

Meaning in Life as a Bridge: Personality Traits and Altruistic Behavior in Educational Settings within a Collectivist Cultural Context

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Received: 25 June 2025 | Accepted: 11 August 2025 | Published: 1 September 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55057/ijares.2025.7.4.34>

Abstract: *This study investigated the mediating role of meaning in life in the relationship between three personality traits—agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience—and altruistic behavior among undergraduate students from a collectivist cultural context. We hypothesized that meaning in life would mediate the effect of each trait on altruism. Results revealed that meaning in life fully mediates the relationship between agreeableness and altruism, partially mediated the association between conscientiousness and altruism, and did not mediate the relationship between openness to experience and altruism. These findings emphasize the role of meaning in life as a motivational mechanism between personality and prosocial behavior and provide culturally grounded insights into virtue development. Implications for theory, practice, and future research are discussed.*

Keywords: personality trait, meaning in life, altruism behavior, prosocial behavior

1. Introduction

Personality and altruistic behavior are both central topics in psychology, but the mechanisms between them remain underexplored, especially outside the West. Big Five traits such as agreeableness are known predictors of prosocial acts (Oda et al., 2014), yet why some individuals consistently help others and how they find meaning in doing so is less understood. Existential positive psychology emphasizes that meaning-making and virtue emerge from both positive and negative experiences (Wong, 2011), proposes that a meaningful life (eudaimonic well-being) which encompasses not only happiness, pleasure, and positive emotions, but also virtues such as altruism and is deeply shaped by cultural values. In collectivist societies, for example, helping one's community is often seen not just as a social duty but as an affirmation of life's significance.

Personality traits, particularly those encompassed in the Big Five model (Costa & McCrae, 1992), have long been associated with prosocial behaviors such as altruism (Luengo Kanacri et al., 2021). Agreeableness, characterized by warmth and cooperativeness, is consistently the strongest predictor of altruistic actions (Rushton et al., 1981). Conscientiousness, reflecting

discipline and responsibility, also facilitates prosocial engagement, albeit through more duty-oriented motives (Oda et al., 2014). The trait of openness to experience, involving creativity and intellectual curiosity, has demonstrated inconsistent associations with prosociality across studies.

The integration of meaning in life within educational settings is increasingly recognized as a crucial factor in promoting students' holistic development and prosocial behavior. Meaning in life functions as a motivational resource that enables students to engage purposefully with academic and social goals, thereby supporting both individual flourishing and collective well-being (Steger et al., 2021). Within the framework of positive education, personality traits such as agreeableness and conscientiousness are linked to greater engagement, empathy, and cooperative behavior in classroom environments (Coppley & Niemiec, 2021; Allen et al., 2021). These traits, when channeled through a sense of meaning, can foster altruistic actions that strengthen social bonds and enhance the moral climate of schools—an outcome particularly significant in collectivist cultural contexts that emphasize social harmony and interdependence (Joshi et al., 2021). As Kern and Wehmeyer (2021) argue, the cultivation of character and purpose should be central aims of education, moving beyond academic performance to include the development of virtuous, socially responsible individuals. Therefore, understanding how meaning in life mediates the relationship between personality and altruism offers valuable insight into how educational systems can promote the development of moral reasoning and prosocial dispositions among students.

Despite these insights, the mechanisms through which personality traits foster altruism remain underexplored. One promising pathway is through the mediation of meaning in life, which may serve as a motivational facilitating factor mediating the relationship between personality traits and helping behaviors (He et al., 2023). Yet, existing literature is predominantly Western-centric, raising concerns about generalizability.

Within educational contexts, personality traits—particularly agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience—have important implications for fostering prosocial behaviors among students. These traits, drawn from the Big Five model, are known to influence cooperative learning, peer support, civic engagement, and broader altruistic tendencies. Agreeableness, which encompasses empathy, trust, and prosocial motivation, consistently emerges as a key predictor of helping behaviors in classroom and peer group settings, especially in collectivist cultures where interpersonal harmony is emphasized (Luengo Kanacri et al., 2021; Weiss-Sidi & Riemer, 2023). Conscientiousness contributes to students' sense of moral responsibility and reliability, fostering behaviors such as helping classmates and adhering to ethical norms within school environments (Oda et al., 2014). Openness to experience, associated with intellectual curiosity and perspective-taking, can support inclusive attitudes and empathy toward diverse peers. However, in cultures where conformity and social cohesion are highly valued, such traits may be expressed more cautiously (Triandis, 1995; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These personality traits also relate closely to how students construct meaning in their academic and social lives. Conscientious students often derive meaning through goal-directed learning and achievement; open students through exploration and reflective thinking; and agreeable students through interpersonal connection and social contribution (Martela & Steger, 2023; Wong, 2011). These pathways to meaning are particularly salient in educational settings that aim to cultivate whole-person development in culturally sensitive ways.

The role of meaning in life is increasingly recognized in educational psychology as a critical component of student well-being, motivation, and engagement. Meaning, defined as the perception that one's life is purposeful and coherent, not only fosters resilience and positive identity development but also enhances students' motivation to contribute to others' well-being. Recent studies with youth populations demonstrate a bidirectional link between meaning and prosocial behavior: students who report a strong sense of meaning are more likely to engage in altruistic actions such as volunteering, peer mentoring, and acts of kindness; and conversely, such behaviors enhance their sense of purpose and belonging (He et al., 2023; Guo et al., 2025). From the perspective of positive education, this dynamic creates a virtuous cycle that strengthens both individual flourishing and school climate (Steger, 2021; Wong, 2020). Importantly, these relationships are shaped by cultural values. In Western educational contexts, meaning may be derived through personal growth and self-expression; in collectivist cultures, meaning often stems from fulfilling familial and social roles (Kitayama & Park, 2007; Zhou et al., 2025). This suggests that interventions designed to promote student altruism or meaning-making must be culturally responsive. Understanding the intersection of personality, meaning, and prosocial behavior within educational systems can inform practices that not only enhance academic outcomes but also nurture moral and civic development among students across diverse cultural contexts.

This study investigates the hypothesis that meaning in life mediates the relationship between personality traits and altruistic behavior. Specifically, traits such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness may foster a sense of meaning, which in turn motivates helping others. We situate this hypothesis in a non-Western cultural context (e.g. Middle-east), where cultural identity and social support strongly influence meaning (Zhou et al., 2025). In collectivist cultures such as Iraq and Kurdistan region, social connectedness and communal values could intensify the interplay between personality, meaning, and altruism. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining meaning as a mediator between Big Five traits (agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness) and altruistic behavior in a large sample of undergraduate students.

2. Method

2.1 Participants and Procedure

The sample consisted of 861 undergraduate students (Male = 20.3, SD = 1.8; 55% female) recruited from Salahaddin University-Erbil, Iraq, reflecting a transitional, non-Western cultural context. A convenience sampling strategy was used, leveraging university networks to distribute an online questionnaire. All participants received a description of the study's purpose and provided informed consent prior to participation. To maximize data quality, the survey was administered anonymously and included attention-check items. Approximately 5% of responses were removed due to incompleteness or patterned responses indicative of disengagement. After data screening, 861 valid cases remained for analysis. The average completion time was approximately 15 minutes.

2.2 Measures

All instruments were administered in Kurdish. For scales originally developed in English, a rigorous back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1980) was employed to ensure linguistic and cultural equivalence.

Personality Traits were measured using the translated Big Five Inventory-10 (BFI-10) (Gosling et al., 2003), focusing on three core traits: agreeableness, conscientiousness, and

openness to experience. Each trait was assessed with two items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Sample items include “I see myself as critical, quarrelsome” (agreeableness) and “I see myself as dependable, self-disciplined” (conscientiousness). Internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha) for the subscales ranged from .74 to .83.

Meaning in Life was assessed using the Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale (MEMS) (George & Park, 2016), which evaluates three dimensions: coherence, purpose, and significance. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Example items include: “I have aims in my life that are worth striving for” and “My direction in life is motivating to me” The subscales demonstrated strong reliability ($\alpha = 0.70$ to 0.87).

Altruism was measured using the Self-Report Altruism Scale (SRA) (Rushton et al., 1981), which assesses the frequency of altruistic behaviors such as giving directions to strangers, donating blood, or helping someone carry a heavy load. Responses were recorded on a Likert-type scale, and internal consistency was acceptable ($\alpha = .79$).

2.3 Statistical Analysis

All analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 30. Initial data screening involved checking for missing values, outliers, and assumption violations. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were computed for all study variables.

To test the hypothesized mediation model, we conducted bootstrapped path analysis using Hayes’ PROCESS macro (Model 4) (Hayes, 2022). Each personality trait was entered separately as the independent variable (X), meaning in life as the mediator (M), and altruism as the dependent variable (Y). Indirect effects were estimated using 5,000 bootstrap samples, with 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs). A CI that does not contain zero was interpreted as evidence of a significant indirect effect.

3. Result

This section presents the findings of the mediation analyses examining the role of meaning in life as a mediator in the relationship between selected personality traits agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience, and altruistic behavior. Descriptive statistics for the main variables are first reported, followed by the results of the mediation models. Each mediation model was tested independently, and significance was determined using bootstrapped confidence intervals. The findings provide varying levels of support for the hypothesized indirect effects.

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for all study variables are presented in Table 1. Participants reported moderately high levels of meaning in life ($M = 5.90$, $SD = 1.00$) and altruistic behavior ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.80$). Personality traits were within typical ranges for undergraduate populations: agreeableness ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.68$), conscientiousness ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.65$), and openness ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 0.70$).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistencies for Study Variables (N = 861)

Variable	Mean (SD)
Agreeableness	3.58 (0.68)
Conscientiousness	3.47 (0.65)
Openness	3.23 (0.70)
Meaning in Life (MLQ)	5.90 (1.00)
Altruistic Behavior (PTM)	4.30 (0.80)

Note. Meaning in life was measured on a 7-point scale; all other variables on a 5-point scale.

3.2 Mediation Analyses

To examine the mediating role of meaning in life in the relationships between selected Big Five personality traits (agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience) and altruistic behavior, three separate mediation models were tested. Analyses were conducted using bootstrapped confidence intervals based on 5,000 samples, as summarized in Table 2.

H₁: Meaning in life mediates the relationship between agreeableness and altruistic behavior.

Results supported full mediation. The indirect effect of agreeableness on altruism via meaning in life was significant ($B = 0.0142$, 95% CI [0.0029, 0.0264]). The direct effect of agreeableness on altruism was non-significant ($B = -0.0123$, $p = .542$), suggesting that the relationship operates entirely through meaning in life. Additionally, agreeableness significantly predicted meaning in life ($B = 0.1753$, $p < .001$), and meaning in life, in turn, significantly predicted altruistic behavior ($B = 0.0808$, $p = .009$).

H₂: Meaning in life mediates the relationship between conscientiousness and altruistic behavior.

Findings indicated partial mediation. Conscientiousness significantly predicted both meaning in life ($B = 0.2250$, $p < .001$) and altruistic behavior directly ($B = -0.0506$, $p = .004$). The indirect effect via meaning in life was also statistically significant ($B = 0.0257$, 95% CI [0.0105, 0.0413]), indicating that meaning in life serves as a complementary pathway through which conscientiousness contributes to prosocial outcomes.

H₃: Meaning in life mediates the relationship between openness to experience and altruistic behavior.

Although openness to experience significantly predicted meaning in life ($B = 0.2502$, $p < .001$), the path from meaning in life to altruistic behavior was not statistically significant ($B = 0.0280$, $p = .390$). Consequently, the indirect effect was also non-significant ($B = 0.0070$, 95% CI [-0.0101, 0.0242]), suggesting that meaning in life does not mediate the relationship between openness and altruism in this context.

Table 2: Summary of Mediation Analyses for the Role of Meaning in Life

Hypothesis	Path a (to MLQ)	Path b (to Altruism)	Direct Effect (c')	Indirect Effect (a × b)	95% CI for Indirect Effect	Mediation Type
H1	$B = 0.1753$, $p < .001$	$B = 0.0808$, $p = .009$	$B = -0.0123$, $p = .542$	$B = 0.0142$	[0.0029, 0.0264]	Full
H2	$B = 0.2250$, $p < .001$	$B = 0.0808$, $p = .009$	$B = -0.0506$, $p = .004$	$B = 0.0257$	[0.0105, 0.0413]	Partial

H3	B = 0.2502, p < .001	B = 0.0280, p = .390	B = 0.0205, p = .603	B = 0.0070	[-0.0101, 0.0242]	None
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4. Discussion

This study contributes to the growing literature on prosocial development in educational settings by examining the psychological mechanisms relating personality traits to altruistic behavior through the mediating role of meaning in life, particularly within a collectivist, non-Western cultural context. The findings revealed a differentiated mediation pattern: meaning in life fully mediated the relationship between agreeableness and altruism, partially mediated the link between conscientiousness and altruism, and did not mediate the relationship between openness to experience and altruism. These results provide novel empirical support for meaning-centered models of positive psychology (Wong, 2011, 2020), underscoring existential meaning as a key conduit through which dispositional traits are translated into prosocial behavior, especially within culturally embedded educational environments.

Within the framework of positive education—which integrates well-being, character strengths, and meaning—these findings highlight the relevance of fostering eudaimonic development among students. Eudaimonia, or the pursuit of meaning and virtue, is particularly pertinent to educational goals that aim to nurture both academic competence and moral growth (Wong, 2011). The finding that agreeableness predicted altruism exclusively through meaning suggests that students high in empathy and interpersonal sensitivity are likely to derive purpose from social connectedness, which then fuels prosocial engagement. This supports the idea that cultivating relational meaning in classrooms—through activities like cooperative learning, peer mentoring, or values-based reflection—can strengthen students’ commitment to social responsibility. In contrast, conscientiousness influenced altruism both directly and indirectly via meaning in life, indicating a dual pathway. Students high in conscientiousness may not only act from internalized moral standards and a sense of duty but may also find life purpose through their structured, goal-oriented behaviors. This aligns with the educational aim of nurturing ethically grounded self-discipline.

Interestingly, openness to experience did not exhibit a mediating relationship through meaning, suggesting that this trait—although associated with cognitive and creative engagement—may foster more individualistic or exploratory forms of meaning that do not readily translate into altruistic action in collectivist settings. This distinction holds pedagogical significance: educators should consider that not all personality-driven sources of meaning support communal values equally. Educational strategies, therefore, must be both differentiated and culturally responsive, aligning meaning-making activities with moral frameworks that resonate with students’ cultural orientations and dispositional strengths.

The implications of these findings are particularly relevant for positive education and social-emotional learning (SEL). Programs that foster purpose and meaning—through narrative identity development, service-learning, and culturally anchored discussions of values—may enhance altruistic tendencies among students, particularly those who are dispositionally inclined toward agreeableness and conscientiousness. The study also supports the integration of existential development into SEL frameworks, emphasizing the importance of helping students connect their personality traits to broader life purposes and societal contributions. For example, agreeable students may benefit from activities that reinforce community values, while conscientious students might be engaged through structured, goal-directed service opportunities.

At a broader level, this research contributes to understanding how meaning functions as a motivational force in collectivist educational environments, where altruism is often seen as a normative social expectation rather than a discretionary virtue. In such contexts, meaning is frequently derived from fulfilling one's role within interconnected social relationships (Weiss-Sidi & Riemer, 2023; Zhou et al., 2025). The full mediation observed for agreeableness reinforces the idea that in these settings, altruism may reflect intrinsic motivation supported by culturally congruent sources of purpose. This view aligns with recent findings suggesting that meaning in life, self-acceptance, and prosociality form a tightly integrated psychological system in collectivist cultures (Guo et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional nature of the design precludes causal inferences about the directionality of the observed relationships. Longitudinal or experimental studies are needed to verify the stability and temporal ordering of these effects. Moreover, reliance on self-report measures may introduce social desirability bias or inflate associations due to common method variance. Future research should incorporate behavioral assessments or peer reports to enhance validity. The cultural specificity of the sample—drawn from a collectivist, non-Western context—also limits generalizability. Cross-cultural comparative studies would help determine whether the mediating role of meaning holds across different cultural frameworks. Additionally, this study focused on only three personality traits; examining additional traits, including socially aversive ones such as narcissism or Machiavellianism, may offer a fuller picture of the personality–altruism–meaning nexus.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs to assess the development and direction of these mediational pathways over time. Interventions aimed at enhancing meaning in life could help determine causal links between purpose and prosocial outcomes in educational settings. Cross-cultural comparisons would also be valuable in identifying both universal and culturally specific mechanisms underlying the mediation of altruism by meaning. Furthermore, examining potential moderators—such as cultural identity strength, gender, or social support—could shed light on which student subgroups are most influenced by these psychological pathways. Finally, applying network analytic techniques (Guo et al., 2025) may help model the dynamic interplay among personality traits, meaning in life, and prosocial behaviors, offering a more comprehensive and systemic perspective aligned with the goals of positive education.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the psychological mechanisms between personality traits to altruistic behavior in a collectivist educational context, with a particular focus on the mediating role of meaning in life. The findings reveal that meaning in life fully mediates the relationship between agreeableness and altruism, partially mediates the effect of conscientiousness on altruism, and does not mediate the link between openness to experience and altruistic behavior. These results underscore the central role of existential meaning in translating certain personality dispositions into prosocial action, particularly within cultural settings that emphasize social responsibility and interdependence. The study contributes to the growing body of research on positive education by demonstrating that fostering students' sense of meaning may enhance altruistic engagement, especially among those with personality traits aligned with empathy and moral responsibility. Overall, the findings offer important theoretical and practical implications for educational systems seeking to promote character strengths, moral development, and culturally responsive well-being practices.

Acknowledgement

This research was not funded by any grant.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research.

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