cohesion among people aged 55 years and over.” Partaking in a meal costs only a few euros. As some older people put a considerable amount of physical effort into meeting each other in front of the building with their walkers and scooters, they happily express their delight with the event. Fred (91), who has been living in the village since his retirement 28 years ago, suffered a stroke two years ago. Fred is no longer eager to participate in club activities or join a trip. He is afraid to burden other people in case something happens to his health. However, the Community Dinner is one of the few activities that he likes to join:

Sylwin Cornielje: Do you go there every month?

Fred: Yes. And why? The social contact! Because if you don’t go there, you don’t go anywhere anymore. Then you lock yourself up, and you pass away. . . [At the dinner,] you become included. And that’s what I find very important. Not for me, as if I would need it that much, but you have to stick with them socially.

The social attraction of the Community Dinner appears to be so great to Fred that he exerts himself in order to participate in the event despite his hearing impairment, which causes him to merely hear murmurs in a group. Els (76) shared a similar sort of commitment:

It’s my conviction that if something is organized, you must participate because otherwise the people say: “There is nothing to do around here.” And that, of course, is not how it should be. If they organize something, then you should participate. That is what I assume.

Both Fred and Els exhibit a discourse of active commitment and togetherness in the community. Here, connectedness is not a mere passive undertaking or acquiescence. It consists of the recurring ‘call’ of

their fellow participants—a call to which they seem to delightfully respond by participating. As such, these older people as a social group are taking care of themselves and reaching out to their fellow peers. They are each other's condition for achieving connectedness.

The significant value that many older people attach to achieving togetherness in clubs is further hinted at by the fact that every event—not just the Community Dinner, but also the soccer club, swim club, ice-skating club, and several other associations such as the “Rural Women's Association”—are run by volunteers. Most of the volunteers are older people as well, some of whom participated in this study. Els (76) expressed her sense of togetherness by contributing financially to several of the clubs instead of attending their activities. “You have to do it together,” she said. To her, this is a way to care for the village because she thinks such clubs should continue to exist. According to Els, many other villagers solely contribute financially for this reason as well.

Whereas many older people experience social connectedness with others through ardently contributing to clubs and associations, some quit activities in clubs due to aging. Eva (86), for instance, is still a member of the neighborhood association she helped set up but explained that “you become less embedded in the community as you grow older.” She prefers for younger people to take the lead since she has outgrown its activities. Furthermore, as senescence causes her to experience a lack of energy and back problems, she does not enjoy “ruling the roost” anymore. She explained that, nowadays, she would rather find meaning in life through the bonds with her friends and family.

4. Family

Family members appear to occupy a central place in many of our informants' lives. According to Eva (86), who has 31 grandchildren and has become a great-grandmother four times, she has developed a certain wisdom that her children seem to value. For instance, she helps when they call to ask for her opinion on matters concerning, for example, relations with their parents.

The walls of Hans's (77) living room are decorated with collages of old and new photographs, children's drawings, and little sayings displayed with impressiveness and intimacy. His daughter and son, who live abroad with their partners, each got married recently. While sharing his story, he pointed to a few pictures. He and his wife miss their (grand)children, especially now that their son has returned home after visiting them for four weeks. “I hope to add another few years to my life. Yes, meaning in life to my wife and me is not least our children and grandchildren” he says.

Lucas's (76) old farmhouse harbors many cherished memories. As an adult, Lucas only left his home for two years due to military service, and thus has spent virtually his entire life on the same farm. He recounted:

There is the bedstead in which I was born. I was born during a harsh winter, and the doctor said to my mother: “Go to the living room!” There was no other place that could be heated. Only here was a stove.

The house still appears to fulfill the function of a middle point to which his brothers and sisters return every now and then:

To my brothers and sisters, it's still just lovely to have a bite and a drink together on this old spot. Everyone has their own memories, of course. And my parents came here

before WWII, in 1937. They lived next door until they were very old. My brothers and sisters came to visit—they are very concerned with this little spot. . . they still adore it.

Like Froukje (71) and Ben (71), the married couple Lucas (76) and Inde (71) were unable to have children. While Froukje and Ben seem more confident in feeling a sense of belonging in the communities to which they belong to if one of them dies, Inde seemed to be more worried about the risk of becoming lonely, especially since her husband was diagnosed with cancer. She and Lucas repeatedly mentioned an older woman living in their neighborhood who is no longer able to walk and whose children are busy most of the time. They explain that, for days on end, this woman does not have anyone to talk to except a nurse. When we discussed a possible future without her husband, Inde asked: “But how can you solve this? Well, I think that you have to participate in everything that is organized for older people by any means, then. . .” She seemed hesitant to acknowledge such participation as a true ‘solution’ for overcoming her feelings of loneliness in the event of such a loss. Thus, Inde revealed that connectedness is not something that can be compensated for through participation in activities and associations. While it may emerge to some extent, meaning in life through connectedness may diminish in later life for childless older people like Inde.

By contrast, Fred’s (91) experiences of social connectedness after the passing of his wife emerged from the relationships he enjoys with his son and daughter-in-law. Fred and his wife moved to the village several decades ago. During that period, Fred’s wife was not well and, therefore, his son and his son’s wife invited Fred and his wife to move to one of the houses just one street away from them. To his son’s wife, this was an “ideal” scenario; something for which Fred raised his thumbs by means of approval more than once during the conversation. According to Fred, it was divine intervention that saved the house from being bought by someone else. Fred believed that being able to live close to his son was part of the many “blessings” he received from He “who determines everything, your life, everywhere you go,” and for which he is thankful every day. Nowadays, Fred takes a walk with his son every evening and, with a little help from him and his daughter-in-law, he can manage his own household.

The positive side of Fred’s feelings of connectedness, however, was contrasted with an ominous tone when he spoke of the discord he has experienced with other family members. While he almost violently squeezed the leather of the sofa he sat on, he recounted that his parents could not accept that Fred and his wife were living happily together. Fred did not want to elaborate on this, to anybody. It became painfully clear that he continues to suffer from past miseries. His son tells him to let go of these things, but it seemed to be in vain:

Time and again, you’re allowed to put it [the discord he experienced] down, but every time it occurs to me again. A while ago. . . my son said, “You must not get old cows out of the ditch.”⁶ I said, “Let me tell you something. Those old cows lay rotting in that ditch—they spoil the whole environment. It’s time that someone gets them out!” Do you understand what I mean? But they [his family] don’t understand that. . .

When asked what he considers to be his biggest wish, Fred told that it is to rest, to be able to let go, or to solve his problems. Each of these options appear as impossibilities to Fred, despite his efforts. The fact that his family doesn’t understand him in this regard adds to a sense of socio-emotional isolation in his sorrow, and this impedes his ability to make meaning by coming to terms with his past miseries.

Ada (74) and Bert (85) live with their son’s family on their dairy farm. Although they are officially retired, Ada and Bert still help to run the farm, which is necessary since there is a lot of work to do, 24 hours a day and seven days a week. Before conducting the interview with Ada, Bert gave us a tour of

their property. We found him feeding the cows in the middle of a shed. He was wearing blue overalls and wooden clogs, and he used a rake to spread the dry food in front of the railings. Moving slowly and quietly, Bert spread an air of calmness amidst the excitement of the hungry cows. "The cows know me," he told. "We try to give them a good life." Because his son is unable to do all the work himself, Bert wanted "to keep things going, even though it's becoming less and less." He said he does not really know what else to say about himself or the world, because his work on the farm covers pretty much all of his life.

After finishing the tour, we drank coffee with the raw milk they collect from their cows. When Bert went back to help their son in the sheds, Ada explained that she hopes to survive her husband. "Who is going to take the lead, then. . .?" she asked. Before they and their son had their own farm, Bert lived and worked with his parents and one sibling on the family farm. After he got married, though, the family had to split up the property and divide the meadows, cattle, and machines, which was far from easy. "In the end, it was all grim. . ." Ada explained.

The family problems that were an issue in the past appear to still have an impact on how Ada and Bert relate to, for example, their neighborhood association:

Ada: We don't go to these evenings anymore because it's just not such a . . . Bert doesn't want to meet with them [sibling's family] anymore. No. Back then, many things have been. . . For instance, she said something like, "He's always just reaped the benefits." . . . You just come to hear that he was just a "freeloader." . . . I really found she put me down then.

SC: Yes, I understand. And this you cannot forget?

A: And this I cannot forget. . . . I wish I could forget it.

Although Ada and Bert attend the church services, they avoid going to places such as the Community Dinner where they might potentially encounter these relatives. To them, the most important connection they seem to have is with their son's family. According to Ada, "The most beautiful thing of all is that we can run this farm together."

A few farmhouses over from where Ada and Bert live, Jos (77) and Inge (74) live with their daughter, her husband, and their children. Jos and Inge's house was separated into two apartments, each with its own front door. They chose this style of living because they wanted to support their daughter in buying a house in a place that she liked. Moreover, it was her initiative to live with her parents "next door." During the interview, however, Jos and Inge repeatedly stressed that the *raison d'être* of this intergenerational set-up was not so they could be cared for as they age. On the contrary, they did not want to let their children care for them. Yet, Jos and Inge do share "a good bond" with their children. They find delight in seeing their daughter and her husband, in having coffee together regularly, and providing their grandson with a shed and tools that he can use to repair engines. However, Inge mentioned that, during her former profession in healthcare, she experienced some older people living with their children only to lay in their beds waiting for them to have coffee together. In relation to her own situation, she explained:

It was not our initiative because then one could say, "You become a burden to them" . . . If you are really old and your mobility becomes reduced, then I would prefer not to live here anymore. I mean, for them it would be better. Because if your children live so near and they couldn't help with anything – well, then it would get rather painful. . . .

Not because they wouldn't want [to help], but they also have their own lives. . . . And you don't want to stand in their way.

Her husband Jos also views a future of intergenerational living as an unhealthy situation of "burdening" their children. Thus, they would prefer to either make it on their own or receive professional care, which, according to Jos, "keeps one young." Therefore, they have decided to move to another house in the near future. When I asked Jos and Inge to imagine a scenario in which their daughter voluntarily offered her support if needed, they repeated that they do not want to stand in their children's way.

Ties (91) has five children, three of whom live in the village. In 2009, one daughter returned to the village with her children and husband to live under the same roof with Ties and his wife. In 2013, Ties's wife passed away and Ties became rather immobile. But instead of moving to a long-term care facility, he now has his (grand)children look after him "with all their love" every day. They have divided several care tasks between them, such as administering his daily eye drops, washing laundry, cooking food, and grocery shopping. For bathing, he gets professional homecare. Yet, feeling "privileged" to live in this intergenerational setting is not all roses for Ties. Indeed, he is happy to have his children look after him, but he feels dependent; this again appears to be an experience that causes inner conflict. His experiences of dependency contribute to his conviction that his life is completed, and he expresses his wish to die on an almost daily basis.

Central to the theme of intergenerational living in some of these older adults' stories is the value of independence and its negative counterpart, being dependent—or, as Jos and Inge frequently explained, being a "burden." Moreover, the latter's fear of encumbering their children as a consequence of aging led them to envision precautionary measures. Moving away from their children should prevent their fear from becoming a reality, as well as prevent a situation in which their children living nearby may neglect to visit them. Jos and Inge's future plans and the underlying image of being an unhealthy burden to one's children seem to reflect an increasing understanding of old age in what philosopher Ricca Edmondson (2015, 68) calls "social problem terms." If older people are unable to conform to society's prevalent image of successful aging consisting of a self-appropriated, active, and vital lifestyle, then they risk becoming excluded from meaningful participation in their society or community (Laceulle 2018). Jos and Inge could already envision their future in a care institution. Thus, they risk becoming deprived of the opportunity to enjoy the meaningful connectedness that they now pursue on a daily basis. It is striking, although not surprising, to note how normal they think it is that old age must lead to a social retreat from their meaningful others.

One might expect that the narrative about independence and 'becoming a burden' is more characteristic of modern, neoliberal cultural settings, and that the relatively traditional setting of the Dutch Bible Belt would hold different values.⁷ But our data suggest that this is more complex, and that cultural meanings of dependence and independence in the context of old age are in fact multilayered and often ambiguous.

5. *Transcendent sphere*

In the context of this study, older people seem to experience integration and senses of belonging within different social spheres. The sometimes heartening experiences which these persons accounted for often contribute to meaning making in their lives. However, a sense of social connectedness is not always positive. A negative sense of connectedness seems to apply to the case of Paulus (91), a tiny man with pale, almost transparent, skin. He lives alone in the front-part of a farmer's house that he shares with an older widow who raised 19 children. About a decade ago, the woman's late husband—a member of Paulus's religious community—invited him to move in.

Paulus never got married. He is originally from another area in the Bible Belt and moved to this village at the age of 10. He felt bullied ever since. When reflecting on his youth and adolescence, he described situations of intimidation and disdain: “. . .and as a child, when you play outside, you’re not one of them. Sometimes, they hit me on my head and said to me, ‘You don’t belong here.’ That’s what they said to me, do you understand?” During his childhood, Paulus felt like an outsider. Even later on, he stated, “I was not lucky with who I am, you know. I am only a very tiny man, and people look [down] on you. And I did not do any study. . .” During the interviews, he became emotional several times. “I am a gloomy person, from childhood onwards. Some people are born like that. Such people are unlucky.” Paulus did not feel valued by other people, and this influenced how he experienced life in both the past and present at old age.

Paulus practices a Puritan form of Christianity and perceives his earthly life as a temporal stage in which any hardships are consequences of the original sin.⁸ He and his family initially attended the most orthodox church in the village but, as a teenager, he started to separate from this church and began to join religious home-meetings instead. “I always went to Sunday services until I encountered the people who read sermons at home. I also read sermons myself, . . .we read the old fathers.”⁹ In Dutch, he uses the word *scheiden* several times, while reflecting on his separation from the church. This word brings a heavy connotation to his story; in Dutch, it means both “separation” and “divorce.” Both meanings make sense because leaving a church community, especially several decades ago and in a small village, is an intense deed.¹⁰

In the home-meetings that he joined, certain ancient interpretations of the Bible were and still are fundamental. These texts are based on ideas such as predestination: i.e., that only a few people are elected to enter Heaven. Paulus has experienced disconnection throughout his life, but the home-readers group that he joined at age 14 offered him a radically different experience of connectedness. A poster of “the wide road and the narrow road” is the predominant decoration in his bedroom. He believes in the metaphor of the wide and crowded road that leads towards Hell, and the bumpy, twisting, and narrow road full of hardships and penance that eventually leads to the small gate of Heaven. As Paulus explained, only “one person in a village and two in a town” will enter Heaven, and God elects these people beforehand.

Paulus joined the religious home-meetings with the group led by a man named Mr. Berry. In those days, this man was known locally as a person who had had “a vision,” a sign for being elected by God. Paulus felt gratified that this man and his family accepted him into their community when he was a teenager. He also described a personal experience, an occurrence that happened to him at the age of seven, when he was practicing writing skills at school.

Paulus: I was praised for my handwriting. [In those days,] you had to write with thin and thick lines—maybe you remember. That was not easy, and my teacher said: “The pupil who writes the most beautifully will win a portrait.” I won the first prize. I was elected . . . and I received this little portrait. It was made of black velvet, and there in gold-colored paint, it mentioned [*gets emotional*], written, “Reconcile yourself with God [*Laat u met God verzoenen*].” That was what was written. It was then already that . . . you understand? But I did not realize it then. It was then that He said, “This and this person will come to Heaven.”

Pien Bos: So, this was a sign that you will go to Heaven?

P: Yes, sure, yes. But remember, this is bought with blood, with the son of God. . . [*long silence*]

In this conversation, Paulus offered a glimpse of a rare earthly success that occurred when he won a contest for the most beautiful handwriting. He also shared the most important holy message that he received, which he acknowledged in retrospect as a sign of 'election' to Heaven. However, he immediately downplayed what he shared because, according to his faith, vanity is sinful and, compared to God, people are nothing but original sinners from the day of birth onwards. In terms of meaning-making, Paulus is rather ambiguous. On the one hand, he appeared to have extremely low self-esteem, and this seemed to restrain his lust for life and consequently his sense of meaning in life. He appeared depressed during the interview, sharing that he already had "his legs in his grave" and was "in the front row," which filled him with mixed feelings. When asked, "What makes life worth living for you at this age?" he answered:

It is yet the final evening-sob separated from God [*'de laatste avondsnek bij het leven van God vandaan'*]. But living life as a human being—that is something that you can't let go easily, isn't it? . . . Death is a reality for every human being, and that is honest and true. "*Wie leeft er, die den slaap des doods niet eens zal slapen?*" [he quotes Psalm 89:19].

The idea of dying worries him, but it also seemed to soothe him that it would also come with relief and salvation.

From childhood onwards, Paulus experienced disconnectedness with his peers. He felt like a loner in his village, among colleagues when working as a clerk and, between the lines, he expressed that he even felt inferior within his family. As a young teenager, he found an escape. The social embedding offered by this isolated home-reading group seemed to mitigate his social pain. Although he also felt inferior in this community, he looked up to leaders who were generally respected as people elected by God, and their status reflected upon him. This social embedding boosted his self-worth. But far more important is the divine connection that he experienced. Paulus believes that Doomsday is getting close, but he is certain that, by God's grace, he will receive redemption. This makes sense to him since it is the only meaning in life that counts for him. His global meaning system of extremely orthodox Protestantism coincides here with the situational meaning he derives from his beliefs in this situation (Park 2017a).

Conclusion

Throughout this article, we have focused on connectedness as a form of meaning-making for older people. Different types of connections appeared to be of paramount importance in our study of the lives of these older villagers in the Netherlands. In particular, the insights from our study point to three distinct forms of connectedness: social, physical, and transcendent. As our analysis in this paper suggests, the village offers strong social cohesion, and older people benefit from being noticed by other villagers. Social connectedness occurs in various social spheres, and being known and noticed frequently result in different forms of emotional or practical care. These various forms of social connectedness seem to make life meaningful.

However, social connectedness does not always result in positive experiences. The village leaves little room for living in anonymity, and being known and noticed seems to come with its downsides. Some older villagers experience intentional exclusion or are the subject of judgement and gossip. Since those who are judged or excluded may simultaneously experience a deep connectedness within the social spheres of the village, church, and family, it is difficult for them to remain indifferent and unaffected by

these negative consequences. How does this dark side of social connectedness influence experiences of existential meaning? Does being known and noticed, even in the case of nasty gossip, still add meaning in life? How does not being noticed at all lead to experiences that can be described in terms of meaning(lessness)? These questions remain open and require further research.

As we indicated in this paper, connection does not only emerge in social forms. Some older villagers seemed to experience a deep connection with their physical context as well (*cf.* Rehak 2019). The village environment, with its buildings, houses, meadows, trees, and canals, evoke reminiscences. Their physical setting conveys past experiences worth remembering and consequently adds meaning to life on a daily basis. Many of the older people were born and raised in this village, and some of them may actually die in the same spot as they were born. As such, these older people appear to experience a strong sense of belonging and attachment to the village. Some of them feel deeply rooted and explicitly express their preference to, for instance, be buried in the local graveyard—in almost the same exact soil from which some of them made their living as farmers. This sense of belonging acts as a significant meaning-maker.

The physical and material settings in which people live—the dairy farms that provide their income, the animals, the houses—are not merely the impersonal background conditions that shape their lives. Instead, they are a source of emotional relatedness and continuity for our informants, who feel responsible for taking care of their surroundings (and each other) in a broad sense. This could be explained by the fact that taking care of the earth and being good to other people as well as livestock is deeply rooted in Calvinistic religion; this is sometimes referred to as stewardship (“*Rentmeesterschap*”). “Serving” in this broad sense, based on respect for the creation and the creator of life, appears to add to meaning in life. Further investigation is required to understand how different religious or spiritual orientations may play a role in transforming conditions of the physical and material world to sources of meaning that seemingly transcend their physicality.

The last form of connectedness emerges, paradoxically, from denouncing these forms of social and physical sources of connectedness. Sometimes, this is a voluntary withdrawal from the social activities or housing in the community, but other times, exclusion and disconnection fuel the search for different means of connectedness. Again, religious orientation may provide a possible explanation for transcendent connectedness. Paulus, for example, follows an extreme form of Puritan Protestantism, and the ideology of this Puritanism *commands* a disconnection with the world. This turns his crisis into a virtue with eternal blessing as a reward. This forecast is his main carrier of meaning in life. With detachment from all worldly candidates that could provide elements of meaning—such as purpose, self-worth, or control, and seeking refuge exclusively in a message of divine salvation—social and physical connectedness seem to be renounced in favor of a transcendent connectedness. This raises interesting questions about the relation between the different types of connectedness as well as the dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion.

After analyzing these different spheres, several questions remain for further research. Can one sphere compensate for another, or can the withdrawal from one affect a person’s connectedness in another? Park (2017a, 16) distinguishes global meaning and situational meaning, and calls for an integrated perspective. Her theory resonates inductively and has enriched our analysis. She claims that the discrepancy between the global and situational meaning results in distress, and that such distress may result in changes to people’s meaning-making process. Our findings support this theory. For instance, Paulus reconfigured his global belief (i.e., religion) as a result of the experiences that he appraised, such as the bullying and the way he retrospectively interpreted the portrait that he won as a child. Schlegel and Hicks (2017, 29) state that “shared systems of meaning such as religion and culture . . . often provide

answers.” Nevertheless, “. . . people must make personal choices about whether they subscribe to those answers” (29).

With the room to manoeuvre and thus with agency in mind, more deductive empirical research is needed; in particular, research that applies Park’s theory in certain cultural settings may offer valuable insights into individual differences in the meaning-making process. This is important because, according to Schlegel and Hicks (2017, 29), individual differences in a person’s need for meaning are often overlooked. As such, we argue that Derkx’s (2013; 2020) list of pre-defined meaning-needs should not be considered to be an exhaustive set that is applicable to every person’s life, regardless of their material and socio-cultural surroundings. Rather, we suggest that Derkx’s needs of meaning should function as concepts that should make researchers more sensitive to investigating older people’s experiences of meaning making in the field.

Notes

1. The name of the village is – of course – known to the authors. To hide our informants’ identities, all names have been changed or are not mentioned.
2. In the Netherlands in 2017, fewer than 50% of the population identified as being a member of a religious community (Schmeets 2018). Approximately 3% of the Dutch population is orthodox Protestant. In this village’s local elections in 2018, 82% voted for a Christian party. The most orthodox party SGP received 24% of the votes and another orthodox party CU (Christian Union) 17%.
3. This study took place in the context of a larger interdisciplinary research program “Aging well,” which has been conducted at the University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht, the Netherlands, since 2008.
4. People in this village will not use the word ‘orthodox’. They would rather use the word ‘heavy’ in the sense of ‘heavy in weight’ but people will use this word in a negative sense, not for themselves but for somebody else. The word ‘orthodox’ has a more neutral connotation. That’s why we use this word.
5. In 2018–2021, the Dutch government supported facilities for aging in place for older people with €340.000.000. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/zorg-en-ondersteuning-thuis/langer-zelfstandig-wonen> (visited 2021-1-27)
6. Fred used a Dutch saying “To not get old cows out of the ditch,” which means “to let by-gones be by-gones.” However, Fred elaborated on this idiom by using more metaphors – e.g., the cows rotting in the ditch and spoiling the environment. This may refer to the worsening of family relationships and maybe even his life because of old conflicts.
7. The subject of ‘burdening’ frequently came to the forefront in the life stories. The perception of old age as a burden can be situated in cultural narratives that prevail in many industrialized societies (Laceulle 2018). Furthermore, international human rights specialist Alison Kesby (2017, 373) suggests that the social role of older people may be reduced to economic cost (to productivity) or concern through these narratives, which may be complemented by sinister metaphors such as the ‘grey tsunami’ or ‘demographic time-bomb’. The ageism inherent in such depictions of older people seems to have been reinforced in many socio-economic discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic (see, for example, Søraa, R. A., Mandzi, F., Kharas, M.W., Marchetti, A., Massaro, D., Riva, G. and Serrano, J.A. 2020. Othering and Deprioritizing Older Adults’ Lives: Ageist Discourses During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Europe’s Journal of Psychology* 16 (4): 532-541. doi:10.5964/ejop.v16i4.4127).
8. ‘The original sin’ is the doctrine that humans inherit a sinful status through the fact of birth. This sin and guilt that all people hold in God’s eyes is caused by Eve and Adam’s defiance in eating the forbidden apple in the Garden of Eden.
9. Interpretations of the Bible and sermons from a few particular ministers from the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries.
10. A church community is supposed to be Christ’s bride. See, for instance, 2 Corinthians 11:2.

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