

# The Role of Meaning in the Retirement Transition: Scoping Review

Rachel E. Wood, PhD<sup>ib</sup> and Nancy A. Pachana, PhD<sup>\*ib</sup>

School of Psychology, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.

\*Address correspondence to: Nancy A. Pachana, PhD. E-mail: [n.pachana@psy.uq.edu.au](mailto:n.pachana@psy.uq.edu.au)

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## Abstract

**Background and Objectives:** The retirement transition is a period of major change and instability, which may challenge a person's sense of meaning in life. This scoping review sought to characterize the current research on the role of meaning in the retirement transition.

**Research Design and Methods:** This scoping review was conducted according to Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) and PRISMA reporting guidelines. Database searches of Scopus, PubMed, PsycINFO, Social Science Database, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global yielded 738 records (after duplicates removed). Accessory searches yielded an additional 286 records. Eligible articles included peer-reviewed literature and theses (qualitative and quantitative) that explored an aspect of meaning in the context of the retirement transition.

**Results:** A total of 30 studies (21 qualitative and 9 quantitative) were included. These studies examined a broad range of research questions on different aspects of meaning—meaning in life, meaning-making, meaningful engagement, and meaning of retirement. Most were single, stand-alone studies (not part of a broader research program) that included only a single time point. Only 6 studies were longitudinal.

**Discussion and Implications:** This review revealed a heterogeneous set of studies and identified gaps in reporting of important participant characteristics, lack of conceptual clarity in defining meaning, and few longitudinal studies. There is a need for more theoretically driven, programs of research that include longitudinal designs, ideally using mixed-methods approaches, to build a richer understanding of the role of meaning during this major life transition.

**Keywords:** Life transitions, Meaning-making, Purpose, Retire

Retirement from work represents a major life transition. While many people adjust well to retirement (Henning et al., 2016), others find the transition especially challenging (Hansson et al., 2018, 2020; Lahdenperä et al., 2022; Pinquart & Schindler, 2007; van Solinge & Henkens, 2008; Wang, 2007). Despite this, retirement planning focuses almost exclusively on financial preparedness (James et al., 2016). However, money alone does not guarantee a satisfying and meaningful retirement. People—at all stages of life—do not simply want to fill their time; they want to do things that are meaningful to them.

## Meaning in Life

Meaning in life may be defined as having a sense of purpose, the perception of significance (feeling one's life matters), and a sense of coherence, that is, life “makes sense” (Baumeister, 2022; George & Park, 2016; Heintzelman & King, 2014; King & Hicks, 2021; Steger et al., 2006). Meaning in life is considered a fundamental human need (Frankl, 2008; Maslow, 1943), and a key component of successful aging (Greenblatt-Kimron et al., 2022; Pachana & Baumeister, 2021). Across people of all ages, higher levels of meaning in life have been associated with lower levels

of all-cause mortality (Krause, 2009), lower depressive symptoms (Greenblatt-Kimron et al., 2022; Westerhof et al., 2010), reduced suicidal ideation (Heisel et al., 2016), greater life satisfaction and higher positive affect (Steger et al., 2009), better physical health (e.g., Haugan & Dezutter, 2021), and improved coping and adjustment to illness (e.g., Almeida et al., 2022).

## Why Study Meaning in Retirement?

Much of the meaning-related literature has focused on restoring meaning following stressful, unexpected life events, for example, bereavement, trauma, or chronic illness (Heine et al., 2006; Neimeyer et al., 2006; Park, 2010, 2013; Park & George, 2013; Stroebe & Schut, 2001). Less attention has been given to the role of meaning in normative, yet often challenging, life transitions such as retirement (Altmaier, 2020; Dewitte & Dezutter, 2021). Because work is an important source of meaning for many people (Kojola & Moen, 2016; Ward & King, 2017), retirement (cessation of work) can present multiple challenges, for example, loss of meaningful roles, identity, and sense of purpose attached to work (Atchley, 1989; Wang et al., 2011, 2014). Retirement is an especially interesting life transition because

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**Table 1.** Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<p>1.<b>Participants:</b> people (any gender) who are in any stage of the retirement transition: If sample does not include exclusively people pre-, during, or post-retirement, the study may be included if the majority of the participants are in one of these categories OR the study provides a separate analysis of the eligible subgroup.</p> <p>2.<b>Concept:</b> must explore or measure an aspect of meaning or related constructs (e.g., purpose, coherence, congruence, mattering) in the context of adjustment to retirement.</p> <p>3.<b>Context:</b> retirement transition, which includes: Preretirement which includes contemplating, thinking about, or planning for retirement During retirement transition including partially retired, engaging in bridge employment Postretirement which includes people who are fully retired, and those who have reengaged with paid or unpaid work (e.g., “unretired,” encore career). No upper limit was placed on time since retirement to capture studies in which people who may have been retired for several years are asked to reflect on meaning during their retirement transition.</p> <p>4.<b>Language:</b> English only</p> <p>5.<b>Publication date:</b> 2000 or after (and data also collected post 2000)</p> <p>6.<b>Types of sources:</b> published in (or accepted for publication in) peer-reviewed journals; dissertations or theses may be included where data have not been published in peer-reviewed journals.</p> <p>7.<b>Study design:</b> any methodology including qualitative (e.g., phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, qualitative description, action research, and feminist research); quantitative, and mixed-methods; any study design including cross-sectional, longitudinal, and interventions that are meaning-centered or focus on meaning-related outcomes</p>	<p>1.<b>Participants:</b> studies will be excluded if samples are described as being “retired” but where the context was not meaning in retirement (e.g., studies that use “retiree” to refer to older adults not in the context of retirement or investigate transition to retirement community living)</p> <p>2.<b>Concept:</b> studies will be excluded if meaning or related constructs are not a focus in the study aims, i.e., meaning is not included in the research aim or purpose and/or research questions and/or data collection instruments—interview guide/questions (for qualitative studies) or measurement instruments (for quantitative studies)</p> <p>Qualitative studies in which meaning or related constructs emerged as themes from interviews but meaning was not a focus of the study aims or interview questions, will be excluded.</p> <p>3.<b>Context:</b> studies that investigate meaning in older adults (but <i>not</i> in the context of retirement) will be excluded. Sport and military retirement will also be excluded given the context-specificity of retirement in these fields.</p> <p>4.<b>Types of sources:</b> non-empirical studies, e.g., opinion pieces, editorials, chapters that do not contain data, philosophical perspectives on meaning of life, and gray literature (other than theses/dissertations) will not be considered for inclusion.</p> <p>5.<b>Study design:</b> reviews, theoretical papers, opinion pieces, and commentaries will be excluded, as will papers that report data but are predominantly theoretical.</p>

it often occurs at a time of life when people are simultaneously navigating the impacts of aging, which can also challenge meaning (Pachana & Baumeister, 2021). Despite this, we know relatively little about peoples’ experiences of meaning during retirement, and how meaning may influence retirement adjustment.

## Rationale and Research Aim

Preliminary searches of the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (DARE), Campbell Collaboration, International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews (PROSPERO), Open Science Framework (OSF), and relevant electronic databases revealed several reviews that explored aspects of retirement adjustment *or* meaning in life (Barbosa et al., 2016; Cassanet et al., 2023; Glaw et al., 2017; Greenblatt-Kimron et al., 2022; Hupkens et al., 2016; Rodríguez-Monforte et al., 2020; Steger, 2022; Vos & Vitali, 2018). However, we did not find any recently completed or in-progress reviews combining *both* meaning in life and retirement adjustment.

As such, the primary aim of this scoping review was to characterize the nature and extent of the academic literature that has combined these two fields. We wanted to know what questions are being asked, which aspects of meaning have been explored, and types of studies and methodologies used to address these questions. Secondary aims were to explore the theoretical frameworks informing research on this topic and identify knowledge gaps and avenues for future research. A scoping review methodology was chosen because it is useful for mapping evidence in a field, exploring approaches and methodologies, and identifying gaps in existing knowledge (Peters, Godfrey, et al., 2020; Pollock et al., 2023; Tricco et al., 2018).

## Research Design and Methods

### Scoping Review Design

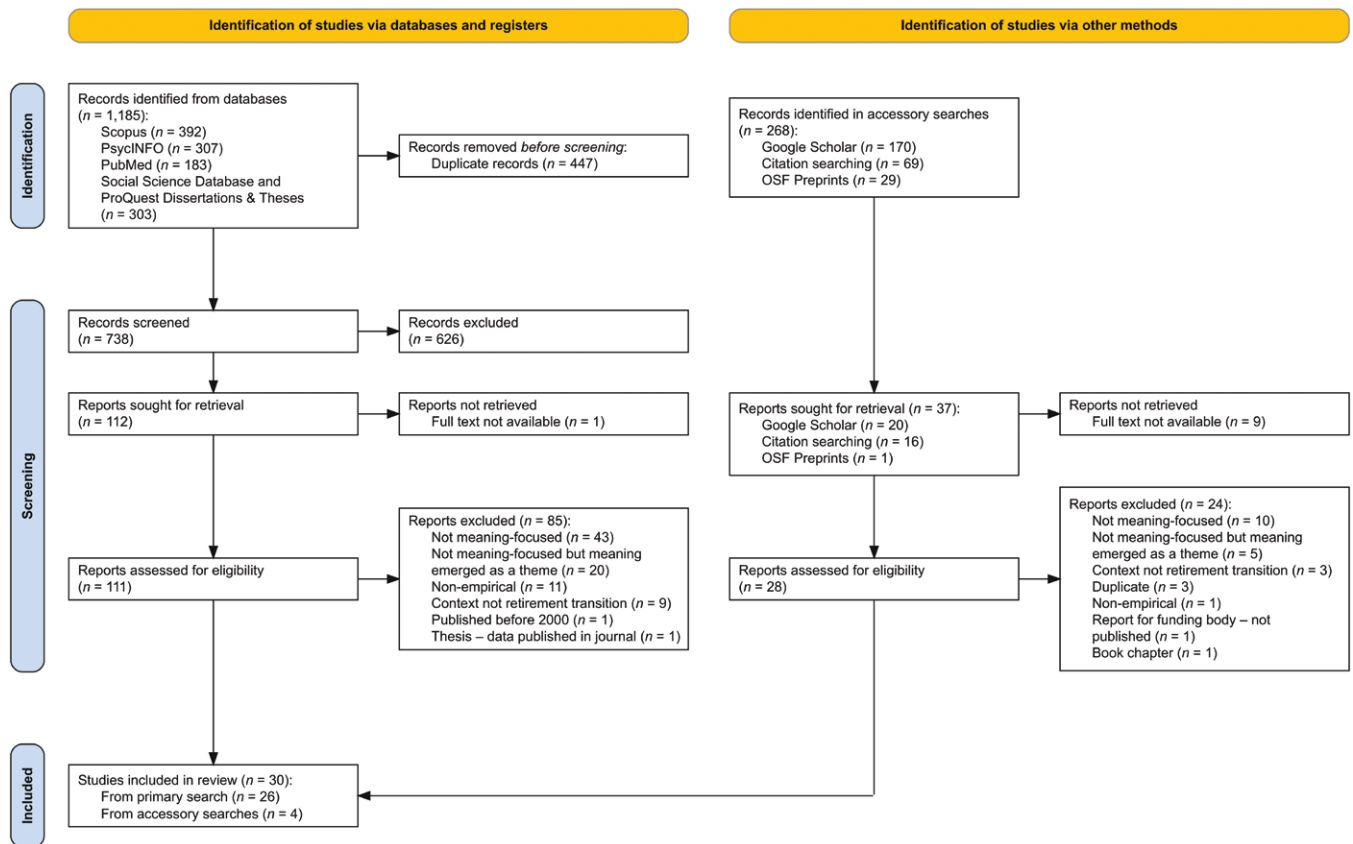
This scoping review was developed and conducted according to the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) guidelines for scoping reviews (Peters, Marnie, et al., 2020) and reported in line with the PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (PRISMA-ScR; Tricco et al., 2018). A protocol was developed and preregistered on the OSF: <https://osf.io/wfgvh>. The PRISMA checklist for scoping reviews is included in [Supplementary Table S1](#).

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Eligibility criteria (Table 1) were developed using the population/participants, concept, and context (PCC) approach as outlined in Peters, Marnie, et al. (2020). Briefly, participants could be at any stage of the retirement transition (pre-, during, or post-retirement). Studies had to explore at least one component of meaning (e.g., mattering, purpose, coherence) or a meaning-related concept in the context of the retirement transition. Sources eligible for inclusion were peer-reviewed empirical research articles and theses and dissertations. Studies could be qualitative or quantitative. Gray literature was not included because the aim was to characterize the academic literature on this topic. Articles had to be published in English and published between 2000 and the date of the primary literature search (3 July 2023).

### Search Strategy

The search strategy was developed in consultation with a research librarian. [Supplementary Table S2](#) contains the search record, including syntax for each database. The search incorporated three components: (1) retirement, (2) adjustment or transition, and (3) meaning and related constructs.



**Figure 1.** PRISMA flow diagram of identification, screening, and selection of studies.

Meaning-related terms were informed by previously published models of meaning in life (Supplementary Table S3). We took a deliberately inclusive approach, including articles addressing various aspects of meaning, for example, meaning in life, meaning-making, and meaningful engagement. We also included studies that investigated *purpose in life* because purpose is a component of meaning (Baumeister, 2022; George & Park, 2016; Heintzelman & King, 2014; Krause, 2004; Krause & Hayward, 2014; Martela & Steger, 2016; Reker & Wong, 1988, 2012; Wong, 2012) and, despite being distinct constructs, they have been used interchangeably in the literature (George & Park, 2013).

For the primary literature search, titles and abstracts were searched across the following databases: Scopus, PubMed, PsycINFO (via EBSCO), and Social Science Database (via ProQuest). ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global was also searched to locate relevant theses containing data not published in peer-reviewed journals. Accessory searches of OSF Preprints and Google Scholar were also conducted (see Supplementary Table S4).

### Screening and Selecting Sources of Evidence

Articles were imported into EndNote 20.6 (Clarivate, PA) and duplicates removed before importing articles into Covidence (Veritas Health Innovation, Melbourne, Australia) for screening. Prior to screening, eligibility criteria were pilot tested by one reviewer (R.E. Wood) on a small sample of articles. Criteria were amended for clarity, and titles and abstracts were then independently screened by two reviewers (R.E. Wood and N.A. Pachana). Full text screening was conducted by the same two reviewers. All conflicts were resolved by

discussion. Records identified through accessory searches were screened by one reviewer (R.E. Wood) and decisions verified by the second reviewer (N.A. Pachana).

### Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data extraction was performed by one reviewer (R.E. Wood). Per guidelines for conducting scoping reviews (Pollock et al., 2023), a data extraction form and guide were developed, piloted, and modified iteratively during data extraction. The following variables were extracted (see Supplementary Table S5): study characteristics, methodological approaches, participant characteristics, data collection methods and instruments, and meaning- and retirement-related theories used to inform the study design. Research questions and aims are detailed in Supplementary Table S6. Data were summarized using descriptive statistical analysis and presented in tables with accompanying narrative synthesis (per Pollock et al., 2023). An Excel spreadsheet with all extracted data is available on request.

## Results

### Search Results

The process for selecting articles and reasons for exclusion are reported in the PRISMA flow chart (Figure 1). The primary database search yielded 1,185 articles. After removing duplicates, the remaining 738 articles were imported into Covidence for title and abstract screening. After excluding 626 irrelevant records, 112 records were sought for retrieval. Full texts were located for 111 of these. Twenty-six studies met the eligibility criteria and were included in the review.

A further 286 articles were identified through accessory searches, yielding an additional four eligible articles (see [Figure 1](#) and [Supplementary Table S4](#)). This resulted in a total of 30 articles included in this scoping review.

### Characteristics of Included Articles

[Table 2](#) provides an overview of the characteristics of included studies. [Supplementary Table S5](#) contains details of key study characteristics, methodologies, and participant characteristics for each study. Of the 30 studies, 21 (70.0%) were empirical, peer-reviewed research articles, and the other 9 (30.0%) were doctoral-level theses (PhD or professional doctorates in education or psychology). Twenty-one studies (70.0%) used qualitative data collection methods, and the remaining nine (30.0%) used quantitative approaches.

Studies were published between 2006 and 2023, with half published within the last 5 years. Just over one third (36.7%) were conducted in the United States, four (13.3%) in Canada, three (10%) each in Australia and the United Kingdom, one (3.3%) each in Denmark, India, Ireland, Portugal, Singapore, Slovakia, Sweden, and Switzerland, and one with samples from both Poland and Germany. Primary authors were mostly affiliated with faculties or departments of psychology (26.7%), health (16.7%), or social sciences (13.3%). Each of the primary research articles was published in a different journal. Journals covered a range of fields including psychology, social sciences, arts and humanities, medicine, nursing, health professions, environmental science, business, and economics based on subject area classifications from [SCImago \(n.d.\)](#).

### Participant characteristics

Sample size ranged between 5 and 120 for qualitative studies and between 178 and 8,113 for quantitative studies. The two interventions had sample sizes of 6 ([Wilson et al., 2013](#)) and 27 ([Heisel et al., 2020](#)). Twenty-one (70.0%) studies recruited both men and women, five recruited only men, and four recruited only women. The mean age of retired participants ranged from 59 to 77 years. Most studies reported nationality of participants, and 19 (63.3%) of studies also provided some further information on ethnicity, cultural background, language, or religious group. Only seven (23.3%) studies reported numerical data on socioeconomic status (SES), six (20%) provided brief descriptions of SES, and two (6.7%) indicated source of retirement income. Nineteen (66.7%) studies reported education level. Sixteen (53.3%) studies reported previous or current occupation, and a further two reported the proportion of people in white- or blue-collar occupations ([Hansson et al., 2023](#); [Yemiscigil et al., 2021](#)). Most studies (70.0%) reported relationship status and/or living arrangements, with most participants classified as married or partnered.

### Sample selection

Nine (30.0%) studies stated the data were part of a larger study, and the remaining 21 studies (70.0%) appeared to recruit unique samples. Purposive and convenience sampling were the most common sampling methods (see [Table 2](#)).

### Retirement status and duration

Approximately half of the studies (53.3%) included people who were retired. Eleven studies (36.7%) included a mix of retired and preretirement people, three of which included a subgroup that transitioned to retirement during the study ([Hansson et al., 2023](#); [Steiner & Amabile, 2022](#); [Yemiscigil et](#)

**Table 2.** Overview of Characteristics of Included Articles

Study Characteristic	<i>n</i> (%)
Type of evidence source	
Primary research article	21 (70.0%)
Thesis	9 (30.0%)
Geographical region study conducted	
North America (United States and Canada)	15 (50.0%)
United Kingdom and Europe	10 (33.3%)
Oceania (Australia)	3 (10.0%)
Asia	2 (6.7%)
Methodology	
Qualitative	21 (70.0%)
Quantitative	9 (30.0%)
Study design	
Cross-sectional/single time point	18 (60.0%)
Longitudinal	6 (20.0%)
Multiple case study	2 (6.7%)
Intervention	2 (6.7%)
Time-lagged design	1 (3.3%)
Longitudinal + cross-sectional	1 (3.3%)
Stand-alone/part of larger study?	
Unique sample	21 (70.0%)
Part of larger study	9 (30.0%)
Sampling strategy	
Purposive and/or snowballing	16 (53.3%)
Convenience sampling	6 (20.0%)
Subset of national sample	2 (6.7%)
Quasi-random (cluster)	1 (3.3%)
Unclear (likely nonrandom)	3 (10.0%)
Not reported	2 (6.7%)
Method of data collection	
Interview	17 (57%)
Interview + creative element	3 (10%)
Survey (self-report questionnaire)	9 (30%)
Panel discussion	1 (3%)
Retirement status of participants	
Retired	16 (53.3%)
Mix (retired/not yet retired)	11 (36.7%)
Pre- and post-retirement (longitudinal)	2 (6.7%)
Preretirement	1 (3.3%)
Reported retirement duration ( <i>n</i> = 29)	
Yes (or can calculate from data)	15 (51.7%)
Range indicated per inclusion criteria	6 (20.7%)
No	8 (27.6%)
Voluntariness of retirement ( <i>n</i> = 29)	
Mixed	6 (20.7%)
Voluntary	4 (13.8%)
Involuntary	1 (3.5%)
Not reported	18 (62.1%)
Reported ethnicity/cultural background	
Yes	19 (63.3%)
No	11 (36.7%)
Reported socioeconomic status	
Yes—numeric indicator	7 (23.3%)
Yes—description	6 (20.0%)



**Table 2.** Continued

Study Characteristic	<i>n</i> (%)
Yes—source of retirement income	2 (6.7%)
No	15 (50.0%)
Reported education level	
Yes	20 (66.7%)
No	10 (33.3%)
Reported occupation	
Yes	16 (53.3%)
Yes (indicted only blue/white collar)	2 (6.7%)
No	12 (40.0%)
Reported relationship status	
Yes	21 (70.0%)
No	9 (30.0%)

Note: *n* = 30 unless otherwise indicated.

al., 2021). A further two longitudinal studies (6.7%) studied people both pre- and post-retirement (August, 2011; Cahill et al., 2022), and the other one (3.3%) included people who were preretirement (“soon to be retired”; Miller, 2016). Criteria for “retired” varied between studies: eight defined retirement as the complete cessation of work and/or receiving a pension (Cabral et al., 2014; Eagers et al., 2018; Froidevaux et al., 2016; Halama et al., 2021; Hansson et al., 2023; Hunt, 2012; Malette & Oliver, 2006; Yemiscigil et al., 2021). Yemiscigil et al. (2021) also differentiated between completely retired, partly retired, and not retired. A further five studies included people who were semi-retired or working postretirement, defined differently in each study (Burr, 2009; Coelho et al., 2023; Gruszczyńska et al., 2020; Taylor, 2022; Zandlo, 2014). Thirteen studies stated participants must be retired but did not define it, and three relied on self-reported retirement status (Adler, 2016; Gettings, 2019; Hall & Birtles, 2022).

Of the 29 studies that included people who had retired, only 15 (51.7%) reported the duration of retirement or provided sufficient data to calculate it, with duration ranging from several months to 27 years. A further six (20.7%) did not report duration but inclusion criteria provided some indication.

### Retirement voluntariness

Voluntariness of retirement was either reported or could be derived from context in only 11 (37.9%) studies: 4 reported retirement was voluntary (Cabral et al., 2014; Cahill et al., 2022; Eagers et al., 2018; Ellis et al., 2017), 6 included a mix of voluntary and involuntary (Adler, 2016; Brown, 2014; Cousineau & Misener, 2019; Hansson et al., 2023; Kristensen et al., 2023; Malette & Oliver, 2006), and 1 included people for whom retirement was expected due to mandatory retirement age but not necessarily welcomed (Chan et al., 2015). One further study used voluntariness as a control variable but did not report it (Froidevaux et al., 2016).

### Primary Research Aims of Included Studies: What Questions Are Being Asked?

Studies addressed a broad range of meaning-related questions (see Tables 3 and 4 for a summary of topics for qualitative and quantitative studies, respectively). Supplementary Table S6 provides further details of the research aims and questions for each study, relevant meaning-focused questions from

interview guides (qualitative studies), and meaning-related outcome measures (quantitative studies).

### Methods of Data Collection

Each of the nine quantitative studies used a different self-report measure of meaning or meaning-related constructs (see Table 4 for details).

Of the 21 qualitative studies, 19 used individual, semi-structured interviews, most conducted face-to-face in a location chosen by participants. For the other two, one was a panel discussion about sources of meaning in retirement from academia (Ellis et al., 2017), and another used Life Review to explore meaning-related themes (Malette & Oliver, 2006).

Sixteen studies (76.2%) stated they used an interview guide and provided it in the article or supplementary material (not accessible for one article). The remaining five (23.8%) provided broad interview topics or examples of interview questions (August, 2011; Cousineau & Misener, 2019; Gettings, 2019; Hall & Birtles, 2022; Wilson et al., 2013). Only six studies described how the interview guide was developed.

Three studies included additional creative approaches to facilitate the interview process. Hunt (2012) asked participants to share a personal artwork representing their retirement experience to stimulate discussion regarding meaning of retirement. Hall and Birtles (2022) used a brief writing task to tailor questions for the main interview 3 months later. Cabral et al. (2014) asked participants about experiences in the retirement transition related to seven topics to facilitate reflection in the subsequent interview.

### Theoretical Frameworks

#### Retirement adjustment

Several models of retirement adjustment were discussed in the theoretical background for studies including: role theory (Ashforth, 2001; discussed in Adler, 2016; Halama et al., 2021; Hansson et al., 2023; Liu & Allan, 2023); continuity theory (Atchley, 1989; discussed in Burr, 2009; Cahill et al., 2022; Froidevaux et al., 2016; Halama et al., 2021; Hall & Birtles, 2022; Miller, 2016); life-course perspectives (Elder, 1995; Moen, 1996; discussed in Dhal, 2017; Halama et al., 2021); and resource-based dynamic model of retirement adjustment (Wang et al., 2011; discussed in Froidevaux et al., 2016; Halama et al., 2021).

Other theories applied to studying the retirement transition included self-determination theory (Froidevaux et al., 2016; Gruszczyńska et al., 2020); adult development perspectives and successful aging (Cabral et al., 2014); generativity, salutogenesis, and sense of coherence approach (Brown, 2014); Schwartz’s personal values (Gruszczyńska et al., 2020); successful aging and generativity (Hunt, 2012); contributory model of successful aging (Froidevaux et al., 2016); conscious aging and aging as a complex system (Miller, 2016); model of human occupation (Eagers et al., 2018); doing, being, becoming, and belonging (Cahill et al., 2022); temporal comparison theory and the selection, optimization, and compensation model (Burr, 2009); construal level theory (Steiner & Amabile, 2022); identity theories (Adler, 2016); and innovation theory (Adler, 2016; Cousineau & Misener, 2019). Also, Zandlo (2014) referred to Bridges’ (2009) three-stage model of life transitions (letting go, neutral zone, and new beginnings; as cited in Zandlo, 2014) and Sundstrom’s (2007) four-stage model specific to the retirement transition (relinquish, recess, redefine, and reengage; as cited in Zandlo, 2014).

**Table 3.** Summary of Topics Covered in Qualitative Research Studies ( $n = 21$ )

Study	Topic/Theme
Adler (2016); Chan et al. (2015); Eagers et al. (2018); Ellis et al. (2017)	Changes in meaning in life following retirement from a previously meaningful career
August (2011); Cahill et al. (2022)	Changes in perceived meaning of retirement across the retirement transition
Cousineau and Misener (2019); Hall and Birtles (2022); Wilson et al. (2013)	Role of meaningful engagement/occupation in retirement through valued social roles including: golf club membership (Hall & Birtles, 2022), volunteering (Cousineau & Misener, 2019), and an intergenerational mentoring intervention (Wilson et al., 2013)
Brown (2014)	The role of personally constructed meanings and identities regarding work, retirement, and hobbies in maintaining a positive sense of self in retirement
Cabral et al. (2014)	Navigating the loss of professional identity and the role of meaningful engagement in adjusting to retirement in women who self-identify as having a meaningful retirement life
Dhal (2017)	How people structure life in retirement to foster meaning and purpose
Gettings (2019)	Meanings people assign to retirement
Halama et al. (2021)	Identifying meaning-making processes and sources of meaning in retirement
Hunt (2012)	Engagement with the visual arts as a form of meaning-making in retirement adjustment
Kristensen et al. (2023)	Reflections on meaning in life in the retirement transition
Malette and Oliver (2006)	The role of Life Review as a meaning-making process in adjustment to retirement
Miller (2016)	Exploring the expectations, values, and needs for a meaningful retirement
Steiner and Amabile (2022)	The role of personal narratives about work and retirement in meaning-making during the retirement transition
Taylor (2022)	How people, who perceive their lives as meaningful, find meaning after retirement
Zandlo (2014)	The process, and outcomes, of searching for purpose in life when approaching or transitioning to retirement

**Table 4.** Summary of Topics and Measurement Instruments in Quantitative Research Studies ( $n = 9$ )

Study	Topic/Theme	Measurement Instrument
Burr (2009)	Relationship between perceived changes in personal values and perception of personal growth, and meaning in life and other measures of wellbeing in retirement	6-item Meaning subscale of the Orientations to Happiness (Peterson et al., 2005)
Coelho et al. (2023)	Biopsychosocial predictors of purpose in life in both older workers and people who have retired	Purpose in Life test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964)
Froidevaux et al. (2016)	Role of mattering as a mediator of life satisfaction and positive affect in retirement	5-item General Mattering Scale (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981)
Gruszczyńska et al. (2020)	Meaning in life as a predictor of well-being in retirement	Shortened meaning in life scale (Krause, 2007)
Hansson et al. (2023)	Personal motivation to do something meaningful as a predictor of engaging with work postretirement	Single item for measuring motives for working postretirement: "I want to continue to do something meaningful" (p. 182)
Heisel et al. (2020)	Effectiveness of a meaning-centered men's group intervention on meaning in life and other measures of wellbeing in men struggling with the retirement transition	40-item Experienced Meaning in Life Scale (Heisel, 2009)
Liu and Allan (2023)	Relationship between reminiscence functions and previously meaningful work, and meaning in life in retirement	5-item Presence of Meaning in Life subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006)
Miranda-Chan and Nakamura (2016)	Effect of generativity via previous academic mentoring on meaning in life in retirement	4-item scale of coalesced-ego-integrity (Ryff & Heinicke, 1983)
Yemiscigil et al. (2021)	Explored causal impact of retirement on purpose in life and characteristics associated with an increase in purpose	7-item scale purpose in life scale (Ryff and Keyes, 1995)

### Definitions of meaning and theoretical models of meaning-making

Many articles did not formally define meaning or related constructs. Those that did used various definitions, albeit with substantial overlap. Very few studies were driven by theoretical models of meaning-making. Halama et al. (2021) framed

their study based on the meaning-making model (Park, 2010; Park & George, 2013) to explore meaning-making processes, factors that facilitated or hindered meaning-making, and changes in sources of meaning after retirement. Kristensen et al. (2023) referred to the meaning-making model (Park, 2010) and meaning maintenance model (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012) in

the rationale for their study. Cabral (2014) explored meaning-making using transformative learning theory. Cousineau and Misener (2019) investigated meaning-making through volunteering, drawing from positive and social psychology and the work of Davis et al. (1998) on the two construals of meaning, that is, benefit-finding and sense-making. August (2011) investigated women's meaning-making in retirement from an ecological and gender perspective. Steiner and Amabile (2022) studied meaning-making using McAdams's theory of life narrative and Antonovsky's sense of coherence approach. Malette and Oliver (2006) and Miller (2016) each discussed Life Review as a process that may facilitate meaning-making and adjustment to retirement. Heisel et al. (2020) evaluated a meaning-centered intervention based on Frankl's Logotherapy. Several studies also referred to Erikson's developmental stages in the context of both adjustment and meaning (e.g., Brown, 2014; Cabral et al., 2014; Miranda-Chan & Nakamura, 2016), especially the seventh and eighth stages (generativity vs. stagnation and integrity vs. despair), often considered most salient for older adults.

## Discussion and Implications

The primary question addressed in this review was: What is the nature and extent of the academic literature on meaning in the retirement transition? We also sought to explore which theoretical frameworks have informed research on this topic and identify current knowledge gaps and avenues for future research.

### Summary of Findings

This review revealed a heterogeneous set of studies using a range of approaches and measures to explore various aspects of meaning in the context of retirement. A total of 30 articles (70% qualitative) were included. Half of the studies were published in the last 5 years, suggesting current interest in this topic. Studies were informed by a vast number of theoretical frameworks and the stated research aims were diverse and explored different aspects of meaning including meaning (or purpose) in life, the meaning of retirement, meaning-making, sources of meaning, and meaningful engagement.

### Methodological and Conceptual Considerations

#### Reporting gaps

This review highlighted several methodological issues. Overall, there was a reasonable representation of men and women. However, most studies recruited people from "WEIRD" (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) countries, so there may be limited generalizability to people with lower socioeconomic means, people from other cultures, or from low- and middle-income countries. Further, ethnicity, financial status, education, occupation, health status, and relationship status were inconsistently reported. These variables may influence both meaning and retirement adjustment (e.g., Barbosa et al., 2016; Hyde et al., 2018), providing important context for interpreting findings.

Further, not all studies documented voluntariness of retirement and only a few studies explored the centrality of previous work (e.g., August, 2011; Brown, 2014; Eagers et al., 2018; Hansson et al., 2023; Liu & Allan, 2023; Steiner & Amabile, 2022). Loss of a valued work role may increase risk of adjustment difficulties, especially if retirement is involuntary (e.g., Ashforth, 2001; Atchley, 1989; Wang et al., 2011) and if work was central to a person's identity and a major

source of meaning in life (Heine et al., 2006; Park, 2010). Thus, understanding meaning in retirement also requires understanding the person's relationship to their prior work.

#### Defining meaning and retirement

Another methodological issue is that few studies explicitly defined meaning-related constructs. There is now widespread support for a three-component model of meaning (purpose, coherence, significance/mattering; Baumeister, 2022; George & Park, 2016; King & Hicks, 2021; Martela & Steger, 2016). However, historical differences in the conceptualization of meaning in life (Supplementary Table S3) have likely contributed to a fragmented literature (an issue discussed in the broader meaning literature, e.g., George & Park, 2016; Heintzelman & King, 2014; Martela & Steger, 2016).

Definitions of "retired" also varied considerably between studies. This perhaps reflects the changing nature of retirement (Chambré & Netting, 2018; Kojola & Moen, 2016) and recognition that retirement is a process, not a point in time, and often involves a gradual reduction in working hours, bridge employment and, increasingly, reengagement with work postretirement (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021; Fasbender et al., 2014).

#### Heterogeneity in theoretical frameworks, methods, and measures

Between-study heterogeneity made it challenging to identify common themes across studies. Each of the nine quantitative studies used a different instrument to measure meaning or meaning-related constructs (see Table 4). This likely reflects the complexity of meaning in life as a concept and differing perspectives on how best to measure it (e.g., as discussed in King & Hicks, 2021).

Similarly, each qualitative study used a different set of interview questions. Further, conducting and analyzing in-depth interviews is time- and resource-intensive so samples in these studies tended to be small and highly specific, for example, members of a single golf club (Hall & Birtles, 2022) or professional single, childfree women who self-identified as having a meaningful retirement life (Cabral et al., 2014). Thus, while each study provided a rich account of meaning in a particular group, it is unclear how findings may generalize to others.

Another notable finding was that research on this topic has been informed by a vast number of theoretical frameworks. Some are specific to meaning-making (e.g., Heine et al., 2006; Park & George, 2013) or retirement adjustment (e.g., Wang et al., 2011), and others have applied broader theories to this topic (e.g., model of human occupation or concept of generativity). While multiple perspectives add richness to the field, this also makes it challenging to interpret and neatly summarize findings.

#### Few longitudinal studies

Although both meaning-making (e.g., Park & George, 2013; Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012) and retirement adjustment (e.g., Hansson et al., 2018; van Solinge & Henkens, 2008; Wang, 2007) are heterogeneous processes that occur over months or years, only six studies (20%) used longitudinal designs. As such, there is limited information on the nature and time course of meaning-making processes and their role in retirement adjustment.

#### Limited research on meaning-making processes

Most studies reviewed here explored the meaning of retirement, meaning in life, or meaningful engagement with different activities. Very few investigated *meaning-making processes*

proposed by key theoretical models (Heine et al., 2006; Park & George, 2013; Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012). Only one study (Halama et al., 2021) explicitly investigated both sources of meaning and specific meaning-making processes (e.g., change, continuity, active reconstruction of meaning) across the retirement transition. Several other studies referred to meaning-making in the theoretical background but did not explore specific processes (e.g., August, 2011; Burr, 2009; Cabral et al., 2014; Cousineau & Misener, 2019; Hunt, 2012; Kristensen et al., 2023; Malette & Oliver, 2006; Steiner & Amabile, 2022).

### Implications

An important minority of people struggle with meaning during the retirement transition. Two currently unanswered questions for clinical practice are: (1) how do we identify people who are struggling, and (2) how do we best support people during this transition? Several therapeutic approaches that seek to help people (re)establish meaning, for example, meaning-centered, narrative, and reminiscence therapies; life review; acceptance and commitment therapy; and positive psychology may be useful in this space. However, we identified only two intervention studies, only one of which evaluated a meaning-centered intervention (Heisel et al., 2020).

Also noteworthy is that very few studies focused on the *preretirement* phase, despite increasing understanding that this is a key time for retirement planning (Muratore & Earl, 2015). Considering a life-course perspective, we suggest adopting a *career-span* perspective on retirement to identify whether certain subgroups of employees (perhaps from certain industries) may require greater support in finding meaning postretirement, especially when retirement is unplanned. Intervention in the preretirement phase may provide the greatest benefit by equipping people at risk of adjustment difficulties with the skills to navigate this transition.

### Recommendations for Future Research

First, more well-designed longitudinal studies are needed to capture changes in meaning in life, adjustment, and their relationship across the retirement transition to better understand individual differences and the time course of these processes. This should include measures of both the search for, and presence of, meaning because prolonged searching for meaning without resolution has been associated with poorer psychological outcomes, especially in older adults (e.g., Steger et al., 2009).

Second, using mixed methods (e.g., per Creswell et al., 2011), that is, qualitative approaches (to capture in-depth lived experiences) and quantitative approaches (to characterize components of meaning and measure change over time), would substantially enhance our understanding of the role of meaning in the retirement transition.

Third, more theoretically informed, planned programs of research are needed to systematically investigate the role of meaning in adjustment to retirement. While retirement is a component of some existing programmatic longitudinal research (e.g., the New Zealand Health, Work and Retirement Study and U.S.-based Health and Retirement Study), these studies mainly capture components of aging rather than adjustment to, and sequelae of, retirement specifically. There is also a need for research evaluating meaning-focused interventions at different phases of the retirement transition.

Fourth, most studies have been conducted in WEIRD samples (e.g., Lam et al., 2018). There needs to be a greater focus on cross-cultural research to document and compare the experience of meaning in retirement across cultures.

### Strengths and Limitations

Limitations relate mainly to the search strategy. By limiting the search to peer-reviewed articles and dissertations/theses, we may have missed other sources (e.g., reports). We also limited the search to articles published after 2000 to capture a contemporary perspective on retirement, and excluded articles not published in English for pragmatic reasons. We also identified some qualitative studies that did not meet inclusion criteria but where meaning emerged as a theme from their analysis (e.g., reported in Results/Discussion). We therefore may have missed some useful data. However, to our knowledge, this scoping review is the first to combine the retirement adjustment and meaning literatures. We hope it is a useful starting point to inform future reviews and research on this topic.

Strengths of this review include developing the search strategy in consultation with a research librarian to optimize terms and coverage, conducting the review according to JBI guidelines for scoping reviews and PRISMA-ScR reporting guidelines, and transparency in the process and reporting including preregistering the protocol and making available the extracted data.

### Summary and Conclusion

In summary, this review revealed a small, heterogeneous set of studies addressing various aspects of meaning in the retirement transition. Most studies have been stand-alone and conducted with highly specific populations at a single point in time, and no two studies have used the same measurement instrument or set of interview questions. While each of these studies has added value, the field would benefit from theoretically driven, ongoing programs of research designed to systematically investigate the role of meaning in life during this important life transition. Specifically, there should be a focus on cross-cultural, longitudinal research, employing mixed-methods approaches to develop a comprehensive understanding of the role of meaning in adjusting to retirement. This will help to inform the design of effective interventions and programs to support people who struggle with this major life transition.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary data are available at *The Gerontologist* online.

### Funding

None.

### Conflict of Interest

None.

### Data Availability

The protocol for this scoping review was preregistered with Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/wfgvvh>. The data extraction spreadsheet is available on request.

### Author Contributions

Rachel Wood (Conceptualization [equal], Data curation [lead], Formal analysis [lead], Investigation [lead], Methodology



[equal], Writing—original draft [lead], Writing—review & editing [equal] and Nancy Pachana (Conceptualization [equal], Data curation [supporting], Formal analysis [supporting], Investigation [supporting], Methodology [equal], Supervision [lead], Writing—original draft [supporting], Writing—review & editing [equal])

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