# FORMULATIONS OF THE MAIN GOAL IN LIFE: A QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

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**Abstract.** *Humanistic tradition emphasizes the main goal in life as something towards which people determine themselves. The main goal (or a group of goals with the highest priority) provides the basis for the sense of purpose in life and for development of its meaning. This study aimed at revealing categories in formulations of the main goal in life. Participants were 226 adults aged from 18 to 69 (M = 25.34, SD = 8.51, 65 % females). They answered an open question: "Kā Jūs raksturotu galveno dzīves mērķi? Lūdzu, padalieties ar savām pārdomām. [How could You describe the main goal in life? Please, share your opinion.]" The qualitative content analysis resulted in 29 categories. Inter-rater agreement among three raters was acceptable and varied from .72 to 1.00 (the mean Krippendorff's alpha was .88). Work, Family, and Satisfaction were the most frequently selected categories for a formulation of the main goal, while Love, Leisure, and Transcendent Issues were the less selected ones. An additional step of thematic analysis demonstrated that categories can be joined in four overarching themes: Vague Formulations, Self, Others, and Desired States.*
**Keywords:** *categories; qualitative content analysis; the main goal in life.*

## Introduction

Among different approaches to self-regulation (for a review see Karoly, 1993), humanistic tradition emphasizes the main goal in life as integrating the person and forming the genuine self (Buhler, 1971). Intentional moving towards this goal associates with self-fulfillment. At the same time, continuous pursuit of the main goal seems impossible (Buhler, 1971), and multiple motivational "peaks" (Леонтьев, 1975) make empirical investigation of this process very complex. As a result, there are a number of concepts associated with higher levels of goals. The most frequent of them are personal goals (e.g., Emmons, 2003; Nurmi, 1991), life goals (e.g., Gabrielsen, Ulleberg, & Watten, 2012; Roberts, O'Donnell, & Robins, 2004), personal strivings (e.g., Emmons, 1991), and personal projects (e.g., Little, 2006).

In contrast to conceptual variability, empirical studies (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Emmons, 2003; Gabrielsen et al., 2012; Hill, Burrow, O'Dell, & Thornton, 2010; Scheibe, Freund, & Baltes, 2007) demonstrated common tendencies in formulations of goals at the higher level of their hierarchy. In sum, personal goals, strivings, or projects share following themes: (a) self and achievement; (b) intimacy and social relationships; (c) happiness and hedonism; and (d) religiosity and spirituality. Analytical works (e.g., McKnight & Kashdan, 2009) associate these themes with the purpose in life, which is linked to one's sense of meaning in life (e.g., Baumeister & Wilson, 1996), psychological well-being (e.g., Emmons, 2003; Ryff & Singer, 2008), and happiness (Lyubomirsky, Tkach, & Dimatteo, 2006).

At the higher level of generalization, life goals demonstrated rank-order stability comparable with personality traits (Roberts et al., 2004). However, cross-cultural stability or variability of these goals is not well explored. This seems an important issue for the further investigation, because of cross-cultural differences established at the level of less generalized personal goals (Nurmi, Poole, & Seginer, 1995).

In Latvia, studies on the main goal in life are not well presented. "Galvenais dzīves mērķis [the main goal in life]" has one result in Google Scholar with two occurrences in the text. Even "personīgie mērķi [personal goals]" and "dzīves mērķi [life goals]" are presented in only 69 documents. Furthermore, in rare empirical studies in Latvia (e.g., Rone & Vidnere, 2016), measurements of life goals are based on existing instruments without revisiting their basis for the Latvian sociocultural context.

In the current study, we have focused on a more detailed exploration of formulations of the main goal in life construed by people in Latvia. Therefore, *the aim of the study was to reveal categories in formulations of the main goal in life.* We have considered a combination of a qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) and a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as the best strategy for this study. The qualitative content analysis can provide information on the basic categories and their occurrence in formulations of the main goal in life. In turn, the thematic analysis is a tool for more flexible grouping and interpreting these categories.

## Method

***Participants.*** Research participants were 226 adults aged from 18 to 69 ($M = 25.34$, $SD = 8.51$, 66 % females). The sample was formed as a convenient one. Among the participants, 89 % were university students, 29 % have acquired some level of higher education, 54 % were working, and 13 % were married.

***Measurements.*** Filling in the Individual Future Orientation Scale (IFOS, Kolesovs, 2017), participants answered an additional open question: "Kā Jūs raksturotu galveno dzīves mērķi? Lūdzu, padalieties ar savām pārdomām. [How could You describe the main goal in life? Please, share your opinion.]" The question was placed after questions regarding the near and distal personal goals. Five lines were provided for one's formulation of the main goal.

***Procedure.*** Data were collected in a paper-and-pencil format individually or in a group of participants. After informed consent was obtained, participants filled in the inventory without a time limit. Data were transcribed and checked for accuracy of the transcription.

## Results

In accordance with guidelines for a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), reading and re-reading formulations of the main goal was the main procedure applied by three authors of the paper at the first step of analysis. Initial categories of content were formed through grouping of content items included by participants in the descriptions of the main goal. This analysis was performed at a semantic (i.e., explicit) level. Table 1 presents examples of content items and 29 categories developed during this step.

After a group discussion, the list of categories was applied as a guide for coding the entire data set. The presence of each category in a description was marked by the relevant code. In the frame of a content analysis, presence or absence of a category in the description was coded as 1 or 0, respectively. Inter-rater agreement on the categories was assessed by Krippendorff's alpha coefficient (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). The coefficients (Table 1) demonstrate acceptable level of agreement on the basic categories (from .72 to 1.00, mean Krippendorff's alpha = .88). The final decision was made by consensus – at least 2 of 3 coders agree on the presence of the category in a description. Table 1 shows also the relative frequency of each category.

It should be noted that no one category was presented more frequently than in 30 % of descriptions. Therefore, no one category dominated in formulations of the main goal in life. Figure 1 presents ranking of categories by their relative frequencies. Work, Family, and Satisfaction, were leading categories in the descriptions. In opposite, Love, Leisure, and Transcendent Issues were the less mentioned categories in formulations of the main goal in life.

Table 1 **Content items, categories, inter-rater agreement (Krippendorff alpha, $K_\alpha$), and relative frequencies of the categories ($f_{rel}$) in the descriptions of the main goal in life** (*N* = 226)

| Content Items | Category | $K_\alpha$ | $f_{rel}$ |
|---|---|---|---|
| "Laime"; "būt laimīgam"; "laimīga". ["Happiness"; "be happy"; "happy".] | Laime [Happiness, HAP] | 1.00 | 19.5% |
| "Labklājība"; "dzīvot labi"; "pilnvērtīga dzīve". ["Wellness"; "to live well"; "fully-fledged life".] | Labklājība [Wellness, WEL] | .72 | 8.4% |
| "Harmonija"; "dzīvot saskaņā ar…"; "sabalansēt". ["Harmony"; "to live in accordance with…"; "to balance".] | Harmonija [Harmony, HAR] | .85 | 11.5% |
| "Stabilitāte"; "stabils pamats"; "drošība". ["Stability"; "stable background"; "safety".] | Stabilitāte [Stability, STA] | .83 | 7.5% |
| "Laba veselība"; "veselība"; "veseli". ["Good health"; "health"; "healthy".] | Veselība [Health, HLT] | 1.00 | 5.3% |
| "Absolūts un nemateriāls"; "garīga attīstība"; "attīstīties garīgi". ["Absolute and non-material"; "spiritual development"; "to develop spiritually".] | Transcendence [Transcendent Issues, TRA] | .84 | 2.7% |
| "Sev"; "man"; "ar sevi". ["For myself"; "for me"; "with myself".] | Es [Me, ME] | .77 | 17.3% |
| "Būt apmierinātam"; "patīk"; "baudīt"; "gandarījums"; "prieka brīži". ["To be satisfied"; "like"; "to enjoy"; "pleasure"; "times of joy".] | Apmierinājums [Satisfaction, SAT] | .92 | 20.8% |
| "Brīvība"; "neatkarība"; "patstāvīgs". ["Freedom"; "independence"; "self-contained".] | Autonomija [Autonomy, AUT] | .81 | 5.3% |
| "Augt un attīstīties"; "pilnveidot sevi"; "personīgā izaugsme". ["To growth and develop"; "to improve myself"; "personal growth".] | Izaugsme [Growth, GRO] | .93 | 19.9% |
| "Sasniegt"; "panākumi un sasniegumi"; "augsts līmenis". ["To achieve"; "successes and achievements"; "top-level".] | Sasniegumi [Achievement, ACH] | .76 | 9.7% |
| "Realizēt idejas"; "realizēt savu potenciālu"; "pašīstenoties"; "īstenot savus sapņus". ["To fulfill my ideas"; "to actualize my potential"; "to actualize myself"; "to live my dreams".] | Sevis realizācija [Self-Fulfillment, FUL] | .81 | 17.3% |
| "Izglītība"; "pabeigt augstskolu"; "mācīšanās". ["Education"; "to graduate from my university"; "learning".] | Izglītība [Education, EDU] | .95 | 13.7% |
| "Darbs"; "karjera"; "nodarbošanās"; "profesija"; "strādāt"; "bizness". ["Work"; "career"; "occupation"; "profession"; "working"; "business".] | Darbs [Work, WOR] | .94 | 28.3% |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| "Māja"; "īpašniece"; "nauda"; "labi apmaksāts"; "finansiāla"; "ienākumi". ["House"; "owner"; "money"; "well paid"; "financial"; "incomings".] | Īpašums [Property, PRP] | .82 | 12.8% |
| "Atpūta"; "hobiji"; "brīvais laiks". ["Rest"; "hobbies"; "leisure time".] | Atpūta [Leisure, LEI] | 1.00 | 2.2% |
| "Ģimene"; "izveidot ģimeni"; "ģimenes dzīve". ["Family"; "to establish a family"; "family life".] | Ģimene [Family, FAM] | .99 | 23.9% |
| "Tuvi cilvēki"; "draugi"; "savi mīļotie"; "mani vecāki"; "attiecības". ["Relatives"; "friends"; "loved ones"; "my parents"; "relationships".] | Tuvas attiecības [Close Relations, CLO] | .90 | 8.8% |
| "Mīlestība"; "mīlēt"; "būt mīlētai". ["Love"; "to love"; "to be loved".] | Mīlestība [Love, LOV] | 1.00 | 1.8% |
| "Citi"; "sabiedrība"; "cilvēki". ["Others"; "society"; "people".] | Citi cilvēki [Other People, OTH] | .72 | 12.4% |
| "Atbalstīt"; "nodot"; "sniegt"; "palīdzēt". ["To support"; "to hand over"; "to give"; "to help".] | Devums [Contribution, CON] | .85 | 12.4% |
| "Bērni"; "mazbērni"; "radīt pēcnācējus" ["Children"; "grandchildren"; "to create offsprings".] | Pēcteči [Offsprings, OFF] | .96 | 11.9% |
| "Grūti pateikt"; "nezinu"; "grūti formulēt". ["It's difficult to say"; "I don't know"; "it's difficult to formulate".] | Neskaidrība [Unclear, UNC] | .90 | 7.1% |
| "Dzinējs, kas dzen uz priekšu"; "tas, ko tu gribi sasniegt"; "lietas, kuras man jāizdara". ["A mover, which spurs forward"; "something you want to reach"; "things I have to complete".] | Mērķis motivātors [Motivator, MOT] | .90 | 11.9% |
| "Ceļš"; "svarīgāks ir process"; "dzīvot"; "tas ir kaut kas, kas mainās, attīstās dzīves gaitā"; "mazi solīši". ["The path"; "the process is more important"; "to live"; "something that is changing, developing during the life span"; "small steps".] | Process [Process, PROC] | .75 | 1.6% |
| "Mērķu izvēle"; "par to domāju un meklēju"; "jāizprot katram". ["Selecting goals"; "(I'm) thinking about and looking for it"; "Everyone has to understand".] | Meklējumi [Exploration, EXP] | .87 | 5.3% |
| "Dzīves izskaņā"; "atskatoties"; "pēc 30 gadiem". ["At the decline of life"; "taking a rear view"; "in 30 years".] | Vēlāk [Later, LAT] | .80 | 4.0% |
| "Bez bailēm"; "nepazaudēt"; "neko nenožēlot" ["Without fears"; "not to lose"; "not to have regrets".] | Izvairīšanās [Avoidance, AVD] | .89 | 12.8% |
| "Nav"; "Man nav konkrēta dzīves mērķa"; "Nav nekādas vajadzības to uzstādīt". Tukšs laukums bez mērķa formulējuma. ["There is no goal"; "I haven't a specific goal in life"; "There is no need to set it". An empty field without a formulation.] | Nav mērķa [No Goal, NOG] | .90 | 11.9% |

The number of categories within a description varied from one to 13. The mean number of categories was 3.37 ($SD = 2.16$) and median was 3.00. A single category was recognized in 23 % of formulations.

The next step in the analysis followed the principles of the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Happiness and Wellness addressed a higher level theme – Positive States – as a part of their main goal. Harmony, Stability, Avoidance, Health, and Transcendent Issues were joined into a theme of Balance. Avoidant formulations were considered as very close to formulations presenting stability and safety, while Transcendent Issues harmonized one's relationships with the immaterial world. In sum, Positive States and Balance formed a higher-order theme labeled *Desired States* (Figure 2).
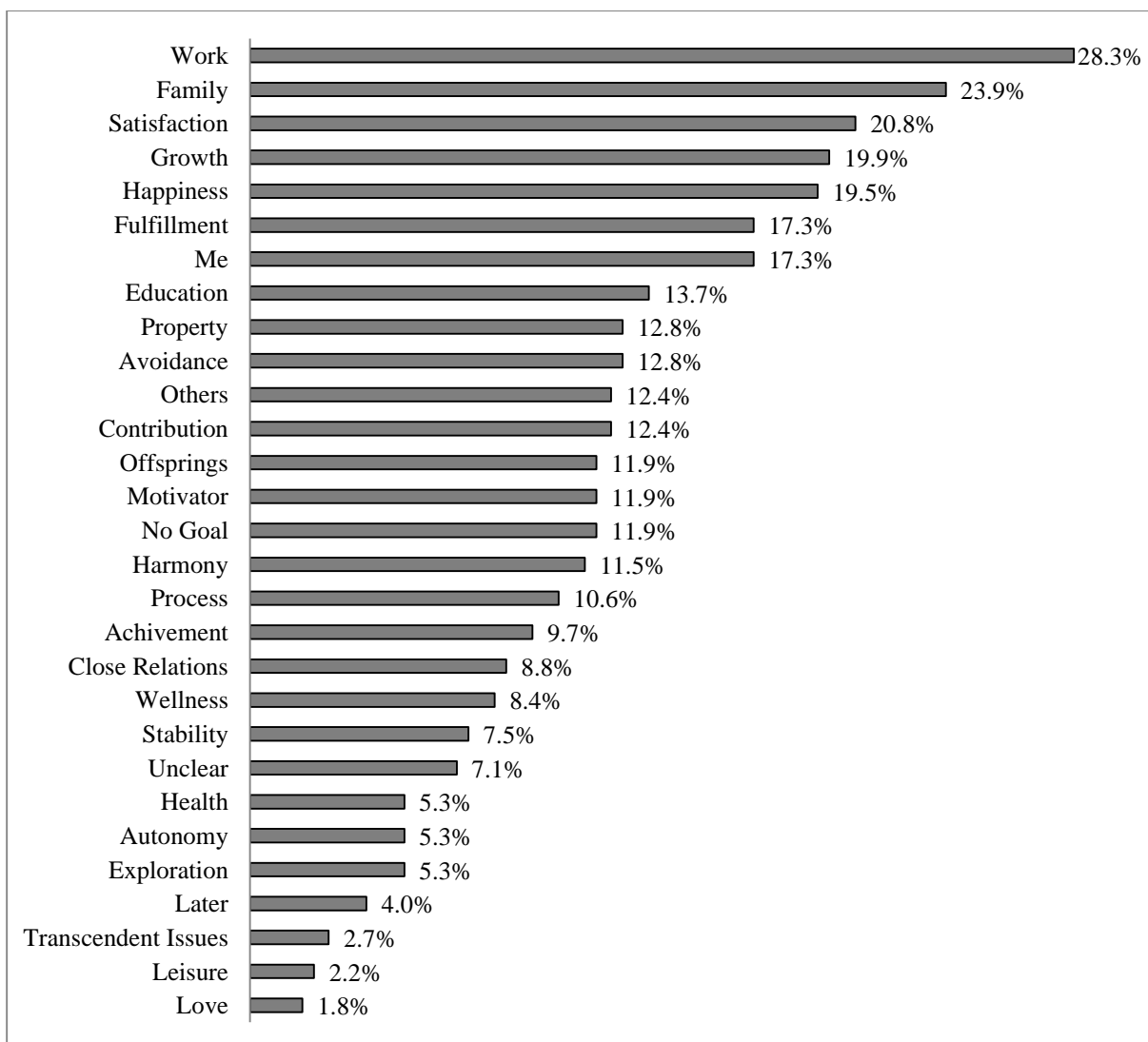
| Category | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Work | 28.3% |
| Family | 23.9% |
| Satisfaction | 20.8% |
| Growth | 19.9% |
| Happiness | 19.5% |
| Fulfillment | 17.3% |
| Me | 17.3% |
| Education | 13.7% |
| Property | 12.8% |
| Avoidance | 12.8% |
| Others | 12.4% |
| Contribution | 12.4% |
| Offsprings | 11.9% |
| Motivator | 11.9% |
| No Goal | 11.9% |
| Harmony | 11.5% |
| Process | 10.6% |
| Achivement | 9.7% |
| Close Relations | 8.8% |
| Wellness | 8.4% |
| Stability | 7.5% |
| Unclear | 7.1% |
| Health | 5.3% |
| Autonomy | 5.3% |
| Exploration | 5.3% |
| Later | 4.0% |
| Transcendent Issues | 2.7% |
| Leisure | 2.2% |
| Love | 1.8% |

Figure 1. **Relative frequency of categories in formulations of the main goal in life** (**$N = 226$**)

Me, Autonomy, Fulfillment, and Leisure presented self-focused issues and were joined under a theme of Myself. Education, Work, and Property formed a theme of Social Indicators of individual development and career, while Achievement and Growth formed a theme of Personal Challenges. As a result, Myself, Social Indicators, and Personal Challenges were joined into a higher-order theme labeled *Self*.

Family, Close Relations, Offsprings, and Other People were joined into a theme of Social Networks. Love and Contribution formed a theme of Affiliation. Difficulties in differentiation of Networks and Affiliation indicated that these themes are very close. This closeness resulted in combining them in a higher-order theme labeled *Others*.

Abstract Formulations was suggested as a theme for Motivator, Process, Exploration, and Later (recognizing the main goal at a later time). These themes presented the main goal as potentially existing but not specified in one's formulation. Unclear and No Goal categories were joined into a theme of Uncertainty. The analysis of Abstract Formulations and Uncertainty revealed common fuzziness of these formulations that resulted in forming the last higher-order theme labeled *Vague Formulations* (Figure 2).
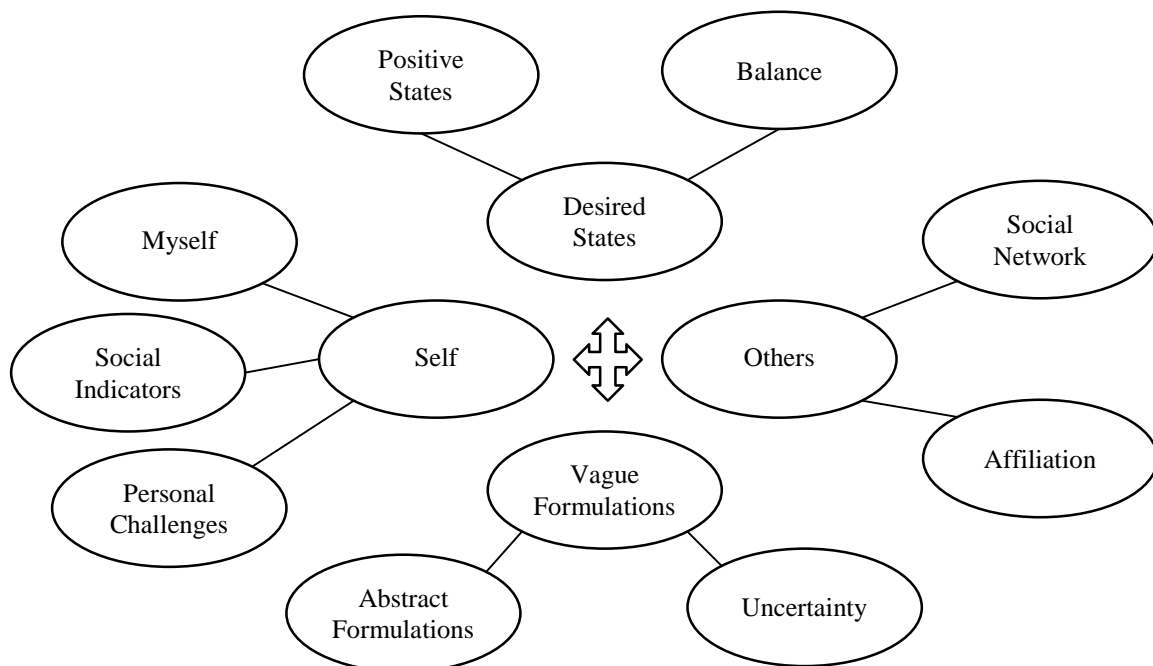


Figure 2. **Themes in descriptions of main goal in life**

A quantitative assessment of presence of the higher-order themes demonstrates that *Desired States* are identified in 47.8 % of descriptions; *Self* was included in 68.1 % of formulations; *Others* were included in 44.7 % of

descriptions; and *Vague Formulations* were presented in 37.2 % of formulations of the main goal in life. Krippendorff's alphas were .87, .87, .98, and .92 for Desired States, Self, Others, and Vague Formulations, respectively.

**Discussion**

The analysis of formulations of the main goal in life demonstrated that individual descriptions combined various categories. Joining the categories into higher-order themes resulted in four overarching themes: Desired States, Self, Others, and Vague Formulations.

Leading of work and family in the list of categories shows that social indicators or developmental tasks are the most accessible for organizing the highest level of personal goals. It is possible that inclusion of these categories was affected by the assessment of personal goals with the IFOS (Kolesovs, 2017) provided a context for construing the main goal. At the same time, leisure (presented in the IFOS) was mentioned relatively rare. Moreover, participants mentioned other themes (e.g., Happiness, Satisfaction), which were not primed by the IFOS.

A broad number of categories and their relatively frequencies confirm that there is no single category predominating in the descriptions. Even the most frequently mentioned category – work – was included in less than 30 % of formulations. It can be supposed that during the process of construal of the main goal, an individual deals with a broad range of possible goals and some level of uncertainty in formulations. The latter is visible in the following examples:

> *"Nespēšu konkrēti pateikt. Kopumā vēlos būt veiksmīga... [I can't specify it. In general, I wish to be successful...]* (22-years-old female). *"Galveno dzīves mērķi skaidri definēt vēl nav izdevies. Taču raksturlielumi tam ir: ģimene, iespēja tērēt... [The main goal in life is not clearly defined yet. However, its characteristics are: a family, a possibility to spend...* (20-years-old male).

Observed presence of multiple categories in one's description of the main goal in life is in accordance with a view of the higher level of human goals as multifaceted rather than singular (Emmons, 2003; Леонтьев, 1975). Co-occurrence and possible combinations of the categories are in question for the further research.

At a higher-order level, revealed themes are in accordance with a view of the purpose in life associated with goals and subjective states (Baumeister & Wilson, 1996). Desired States, Self, and Others are also in accordance with the themes revealed in empirical studies on higher-level goals (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Emmons, 2003; Gabrielsen et al., 2012; Hill et al., 2010; Sheibe et al., 2007). However, religiosity and spirituality do not occur as a higher-order theme. It does not support the previous studies (e.g., Emmons, 2003; Hill et al., 2010). The

current study revealed content items associated with the theme of spirituality in less than three percent of answers. Therefore, this is a significant change in a construal of the content of the main goal, which can be interpreted as an indicator of the secularization of social life in Latvia.

Vague Formulations forms a theme, which contrasts with other formulations of the main goal in life. Uncertainty, distancing, and abstract formulations associate with difficulties in selecting a particular goal at the highest level of a hierarchy. Therefore, occurrence of this theme can indicate a specific kind of formulating the main goal.

In addition to descriptions of the main goal, an association of the purpose in life with its meaning (Baumeister & Wilson, 1996) was found among the descriptions. It was presented as a relationship between the main goal and meaning of life:

*"Kad cilvēks ir sasniedzis savu mērķi dzīvē, tad viņš ir ieguvis dzīves jēgu. [When a person has achieved one's goal in life, one has obtained the meaning of life.]"* (22-years-old female). *"Galvenais dzīves mērķis ir viena no svarīgākām lietām, kas dod jēgu dzīvei. [The main goal in life is among the most important things making meaning in life.]"* (26-years-old male). *"Kāda ir manas dzīves jēga? [What is the meaning of my life?]"* (21-year-old male). *"Es nejūtu, ka dzīvei ir jēga, tad arī dzīves mērķi nav iespējams atrast. [I don't feel that life has meaning, and then it is impossible to find the goal of life.]* (21-year-old female).

This association confirms importance of recognizing personal goals in forming the sense of meaningful life. A more detailed investigation of this connection is needed.

Focusing at the explicit content of formulations of the main goal in life limits the study in the sense of interpreting the meaning of these formulations. Another limitation of the study was the age of the participants. The younger ones were overrepresented in the convenient sample. Involvement of a broader range of participants will be useful for higher variability of views of the main goal in life. Selecting 29 categories at the first step limits some quantitative steps of the further analysis. For example, the number of combination of formulations of the main goal is $2^{29}$ or about 536 millions of combinations. Therefore, a quantitative analysis of combinations is better to perform on more generalized themes.

## Conclusions

It can be concluded that the main goal in life is construed as either a single or a multifaceted goal. This study demonstrates that multifaceted formulations are more frequent than singular ones. Initial 29 categories present a variety of individual views of the main goal. These categories can be grouped under four

overarching themes: Self, Others, Desired States, and Vague Formulations. Combinations of these themes in individual descriptions and their relationship with the meaning in life are in question for the further research.

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