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Unveiling the Depths of Existential Inquiry: A Qualitative Examination of Psychological Literature (2000-2023)

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Abstract

This is a continuation of the previous article, "Exploring Existential Questions: A Comprehensive Review of Psychological Literature (2000-2023) -Part 1", the aim of which, following on from an analysis that was more quantitative in nature, is to present the results of a more in-depth analysis of the articles by means of a qualitative and/or mixed approach, published between 2000 and 2023, with the aim of understanding how Psychology has appropriated the themes of existential vacuum and meaning of life over this period. Method: Of the group of articles studied in Part I, only articles with qualitative or mixed approaches were analyzed in this second phase, in accordance with the following aspects: year of publication, theoretical references used in the articles, concepts employed in the studies, context and studied populations, emerging themes and relationship between the topic and psychotherapy, religiosity and spirituality. Results: Of the 264 articles selected in Part 1, 191 quantitative articles were excluded, leaving 73 articles with a qualitative or mixed approach, initially classified as follows: 46 theoretical/ qualitative, 17 empirical/qualitative, 7 mixed and 3 interventions.

Index terms— existential vacuum, meaning of life, mental health, psychology, qualitative approach, logotherapy,

1 Introduction

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

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

This was redolent of the manifesto delivered by Edmund Husserl (2002) in his "Crisis of European Humanity and Philosophy", foreseeing the present-day issues with the crisis of meaning. Similar questions prevailed in his time, when Husserl stated that the modern sciences had distanced themselves from the lifeworld (Lebenswelt) and the problems of humanity, losing humanity's sense of meaning. In the quest for absolute truth, this science reduced the world to plain facts, only concerned with quantifying and measuring it, becoming strictly objectivist, obliterating subjectivity and the notion of meaning. Thus, the job of Husserl's phenomenology was to study

43 the significance of experiences, in other words, the meaning of human life. This philosophy inspires and directly
44 supports the proposal of the present study, which is to investigate how contemporary psychology dealt with the
45 study of existential questions, unveiling its implications for the significance of life experiences. The philosopher
46 questioned the sovereignty of the natural sciences (explanatory in nature and a description of laws) over the
47 sciences of the spirit (sympathetic, historical, individual and social in nature), as if they were distinct, disjointed
48 objects, as the scientific world only edifies itself based on its surroundings (Lebensumwelt). His short essay,
49 produced in 1935, and entitled the Crisis of Humanity, is reverberating 88 years later with the advent of new
50 crises: the Covid-19 pandemic, which extrapolated the level of the physis and became humanitarian, and the
51 level of wars, which returned to the theater of Europe and the Middle East, snuffing out so many lives. In other
52 words, in his time, Husserl was already warning of the importance that the theme of the meaning of life was
53 rekindling for an understanding of the essence of the spirit and reflections on the soul and, consequently, put in
54 check the need for the completeness of psychology. In this way, it has become necessary to consider not only the
55 rationality of the logos, understood as reason and analytical discourse, but also the creative activity of the spirit,
56 understood to be esthetic and emotional expression, the subjectivism, and the mythos, conceived as sensitivity,
57 a synthetic, emotive and narrative discourse.

58 The present study focuses on the existential questions addressed in qualitative studies arising from a prior
59 meta-analysis of the scientific output in psychology (Alencar & Freitas, 2023) on the topic in question, between
60 2000 and 2023. As such, the main aim is to understand how contemporary Psychology has addressed the topics
61 of existential vacuum and meaning of life over the last two decades, observing two fundamental axes. The first
62 being horizontal in nature, which follows on from the extension study and whose principal results have already
63 been described in the previous article, including a quantitative analysis of the following variables: a) year of
64 publication; b) theoretical approach; c) context; d) target audience. The second is vertical in nature, proposing
65 to delve deeper into the issues, including a qualitative analysis of the following variables: e) conceptual categories,
66 and f) thematic categories, highlighting the relationships or implications of existential questions in psychotherapy
67 and/or the topics of religiosity and spirituality. This last aspect is justified by the observance, in the present day,
68 of a strong tendency to associate the concept of spirituality with the movement that is searching for existential
69 meaning (Freitas, 2024; ??oenig et al., 2024;Freitas, Leal & Nwora, 2022), at the same time that the role of
70 religion is being increasingly questioned as to whether or not it is a driver of meaning (Krok, 2015;Villani et
71 al, 2019;Jung, 2015;Zarzycka, Tychmanowicz & Krok, 2020). On the other hand, the integration of study and
72 practice has, as recently indicated by Pargament (2023), characterized a kind of third wave in the evolution of
73 the psychology of religion and spirituality, and in this is included, of course, psychotherapeutic practice.

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

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

105 Seeing as the meaning of life and/or existential vacuum are primordial to the care of mental health, through

106 their relationship with the impulsion for human life and/or psychic suffering (and its respective elaboration), a
107 brief historical and conceptual description of both constructs is initially presented here.

108 Up until the postwar periods (first and second world wars), when discussions about the constitution of man
109 began anew, the ideas of vacuum and meaning were restricted to the domain of philosophy. ??Vieira & Dias,
110 2021, p.2). Accordingly, it also starts to be incorporated by psychology, in particular through the humanist
111 movement that rose up against the prevailing models, namely behaviorism and psychoanalysis ??Ponte & Souza,
112 2011), respectively indicated as mechanistic, deterministic and detractors of the human values of freedom and
113 choice. The conceptions of this movement can, for example, be seen in the existentialist humanism of Rollo May
114 who, in his work entitled 'Psychology and the Human Dilemma", originally published in 1967, declared that
115 man's fundamental problem in the mid 20 th century was precisely existential vacuum, described as a sensation
116 of the incapacity to do anything meaningful for oneself or for the world. Given this perspective, he sought to
117 characterize the human being as a free being, responsible for his own actions, involved in a psychology that would
118 help to understand and elaborate the crisis of meaning and the respective dilemma between subject and object,
119 a paradox inherent to the human condition (May, 1953(May, /1994)).

120 Also from a humanist, existential and phenomenological perspective, on the other side of the coin, on the
121 continent of Europe, the postwar period also witnessed the emergence of the conception of Viktor Frankl
122 (1946Frankl (/2019)), one of the most researched agents in the present day, who places emphasis on the
123 side of presence, directing his theory towards the study of the meaning of life, through which he develops the
124 psychotherapeutic approach of logotherapy.

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

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

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

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

160 By way of an historical, conceptual and philosophical contextualization of the briefly presented existential
161 questions, in solidarity with the Husserl's proposition, we shall explore existential vacuum and meaning of life in
162 the upcoming sections of this article. In the same way that the malaise of our era has recently been in evidence,
163 primarily due to the pandemic crisis and the advent of successive wars, the depth of the existentialist investigation
164 in present-day psychologyrelated literature is revealed. This systematic review is the result of a bibliographic
165 search via the concept of existential vacuum, meaning of life and their correlates, carried out on five databases:
166 CAPES Periodicals Portal, APA PsycArticles, SCOPUS, SCIELO, and PePSIC, as described in detail in the
167 previous article: Existential vacuum and meaning of life -Part 1 (Alencar & Freitas, 2023).

168 The CAPES portal was chosen as the database for this study on account of its national and international

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

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

195 In the data extraction process, these criteria were identified through a reading of the abstract, introduction
196 and method of each study, highlighting the aim of the study and the data collection and analysis tools employed.
197 An example of this process is shown below, in Table 1. It should be stressed that, in the article selection process,
198 in order to minimize possible bias in the study, the triage was performed by the firstnamed author under the
199 supervision of the secondnamed author. In the event of disagreement, the selected articles were referred to a third
200 arbiter. The aim of this research was to compare the meaning of life's intensity in offender teenagers in Medellin
201 city, Colombia. The methodology had a mixed descriptive design. The sample consisted of 44 young offenders
202 who answered the Purpose In Life test (PIL), developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick, consisting of one party
203 to collect quantitative and two other parties to collect qualitative information. The Results show a low rate of
204 existential vacuum in the teens surveyed. The more time spent in a social rehabilitation institution, the greater
205 the intensity of the meaning of life. The family (real and ideal) is important as a core value around which to build
206 their sense of life. This suggests some grounds for thinking a model to explain the conclusions reached. It argues
207 that the construct "meaning of life" has different levels of complexity that reflect various aspects mentioned
208 below: the desire to live, aim or purpose of life that gives the proper orientation of each existence, the meaning
209 that each one attributes to his life and his different values that govern it, and finally, the analysis of meaning in
210 general. Keywords: Sentido de vida, vacío existencial, adolescente infractor. Bereavement is an ongoing process
211 of negotiation and meaning-making in which widows and widowers make sense of the changed nature of their
212 relationship with their deceased spouse. We analyzed the experiences of meaning in life among older widows
213 and widowers (aged 65+) using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; see Smith et al. in Interpretative
214 phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research, Sage, 2009), with the following question: How do
215 widows and widowers search for meaning through continuing and/or transforming their bond to their deceased
216 spouse? The results demonstrate that some of the widowed persons sought meaning through rituals or various
217 means of after-death communication with their deceased spouses. Other participants transformed the bond, for
218 example, through clearing out their deceased spouse's belongings or a process of reconciliation?" Keywords:

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

229 The variables displayed in Table 2 were considered relevant to this review as they are in line with the study
230 proposal, namely to obtain an understanding of how contemporary psychology has handled existential questions.
231 It is sought, therefore, to determine which approach has stood out over time, how it dealt with the issues and

its efficiency and pertinence. Moreover, seeking to understand the extent of the phenomenon, considering the context in which it was investigated and the population that took part in the study, potentially unveiling a more unilateral or heterogeneous character in the studies conducted. In addition, how the concepts possess dynamic attributes, changing over time and with the setting, it has become essential to analyze the definitions and the enhancements effectuated in this period. Special

3 Variables Searched

Quantitative Analysis III.

4 Results

Of the total of 264 articles selected and analyzed in the first phase of the study (Part 1, Alencar & Freitas, 2023), 191 were excluded in this second phase, all of which had a quantitative approach. This left a total of 73 articles, distributed as follows: 46 theoretical/ qualitative articles, 17 empirical/qualitative, 7 mixedmethod and 3 interventions, as can be seen in Figure 1, with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow diagram, adapted for this study. Regarding the theoretical framework adopted in studies about meaning of life and existential vacuum, logotherapy was predominant, accounting for 35% of the total number of articles. Existentialist approach and Phenomenology approach came next, representing 12% and 9% of studies, respectively. Then come Psychoanalysis and positive Psychology, each with 6% of the total, and humanistic approach and sociology come next, each with 4%. Then, Behavioral and Hermeneutic approaches come each with 3%. The remaining frameworks, such as the person-centered approach, interactional and genetic, ontology, systemic perspective, Jungian analytical, among others, are less frequent, with 1% of the total number of articles analyzed, as depicted in Figure 3. Tables 3 and ?? exhibit the principal conceptual categories that emerged from the selected articles. Table 3 is about the concept of meaning of life. Table ?? designates the concept of existential crisis. Each category is explained by one citation (column two), followed by the respective reference (column three). In addition, the absolute and relative frequencies (in relation to the total number of articles) are indicated in the columns Absolute Freq. and Relative Freq.

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

5 Global Journal of Human Social Science

Year 2023 () H

6 52

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

Table 5 exhibits the conceptual categorization of the expression "crisis of meaning". As with Table ??, presented above, this term was employed to designate the aforementioned table as it was more comprehensive than those that focus on "absence" of meaning, which varies in degree and frequency throughout the texts read. Thus, the term "crisis" appeared to be more dynamic doing greater justice to the content of the group of texts analyzed.

5 Desire for Power "conceives the desire for power ??Nietzsche, 1996) as a guiding principle of existence. For this author, the nature of the being comes from the effort to exercise larger amounts of power. ??dler (1931 ??dler (/1998)) The above table presents the variations in terminology used by authors to refer to the concept of crisis of meaning. A total of 19 variations were noted that refer to how the different degrees or situations where symptoms of vacuum or of a threat to the meaning of life are experienced, e.g. feelings of anxiety, despair, loneliness, frustration, boredom and demoralization (as a group of negative feelings); existential vacuum or void, and absence; pathological conditions such as crisis, neurosis and pathologies in general. In addition, two expressions were noted that were different from the rest when referring to vacuum, with a positive meaning, such as fertile vacuum and void, per se. These acceptations of vacuum/void have a positive, driving significance, unlike the other semantics, which demonstrate negative tendencies and possess a more demotivating significance.

8 E) TOPICS COVERED IN THE ARTICLES

290 As with the previous table, a citation was presented for each expression extracted directly from the articles with
291 the aim of illustration, followed by the respective references.

292 It was observed that the most frequently employed terms were "existential void", with a relative frequency
293 of 25% and "existential loneliness", with 23%. In second place come the terms "anxiety", and "existential
294 frustration" / "noogenic neurosis", with a frequency of 9% and 7%, respectively. The remaining terms ranged
295 from 2% to 4%. In addition, in a comparison of both the above tables it was found that the concept of meaning
296 of life, with 69 references, was more frequently cited in the articles than the concept of existential vacuum, with
297 57 mentions.

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

312 7 d) Population Studied

313 As far as the target audience of the studies is concerned, the Not Applicable category applied to 29% of articles
314 selected. The generic category we have called contemporary man has the highest target audience level, at 12%.
315 Next come patients with cancer and the elderly, each with 7%; Psychotherapists, with 5%, and widows/widowers
316 and students, each with 4%. The other categories, such as: people in palliative care, teachers, adult offenders,
317 health professionals, prostitutes, Brazilians and adults command a smaller representation, with 33% in total.
318 The Others category includes immigrants, refugees, spouses, people with intellectual disability, patients with
319 HIV, people with borderline personality disorder, Africans and people with Hikikomori, severe social withdrawal.
320 (Figure ??b). The above graph represents the number of populations studied, as found in the selected articles.
321 It can be seen that the theme of existential vacuum and meaning of life involve a diversity of populations,
322 comprising 19 different types of target audience. The most prominent category was Contemporary Man (12%,
323 and 7 articles), indicating concern about the profile of present-day man. This category was followed by cancer
324 patients and the elderly, with identical results (7%, each with 5 studies). Both these populations bring to the
325 fore the relationship between finitude and meaning of life, as those people in a critical state of health may present
326 with greater end-of-life perception, similarly for the elderly, as they are passing through one of the last stages of
327 the life cycle, and may perceive with a greater degree of finitude.

328 8 e) Topics Covered in the Articles

329 Another categorization resulting from the qualitative analysis was the grouping of the themes appearing in the
330 articles. After recording and analyzing these themes, a coding was devised in order to group articles with similar
331 subject matter. These codings and categories are displayed in Table 5, in respect of the construct of meaning of
332 life, and Table 6, regarding the construct of crisis of meaning. These tables also exhibit examples extracted in
333 the form of direct citations 1A second category was coded and denominated "2-Sour" (sources), showing articles
334 exploring sources of meaning of life, such as: human relations, intersubjective relations, spirituality, religious
335 from the selected articles, and the relative and absolute frequencies are determined.

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

341 experience, awareness of finitude, literary expressions and art. This category also includes an article that
342 analyzes the reasons for existential vacuum.

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

347 The fourth category was labeled "4-Lexp" (lived experience) which includes articles that describe lived
348 experiences of meaning of life in diverse populations, such as family members of critically ill patients, offenders,

349 mothers with children in the ICU, etc. This category also includes articles that described lived experiences of
350 existential loneliness in the elderly, immigrants and people with partners in end-of-life situations.

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

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

357 The seventh category was denominated "7-Copi" (coping), designating coping with existential vacuum. It
358 comprises articles that explore strategies such as educational resources, support from family pets, literature and
359 poetry, to deal with the crisis of existence. This differs from the category of Psychotherapy inasmuch as it explores
360 existential vacuum coping strategies deriving from other nonpsychotherapeutic sources. The above table shows
361 the different thematic categories found in articles addressing the concept of meaning of life. It was observed
362 that the most studied topic was "Psychotherapy and meaning of life", with a relative frequency of 35%. In
363 second place, with 26%, was the category "Effects/outcomes of meaning of life", followed by the topic "Sources of
364 meaning of life", with 20%. Of less significance were the categories "Measurement instruments" and "Conceptual
365 analyses", each with 4%.

366 9 Global Journal of Human

367 10 Relative

368 Freq.

369 11 PSYC

370 12 Psychotherapy and existential vacuum

371 Example 1: "The purpose of this communication is to reflect upon the psychic suffering that arises from working
372 in the contemporary psychoanalytical clinic, and its implications, through the symptom whereby the symbolic
373 is captured by the existential vacuum." (p.157) Maggi (2018) 2 7% Example 2: "The present study aimed to
374 validate a proposal for the prevention of existential vacuum in a group of adolescent students. In this regard, the
375 purpose was to promote a sense of awareness in terms of the search for meaning and, consequently, to prevent
376 the sensation of a lack of meaning in life, based on the theory of logotherapy." (p.147) Aquino et al. (2011) 2
377 SOUR

378 13 Reasons for existential vacuum

379 Example 1: "The aim of this text is to analyze some of the reasons for the human existential vacuum, as a
380 bottomless pit, that is to say, no matter how much man looks to realize himself in all his dimensions, he will
381 never achieve a full life, the total happiness he so craves, because there is always a need to look for new projects
382 and fulfilment.

383 14 () H

384 The above table describes the results related to the thematic categories used in the articles to speak about the
385 concept of existential vacuum. Note that the themes most explored were "Experiences of existential loneliness",
386 with 33% of the results, followed by "Effects/outcomes of existential vacuum", with 30%. In third place came
387 "Coping with the existential vacuum", with 15% and, in fourth place, "Conceptual analysis", with 11%. The
388 categories "Psychotherapy and Existential vacuum" and "Reasons for the vacuum" were less productive, with
389 7% and 4% respectively, unlike the results presented in these same categories when focusing on meaning of life.
390 Moreover, the topics found in the selected articles focused more on the aspect of the meaning of life, with an
391 absolute frequency of 46 articles, versus 27 with emphasis on the emptiness of existence. Curiously, the topic of
392 measurement tools for existential vacuum did not come up in the articles studied, which may be a subject for
393 potential exploration.

394 Using an artistic resource and statistical bases, the word cloud displayed in Figure ?? more clearly shows
395 the thematic prominence in the study and its proportionality in relation to the other topics. Accordingly, it
396 is evident that there is a subtle emphasis on the topic of the effects of existential vacuum and meaning of life,
397 followed by the theme of Psychotherapy. theory of Frankl, to treat patients undergoing palliative care (Moncayo
398 & Breitbart, 2014). Articles using existential/humanistic approaches, two of which were theoretical (e.g. Vos et
399 al., 2015;Wong, 2017) and 2 qualitative/empirical (e.g., Hill et al., 2017; ??onstanza et al., 2020) also discuss
400 the importance of working with meaning of life in their therapies, a request which may come expressly from
401 the clients themselves or even indirectly, with the topic going beyond the psychic suffering, such as depression,
402 obsession and the like (Hill et al, 2017). In addition, there was also an attempt to study the results of different
403 existential therapies in patient treatment, with the purpose of understanding the efficacy and pertinence of
404 existential therapy (Vos et al, 2015; ??onstanza et al., 2022). Moreover, there was also discussion about the

405 course of humanistic psychology with the idea of regaining its rightful place inside traditionalist psychology in
406 order to offer significant contributions to both research and therapeutic interventions (Wong, 2017).

407 Articles using a psychoanalytical approach (Maggi, 2018) and constructivist approach (Vos et al., 2017)
408 discussed, respectively, the challenges of the psychoanalytical clinic in treating the existential vacuum problem by
409 evoking the resource of symbolic function, and discussion about the significance of meaning in clinical practice,
410 unfolding as: roles of meaning in psychotherapy, its influence on the evolution and recuperation of the subject
411 being therapeutized and on the required clinical skills.

412 **15 g) Articles that reported the theme of existential vacuum** 413 **and meaning of life with religiosity and spirituality**

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

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

429 IV.

430 **16 Discussion**

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

446 Among these discoveries, the influence of constraints such as crises and wars is conspicuous, characterized as
447 a point of inflection in the course of history, dictating new paths in the scientific milieu, with an accentuated
448 need for existential responses. Consequently, our attention is drawn to the fact that the existential turning
449 point highlights the topic of religiosity and spirituality, notably in a contemporary society that is more secular,
450 unveiling a reappraisal of the topic. Also prominent is the huge interest in logotherapy, in the settings of
451 healthcare (hospital, palliative care), home care, psychotherapy and legal assistance, unveiling an avid desire
452 for meaning. This desire attested to the predominance of studies addressing this construct and not existential
453 vacuum. In parallel, the emergence of phenomenology and approaches of an existential, humanist nature are
454 somewhat surprising as they are making their mark in the scientific milieu, signaling a nascent concern of men of
455 science with subjective questions, particularly in the Brazilian context. Lastly, the topic of psychotherapy is also
456 garnering attention, gaining clearer, better defined dimensions, showcasing psychology as a science. Moreover, it
457 can be seen that there is a diversity of approaches in Psychology (logotherapy, phenomenology, psychoanalysis,
458 positive psychology, behavioral, Jungian analytical psychology, to name but a few) that are involved with the
459 topic in question, highlighting the multiple aspects of this theme. These approaches have different conceptions
460 about the understanding of the human being. Psychoanalytical, behavioral approaches stem from the idea that
461 man is a driven being, whether through his unconscious (psychoanalysis), or through experience and conditioning
462 (behavioral). On the other hand, existential humanist and phenomenological approaches stem from the principle
463 that man is a being with freedom and autonomy, the author of his own choices. Despite the differences, they
464 offer unique insights into existential questions.

465 Psychoanalysis understands the vacuum as a primordial void that will always be present as man is seen as a
466 hiatus (Amaral, 2010). As for meaning, in this theory, it is the result of a search for pleasure (Freud, 1929(Freud,
467 / 1996)). With a different focus, the central theme of logotherapy is the idea that the primary motivation of
468 the human being is desire for meaning. This meaning exists in the life of human beings and needs to be found,
469 regardless of the circumstances (Frankl, 1969(Frankl, /1988). Phenomenology, meanwhile, focuses on the study of
470 phenomena and their signification. Moreover, it is guided by the idea of the teleology of intentional experiences,
471 that is to say, it relates to the aims of human actions and the giving of meaning (Husserl, 1935(Husserl, /2002)).
472 From a different perspective, positive psychology emerges as a more pragmatic approach, whose proposition is
473 the quest to reinforce positive aspects and human virtues. Meaning of life, from this perspective, is conceived as
474 a fundamental component in the acquisition of psychological wellbeing and mental health (Almeida et al., 2022).

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

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

511 Thus, of the articles found in this second phase, it was possible to observe that there is greater emphasis
512 on publications containing the terminology "meaning of life" or "meaning of/in life", registering 36 mentions
513 in the articles, while "existential vacuum" amassed an absolute frequency of 14 mentions, as depicted in the
514 Results section, in Tables 1 and 2. Adding together the term meaning of life and its derivatives, in total there
515 were 66 mentions, against 54 references to the term existential vacuum and derivatives. In other words, it
516 may be concluded that there is greater emphasis on investigations on the side of presence than on the side of
517 absence, which signifies that, in the present day, there is a greater concern about the meaning of life and search
518 for meaning than there is with existential vacuum. Another aspect which came to the fore in the analysis of
519 concepts was the fact that, in order to make reference to the construct meaning of life, there is greater unity
520 and coherence of terminology, the only variation being the semantics of the expressions "meaning of life" and
521 "meaning in life". Besides these, other expressions such as "desire for power", coined by philosopher Friedrich
522 Nietzsche (1872/2019), and "desire for pleasure", introduced by Sigmund Freud (1929/1996), were also related
523 to the construct. The expression meaning of life also unfolded into subcategories, capable of being understood as
524 different stages of life that comprise: need for meaning, desire for meaning, search, presence and super-meaning.

525 Despite there being less uniformity in terms of the forms of expression of the construct meaning of life as
526 opposed to the construct existential vacuum, it is of the utmost importance to mention that that there is
527 a difficulty with regard to its conceptual definition due to an atomization that has taken place in modern

528 times. There is a historical/conceptual evolution that goes from the Aristotelian conception of meaning, passing
529 through the framework introduced by Viktor Frankl (1946/2019), and various outcomes with a multidimensional
530 perspective in order to give full account of the concept, its dynamism and complexity, as well as emphasizing,
531 obviously, its polysemic characteristics. Therefore, as it is a psychological construct of extreme relevance to mental
532 health, it is also seen as a challenge for researchers, it being necessary to obtain further semantic, conceptual and
533 cultural clarification, which will result in the performance of fresh studies, both theoretical and empirical.

534 On the other hand, the concept of existential vacuum presented a variety of terminology, with the identification
535 of 16 variations, which can be classified as sentiments associated with the emptiness, such as: anxiety,
536 despair, loneliness, frustration, boredom and demoralization; existential states: void, vacuum and absence; and
537 pathologies: crises, neuroses and pathologies in general. Besides these cited frameworks, whose semantics focus on
538 the negative aspect, two positive variations were identified, denominated vacuum, by itself, and fertile vacuum,
539 as contributors to a state that drives human action. This variety of denominations reflects the difficulty in
540 embracing, defining, unifying and universalizing the construct of existential vacuum, that is shown to have a
541 polysemic, multidimensional and multi-categorical character that is difficult to understand and to measure. It
542 also seems to be an abstruse concept, ineffable even, in scientific studies, given the diverse nomenclature. It is
543 worth highlighting that the concept of existential vacuum was the predominant one in articles in relation to the
544 other expressions found referring to the construct. It should also be pointed out, however, that this predominance
545 evidently also reflected a bias with the descriptors used, as within it was the concept of "existential vacuum" but
546 not that of "meaning-making". The latter, as has been seen, appeared little in the results of this survey. In fact,
547 its study would merit a separate literature review, bringing up-to-date the one previously conducted by Park
548 (2010) a little over a decade ago.

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

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

572 In the articles that articulated the variables existential vacuum, meaning of life and psychotherapy, the
573 importance was stressed of including this topic in the therapeutic process, whether it be a direct request from
574 the subject being therapized or as a matrix on which diverse layers of psychic suffering are revealed (Martínez &
575 Flórez, 2015). The logotherapy approach also gained prominence by directly addressing the question of meaning,
576 arguing for the incorporation of the principles of logotherapy in the clinical process (Nassif et al., 2010). Also
577 highlighted is the efficacy of therapies with existentialist bases in the treatment of mental health, as well as
578 how the rightful place of such approaches is being reclaimed in the scientific sphere of traditionalist psychology
579 (Wong, 2017). Once again, with the emergence of the relationships between existential vacuum, meaning of
580 life, spirituality and religiosity, the logotherapy approach is mentioned as an adequate and pertinent response.
581 The Franklian theory soothes the relationship between spirituality and psychology and sees in this relationship
582 a driving force of meaning. (Aquino, 2021).

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

589 However, even with the potential limitations, the information uncovered in this review demonstrates that there
590 is a growing interest in approaches in psychology of an existential humanist nature, for studies of qualitative issues

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

610 V.

611 17 Final Considerations

612 The mapping and the broadening in issues of a qualitative nature performed in this second phase of the systematic
613 review of the constructs existential vacuum and meaning of life, reinforced certain information that had already
614 surfaced in the previous phase, namely: emphasis on the abyss of human finitude, accentuating the symptoms
615 of fear, panic, anxiety and despair, faced with such a menacing scenario. It was a turning point that alerted
616 the scientific world to the importance of existential vacuum and meaning of life which, in another era, had
617 already been presaged by Edmund Husserl, when he signaled the danger of the course of modern science in
618 considering only the objective aspects of existence. In this way, it may be concluded that, although the pandemic
619 has certainly provided impetus to scientific studies on the topic, in qualitative studies on the meaning of life or
620 existential vacuum, the pandemic conditions in themselves were not necessarily thematized. In fact, as evidenced
621 in both articles (Part 1 and Part 2), the peak of production occurred precisely in 2021. However, it was noted
622 that few studies of a qualitative or mixed-methods nature confirmed a relationship between meaning of life and
623 the pandemic as the central axis of study. In other words, publications increased during this period but the
624 content was not directly related to the pandemic. It did have repercussions for other topics related to existential
625 vacuum and meaning of life, outside of the pandemic, as was observed in the themes that were explored in most
626 depth: consequences of existential questions and psychotherapy and meaning of life. In addition, as qualitative
627 studies require a longer time to come to fruition, it is possible that new articles thematizing the pandemic will
628 be published in the next few years.

629 In fact, via the graph depicting the distribution of methodologies over the period of 23 years, exhibited in
630 the Results section, a shift can be observed in the type of studies performed as a consequence of the pandemic:
631 a greater constancy and concentration of articles on existential issues using the empirical qualitative method.
632 The same graph also demonstrates a more homogeneous and linear configuration in the publication of theoretical
633 articles on the theme throughout the period of study, while the empirical qualitative studies were concentrated
634 around the period between 2019 and 2023 (with an average of two articles a year), with a peak of production
635 occurring in 2021 (four articles), matching the performance of the theoretical articles. In terms of content studied,
636 these same articles also reveal a trend: studies that addressed experiences of meaning of life and existential
637 vacuum, with a particular focus on the expression existential loneliness. The experience of meaning of life was
638 studied in widows and widowers (Vähäkangas et al., 2022), in people with intellectual disability (Garcia & Pereira,
639 2021) and mothers with children in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) (Silva et al., 2021). Similarly, the
640 experience of existential loneliness was studied in various populations, for instance: elderly migrants (Olofsson et
641 al., 2021); spouses with an end-of-life partner (Larsson et al., 2020) and elderly subjects in diverse states of health
642 (Larsson et al., 2023; Carr & Fang, 2023; Edberg et al., 2023). This suggests that there is a tendency, nowadays,
643 to look to understand the existential state of the human being, unfolding a scientific interest in subjectivity, a
644 necessity underlying the sciences ever since the modern era, which was pinpointed by Husserl, some 88 years
645 previously.

646 ? The Emphasis on the Logotherapy Approach in Scientific Studies of a Qualitative and Mixed-Methods Nature
647 The emergence of logotherapy may be considered a historic landmark that symbolized and materialized a change
648 of course in studies in psychology and psychotherapy, denoting the transition from objectivity to subjectivity.
649 Logotherapy attracted attention back to a period in history when man started to be conceived, not only as a
650 spectator of the world, but also as a subject who constructs his own reality and who possesses direction, a meaning.
651 In this era, the dilemmas of human existence came to the fore, such as life and death, eternity and finitude,
652 determinism and freedom, stressing the importance of teleology and surfacing concerns about existential issues,

not just with instructive and causal issues. The aforementioned approach, which, in principle, was seen to be a possibility for complementing currents in psychology, was empowered and continues inspiring new epistemological constructions in psychology, as was determined in the psychotherapeutic model introduced by William Breitbart, the North American psychiatrist (Moncayo & Breitbart, 2014), as well as providing inspiration to other areas such as education. It must be stressed that logotherapy, by emphasizing the human being's noetic dimension, broadens the conception of man as a biopsychosocial being, as well as the conception of health, understanding it as something beyond the absence of illness and a complete state of wellbeing, also including the meaning of transcendence, of going back to something or someone. In this way, it bears witness to the dimension of spirituality, not pathologizing religious experience but rather seeing it potentially as something which promotes health.

As a means to illustrate how logotherapy influences and impacts the field of psychology, several studies have provided important data to corroborate this information. The study conducted by Aquino (2011) sets out a proposal for intervention to prevent existential vacuum in adolescents, through the application of the logotherapy theory, the requirement being the reintroduction of logos in group meetings. This study reveals how the theoretical logotherapy model is applicable to the concrete world, with an adaptation of philosophical language to narrative language. Thus, the study highlighted the efficacy of the proposition, giving youngsters the tools to build a new network of meaning. Moreover, it represents an advance on the clinical boundaries in the consulting office, expanding the strategy to a community experience. In parallel, in the study by Kroeff (2011), some views of logotherapy as psychotherapy are presented. Among Its characteristics, it is emphasized that logotherapy tends to be more prospective than retrospective because, by focusing on the meaning to be realized, It shifts Its attention more towards the future dimension. Similarly, it tends to be less introspective, stating that the meaning to be realized lies in the world and in encounters with others. Additionally, regarding the therapist's role in logotherapy sessions, it is specified that there is no specific protocol involving methodological rigidity, but there are certain stipulations. For example, the therapist should work to broaden the patient's field of vision and awareness of issues related to meaning and values. It is also recommended that he/she acts with a certain degree of improvisation and individualization, depending on the patient. The central point in the clinical practice focuses on the "I-Thou" relationship ??Frankl, 1967, as cited by ??roeff, 2011, p.72), meaning the therapist-patient relationship, through the technique of Socratic Dialogue2

18 ? Emphasis on Studies on the Concept of Meaning of Life

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

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

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

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

712 **19 ? Effects and Implications of the Existential Vacuum and**
713 **Meaning of Life**

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

721 **20 ? Psychotherapy and its Relationship with Existential**
722 **Questions**

723 The theme of psychotherapy is also highlighted, particularly approaches of an existential, phenomenological and
724 humanist nature, showing it to be an area full of potential to offer strategies of prevention, care and coping with
725 the crisis of meaning. Equally, it can also provide the stimulation for the meaning of life, through interventions
726 and models that stimulate adaptability and human potential. It should be noted that there is still only a
727 modest progress being made in studies with these approaches in the processing of qualitative data, particularly
728 when compared to the outcome obtained in the previous article, where the studies, despite being existential and
729 humanistic in nature, favored psychometric data. This shows that it is an area that deserves to be explored and
730 studied, with great potential for satisfying the demands of man in his lifeworld, of his subjectivity, his peculiarities,
731 as a way to rehumanize. This scientific attitude, unlike conventional attitudes, whose object of study is generic
732 and universalizable man, shows itself to be a source of multiple possibilities to deal with the problems of man
733 and society, through a separate path that complements rational understanding, that seeks intuitive rationality
734 and the discourse of mythos. Therefore, the possibility of reinterpreting the development of new epistemologies
735 in psychology which are seen to be sufficiently effective and creative to deal with existential questions in an
increasingly complex world in constant transformation, will be left to future studies. ^{1 2 3 4}

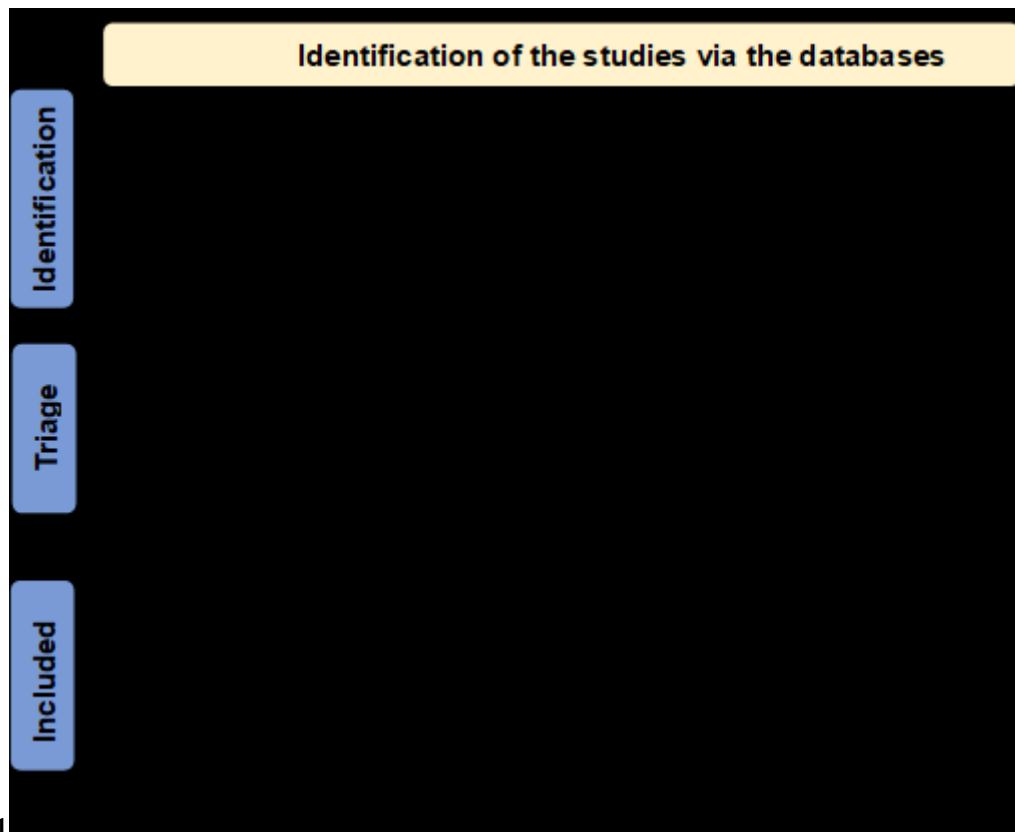


Figure 1: 1

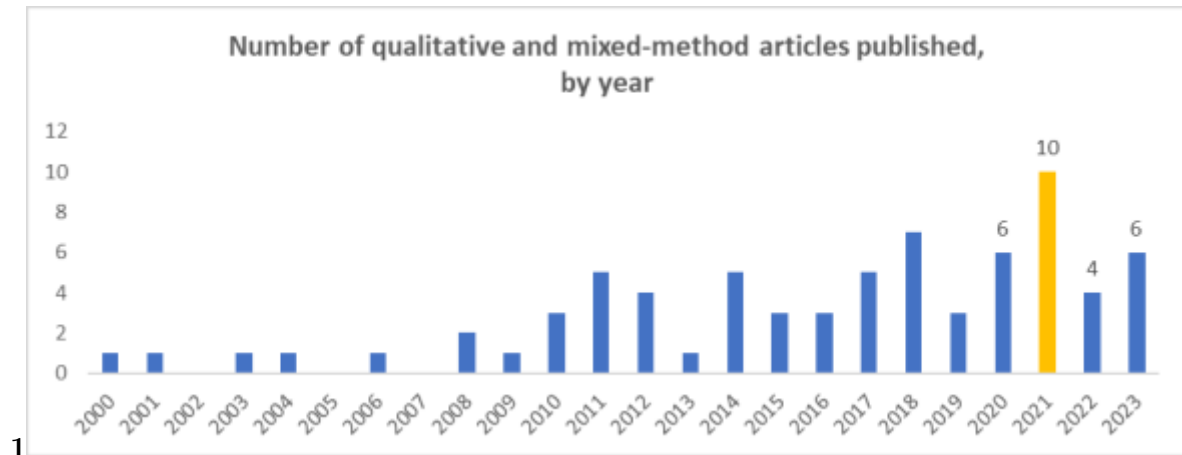


Figure 2: Figure 1 :

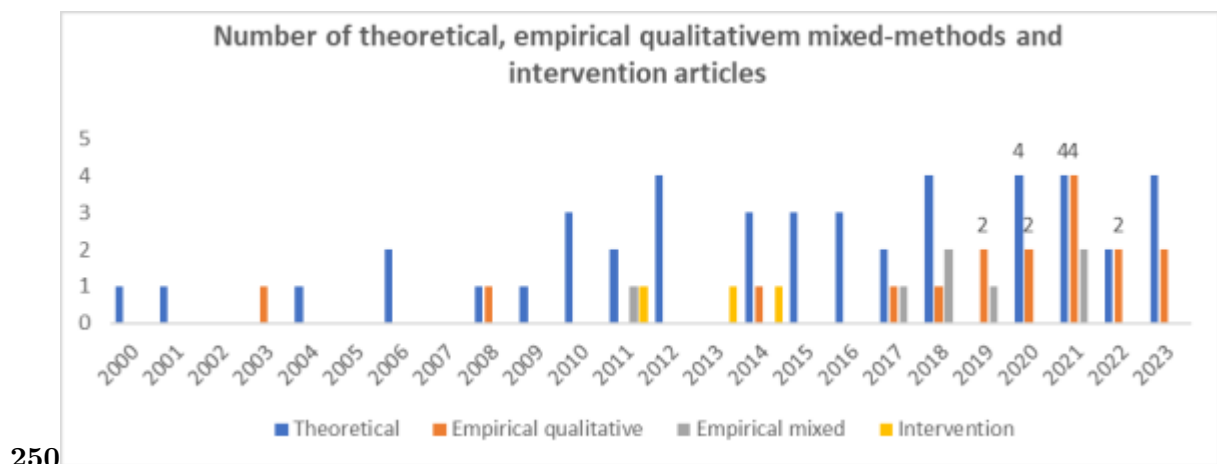


Figure 3: Figure 2 : 50 Figure

2a

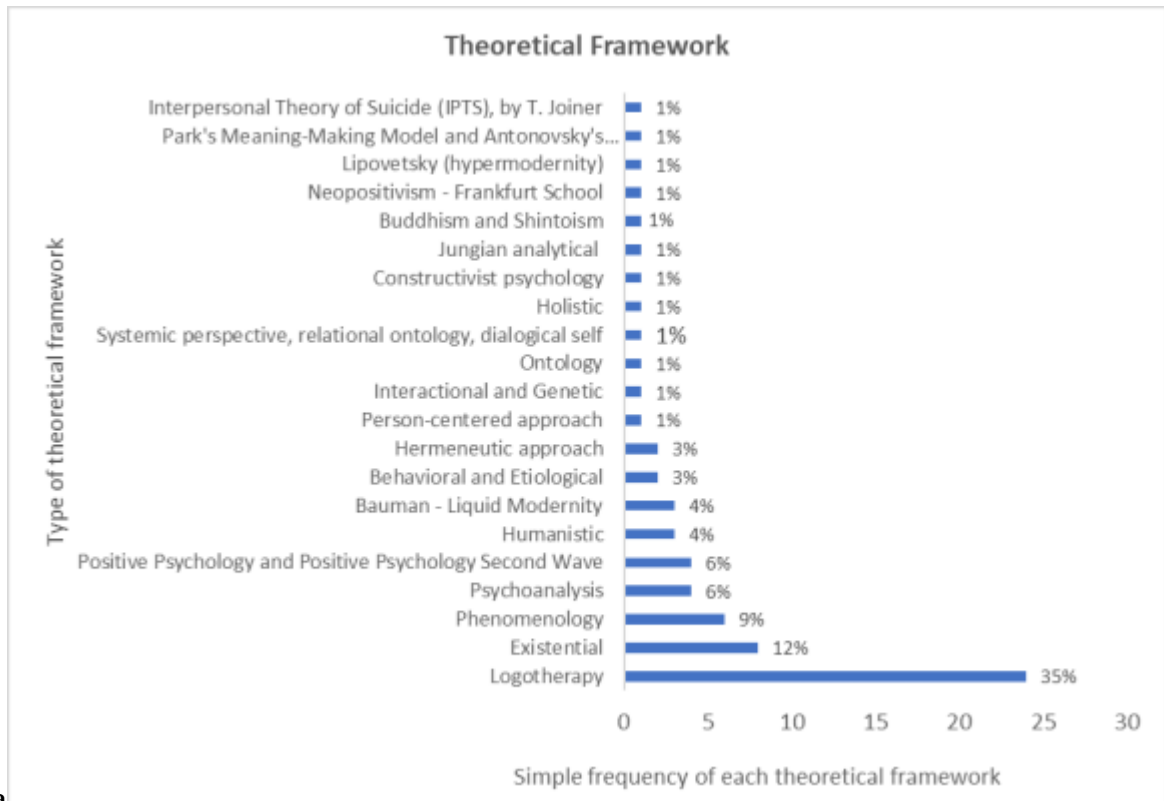


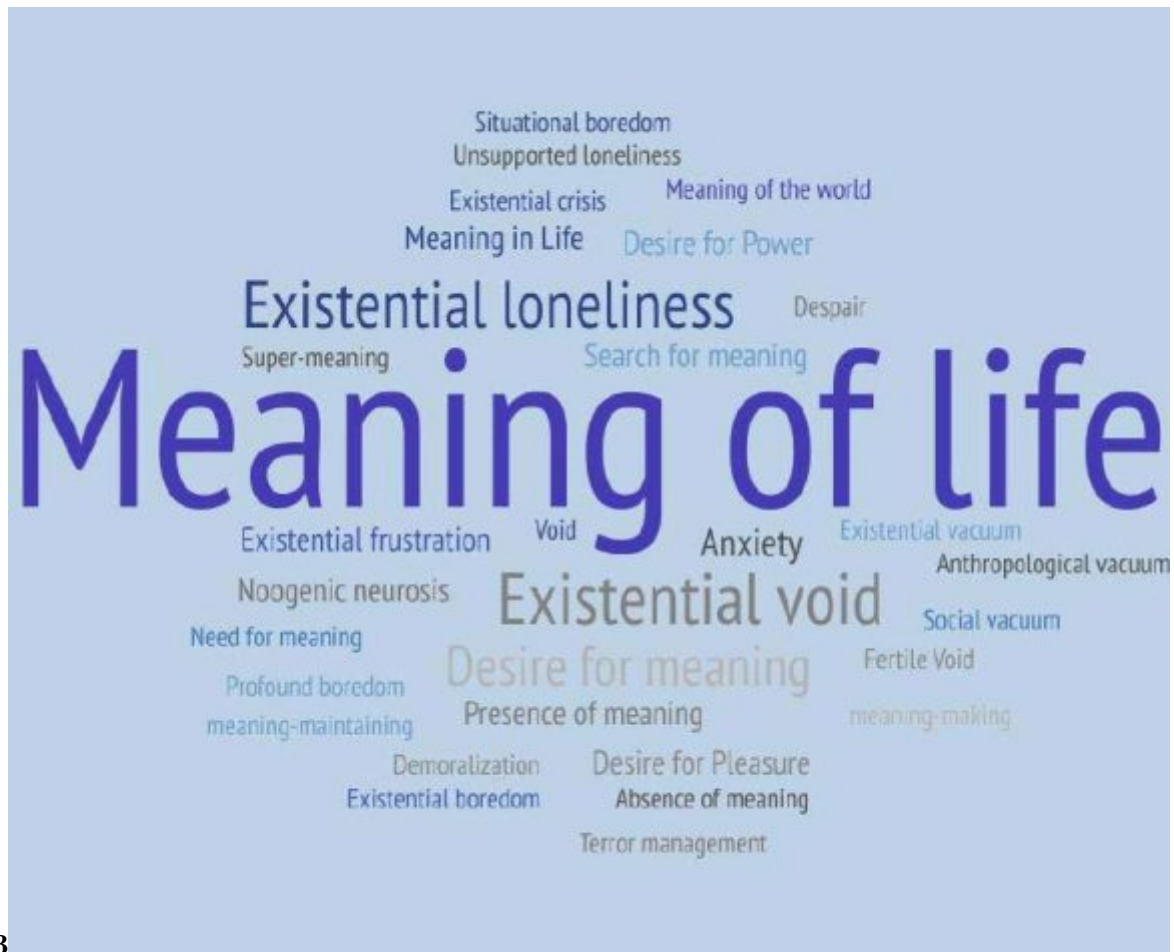
Figure 4: Figure 2a :

¹ Unveiling the Depths of Existential Inquiry: A Qualitative Examination of Psychological Literature

² Note that the citations in the present article are unofficial translations to English of the original texts, and the articles not produced initially in the Portuguese language were translated first into Portuguese before being translated into English.

³ Unveiling the Depths of Existential Inquiry: A Qualitative Examination of Psychological Literature

⁴ Socratic dialogue is a therapeutic technique using questions to extract from the individual undergoing therapy their own ideas, what they think and what they believe. This technique was inspired by Socratic maieutics, which literally means giving birth to ideas (Reale, 1992).



3

Figure 5: Figure 3 :

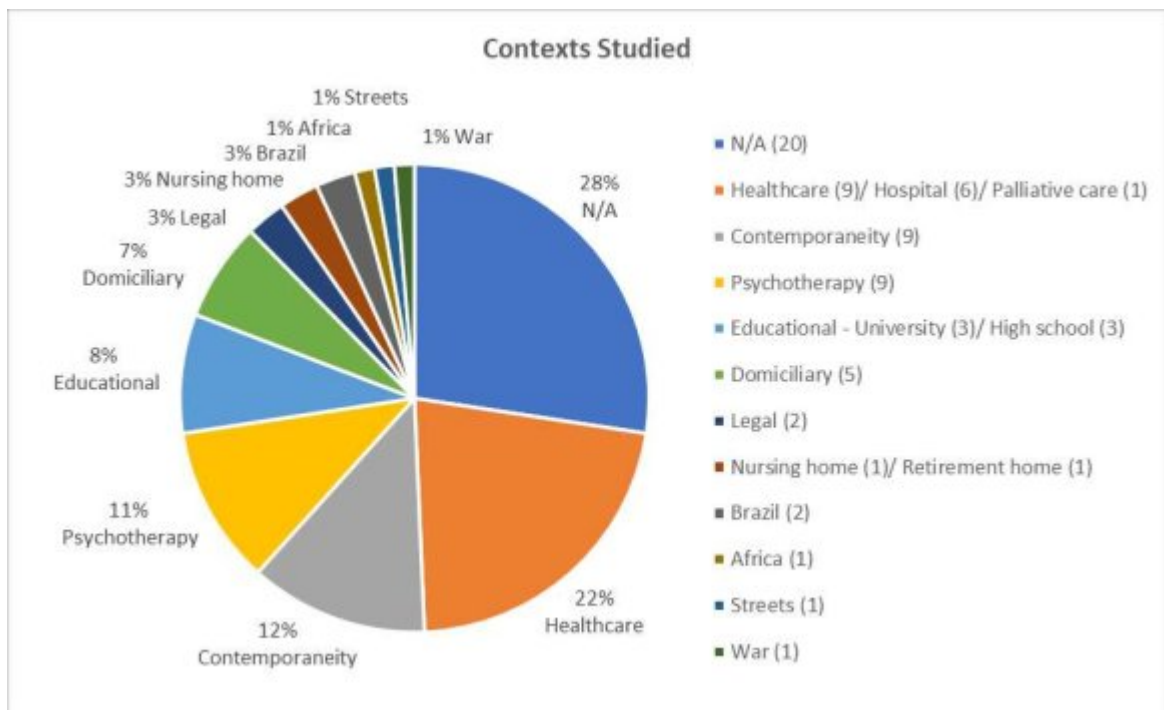


Figure 6:

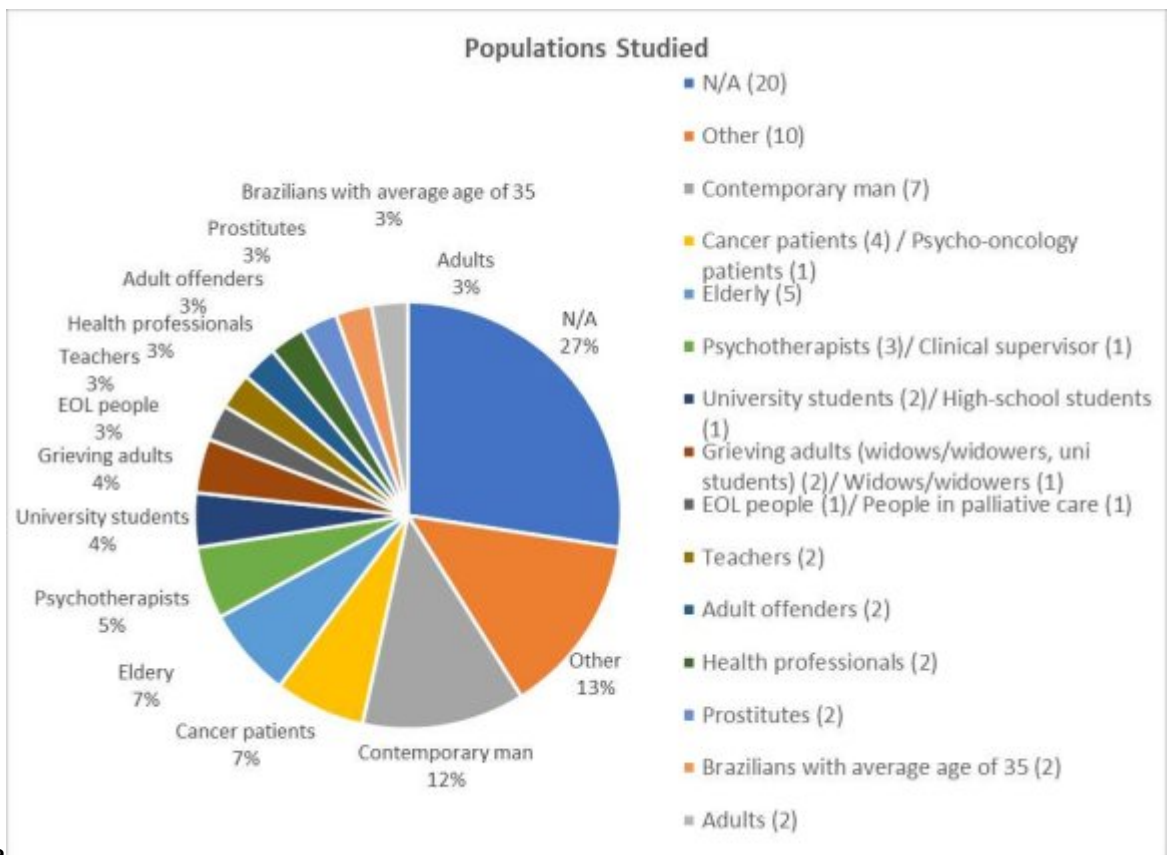


Figure 7: Figure 4 : 57 Figure 5a :



5b

Figure 8: Figure 5b :

Year Title of
Article

Abstract

Qualitative Approach

2021 Older
mi-
grants'
expe-
rience
of exis-
tential
loneli-
ness

Background: With rapidly ageing population worldwide, loneliness among older adults is becoming a global issue. Older migrants are considered being a vulnerable population and ethical issues are often raised in care for elderly. A deeper sense of loneliness, existential loneliness is one aspect of loneliness also described as the ultimate loneliness. Making oneself understood or expressing emotions, have shown to be particularly challenging for older migrants which could

collected through interviews (n ¼ 15) with older migrants' in Swedish nursing homes or senior citizen centres. A thematic analysis was performed to analyse the data..."

Keywords:

interviews; migrants; older adults.

Existential loneliness;

Mixed Approach

Descripción
del
sentido
de
la vida
en

2011 adolescentes
infractores
de
la ciu-
dad de
Medellín

2

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

Figure 10: Table 2

2

Figure 11: Table 2 :

3

Categories	Meaning of Life Example	Reference	Absc	Rela
			Freq	Frec
Meaning of life		Aquino, T. A. A. de. (2021).	36	52%
1.1 Search for meaning	"(...) is about the motivation or direction that individuals develop to obtain Meaning of life." (p.3)	Vieira, G. P., & (2021). Dias, A. C. G.	4	6%
1.2 Presence of meaning			4	6%
1.3 Desire for meaning			10	14%
1.4 Super-meaning	"(...) ultimate meaning, which encompasses the totality of existence. God as "the interlocutor of our most intimate soliloquies." (p.81)	Carrara, P. S. (2016).	2	3%
1.5 Need for meaning	"Human need to search for harmony seemingly lost." (p.186)	Amatuzzi, (1999). Mauro Martins.	1	1.5%
2 Meaning in Life		Aquino, T. A. A. de. (2021).	3	4%
3 Meaning of the world	"(...) the meaning of the world (cosmos) would be beyond rational comprehension, penetrating the perspective of faith or intuition in the unconditional meaning of life." (p.1044)	Aquino, T. A. A. de. (2021).	1	1.5%

" (...) the meaning of life, is something broader and, for this reason, it can only be understood when life fully unfolds, from conception to death." (p.1044) "(...) is about understanding and identifying if individuals have a clear, defined meaning of life" (Steger et al., 2006). (p.3) Vieira, G. P., & Dias, A. C. G. (2021). "(...)refers to human beings' genuine and prime motivation which, if frustrated, can lead to illness, which underpins a science of curing." (p.1043) Aquino, T. A. A. de. (2021). "(...) relates to the meaning of the moment, as, latent in each situation, the human being may reveal a value (demands of the moment) through consciousness (Gewissen)." (p.1044) 4 Desire for Pleasure "(...) deals with the hedonist conception that preaches the principal that all living beings move towards pleasurable experiences and distances themselves from painful ones." (p.306) Aquino et al. (2014). 3 4%

Figure 12: Table 3 :

5

Aquino et al. (2014).

3 4%

"is not a theory about MoL as such, however it deals with the way in which people cope with the constant and imminent awareness of their own mortality, contributing to an understanding of MoL (Greenberg et al., 1986; Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., & Solomon, S.(1986).""The sensation of absence of meaning and emptiness, denominated "existential vacuum" by Frankl, appears frequently in consulting rooms. For Frankl (1989, p. 26) "there are patients who go to see the psychiatrist because they have doubts about the meaning of life or because they already despaired of finding, in general, a meaning for life". (p.156) "(...) Vieira defines unprotected loneliness as "that which makes me feel I'm not alone, though abandoned, scared, phobic, empty and ready to collapse into the dimension of human, psychic survival (...)"(p.193)

Figure 13: Table 5 :

6

Social Science

Figure 14: Table 6 :

7

No.	Abbrev	Category	Example	Thematic Categories -Crisis of Meaning	Reference	Absolute Freq.
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Figure 15: Table 7 :

Example 1: Fukumitsu

et al. (2012)

Effects of Existential vacuum

Example 2: "The philosophical/psychological analysis of the consumerist disposition comes from the assumption that the

unrestrained search regardless of qualitative hierarchization, springs from a subjective for the acquisition of material things, attempt to symbolically fill a level of existence deprived of internally vacuous substantiality." (p.27) Bittencourt (2011)

Example 1: "However, as far as we know, there seems to be little understanding about being a migrant who experiences existential loneliness in old age, which contributes to an understanding of study aims to explore the experience of existential loneliness in older existential loneliness among older migrants. Therefore, the present migrants." (p.1184) (2021) Olofsson et al.,

34 ELXP Example 2: Bolmsjö et al. (2018) Example 1: "To analyze the concept of existential loneliness of analysis of existential loneliness

the concept of EL, analyzing the interrelationships." (p.143)

55 CONG Analysis definition and conceptual evolution

Example 2: "When we talk of the existential vacuum of Frankl (1991), it is appropriate for us to revert to the concept of despair in Kierkegaard (2008). For this Danish author, "(...) despair is a phenomenon of the spirit, something related to the eternal which, as a consequence, contains something eternal in its dialectics" (p.45). Kierkegaard's vision (2008) attracts attention with regard to the desperation to be something which is only possible based on the relationship of man with the eternal. Thus, the despair would be something that enables man to think of his Ego. Despair is the spark of the eternal and can only be thought of if we consider "man within the category of spirit" (Kierkegaard, 2008, p.46)." (p.11)

Rosa & Pulino (2020) Souza (2018)

Example 1: "(...) one aspect in the work and life of the Individual deserves a more analytical look: coping with the existential vacuum -the profound fear of the idea of death and the complete absence of intrinsic meaning that the natural world presents, included therein, for the poet, the human social world where he feels eternally out of place."

Coping with

56 CONG Existential vacuum

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Figure 17: ?

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