



REVIEW ARTICLE

THE SOCIAL SYSTEM OF EMPTINESS: AN EXAMINATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DETACHMENT, SOCIAL ALIENATION, AND THE SPREAD OF MEANINGLESSNESS IN MODERN LIFE

Ahmed F. Alanazi

Department of Social Studies, College of Arts, King Faisal University

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 15th April, 2026
Received in revised form
20th May, 2026
Accepted 25th June, 2026
Published online 30th July, 2026

Keywords:

System of Emptiness
Psychological Detachment
Social Alienation, and the Spread of
Meaninglessness

*Corresponding author:

Ahmed F. Alanazi

ABSTRACT

The experience of meaninglessness represents one of the most pervasive yet poorly understood psychological phenomena of contemporary life. This paper presents a comprehensive theoretical and empirical examination of the relationships between social detachment, alienation, and the experience of meaninglessness. Drawing upon classical sociological frameworks, contemporary psychological research, and existential therapeutic traditions, I argue that meaninglessness emerges not as an individual pathology but as a predictable psychological outcome of social detachment operating through multiple interconnected pathways. The analysis synthesizes evidence from social exclusion research demonstrating that rejection produces immediate cognitive deconstruction and meaninglessness, longitudinal studies identifying social connectedness as the strongest predictor of meaning in life, and clinical observations of existential neurosis. Four mechanisms are identified through which detachment generates meaninglessness: cognitive deconstruction following social exclusion, the erosion of normative frameworks, the loss of relational sources of meaning, and shame-mediated dissociative detachment. The paper concludes by examining therapeutic implications, particularly the potential of meaning-centered interventions to address the existential vacuum created by social detachment. This framework suggests that meaninglessness is best understood not as a philosophical problem to be resolved through individual reflection but as a social-psychological condition requiring reconnection and relational repair.

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Citation: Ahmed F. Alanazi. 2026. "The Social System of Emptiness: An Examination of Psychological Detachment, Social Alienation, and the Spread of Meaninglessness in Modern Life", *International Journal of Recent Advances in Multidisciplinary Research*, 13,(07), 12634-12640.

INTRODUCTION

The question of life's meaning has occupied human thought since the emergence of reflective consciousness. Yet the contemporary experience of meaninglessness appears qualitatively different from historical existential struggles, marked not by philosophical doubt but by a pervasive emptiness that resists articulation. Viktor Frankl observed the psychological landscape of the mid-twentieth century and identified meaninglessness as "a major source of modern neurosis," coining the term "existential vacuum" to describe the widespread experience of inner emptiness and purposelessness (Frankl, 1967). Decades later, this observation appears more prescient than ever, as rates of loneliness, social isolation, and psychological distress continue to rise across industrialized societies (Arnett, 2024). The relationship between social detachment and meaninglessness has been theorized extensively within sociological traditions but has received less systematic empirical attention than its prevalence warrants.

From Marx's analysis of alienated labor to Durkheim's investigation of anomie, classical social theorists recognized that meaning is not an individual achievement but a social product, emerging from participation in shared symbolic systems and meaningful relationships (Seeman, 1959). When these social foundations erode, meaninglessness follows not as a philosophical conclusion but as a psychological consequence. This understanding has been further developed by contemporary researchers who have demonstrated that social exclusion produces immediate cognitive deconstruction characterized by meaninglessness, lethargy, and altered time perception (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2003). This paper advances three central arguments. First, meaninglessness is fundamentally a social-psychological phenomenon, not merely an individual cognitive state. Second, social detachment generates meaninglessness through multiple mechanisms that operate at cognitive, affective, and social-structural levels. Third, understanding these mechanisms has important implications for therapeutic intervention, suggesting that addressing meaninglessness requires not

only cognitive reframing but relational repair and social reconnection (Martela & Steger, 2016; King & Hicks, 2021). The analysis proceeds through several sections. I first establish the conceptual foundations by examining classical and contemporary theories of alienation and meaning. I then review the empirical literature documenting the relationship between social connection and meaning, followed by an analysis of the mechanisms through which detachment generates meaninglessness. The discussion addresses therapeutic implications and identifies directions for future research.

Conceptual Foundations: Alienation, Anomie, and the Social Origins of Meaning

The Classical Sociological Tradition: The concept of alienation has undergone significant refinement since its emergence in the work of Hegel and Marx. Marx's analysis of alienated labor identified four dimensions of estrangement: workers become separated from the products of their labor, from the act of production itself, from their species-being, and from other human beings (Marx, 1977). Central to Marx's account was the insight that meaninglessness arises when individuals lose understanding of how their activities contribute to a meaningful whole. The worker who cannot see the purpose of his labor, who performs fragmented tasks without comprehension of the final product, experiences meaninglessness as a direct consequence of social-structural arrangements (Mészáros, 1970; Archibald, 2009). Durkheim's concept of anomie provided a complementary framework, focusing on the erosion of normative regulation rather than economic exploitation. For Durkheim, meaning and purpose depend upon shared norms that constrain individual desires and provide direction for action. When rapid social change disrupts these normative structures, individuals experience anomie, a state of normlessness characterized by confusion, disorientation, and a loss of moral guidance (Durkheim, 1951). This condition bears direct relevance to the contemporary experience of meaninglessness, as accelerating social change destabilizes the normative frameworks that previously provided existential orientation (Merton, 1938).

Weber's analysis of rationalization offered yet another perspective, identifying the "disenchantment of the world" as a consequence of modernity's relentless calculative rationality. As formal rationality penetrates increasingly many domains of life, the meanings embedded in tradition, religion, and community give way to instrumental logic. The "iron cage" of rationalization, while producing material benefits, simultaneously produces existential impoverishment (Weber, 1958). This theme was later developed by theorists who observed that modernity's emphasis on individual autonomy, while liberating, also produces a loneliness that undermines meaning (Slater, 1970; Reisman, 1950).

Seeman's Multidimensional Framework: Melvin Seeman's systematic analysis of alienation provided the conceptual clarity necessary for empirical investigation. Drawing upon the classical tradition, Seeman identified five distinct varieties of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement (Seeman, 1959). Subsequent scholars have

added cultural alienation as a sixth dimension, recognizing that alienation can extend to the rejection of dominant cultural values (Langman & Kalekin-Fishman, 2005). Meaninglessness, within Seeman's framework, refers specifically to the individual's inability to predict the consequences of their actions, a condition arising when the social environment becomes incomprehensible. The individual experiencing meaninglessness "no longer understands the functioning of social organization of which he is a part," rendering action purposeless because its outcomes cannot be anticipated (Seeman, 1959). This cognitive dimension distinguishes meaninglessness from other forms of alienation: it concerns understanding rather than control, belonging, or self-realization. Seeman's formulation emphasizes that meaninglessness is fundamentally a cognitive state, a failure to comprehend the connections between actions and outcomes that makes purposeful action impossible (Rotter, 1966).

Subsequent researchers have refined and extended Seeman's framework. Dean empirically validated three dimensions, powerlessness, normlessness, and social isolation, while Blauner identified meaninglessness as a distinct dimension of work alienation, experienced when workers lack understanding of how their labor contributes to the whole (Dean, 1961; Blauner, 1964). These formulations share a common insight: meaninglessness emerges when individuals lose the cognitive maps that orient action and provide understanding of their place within larger systems. The work of Johnson further developed these insights by examining how alienation manifests differently across social contexts and historical periods (Johnson, 1978).

The Existential Tradition and the Vacuum of Meaning: Parallel to sociological analyses, the existential tradition in psychology and psychiatry has addressed meaninglessness as a central clinical concern. Frankl's logotherapy explicitly identified the "existential vacuum" as a primary source of neurosis in modern society (Frankl, 1967). For Frankl, the will to meaning is a fundamental human motivation, and its frustration produces what he termed "noogenic neurosis", a condition distinct from psychogenic neurosis in its origin in existential rather than psychological conflicts.

Fromm offered a complementary analysis, arguing that "neurosis is a function of alienation" and that "alienation is a sickness of the self and is considered to be the core of the psycho-pathology of modern man" (Fromm, 1962). In this view, the psychological difficulties of contemporary life cannot be understood apart from the social conditions that produce alienation. Horney similarly recognized that the search for meaning and self-realization is fundamental to human development, and that its frustration produces distinctive forms of neurotic suffering (Horney, 1950).

Leffert has argued that existential psychotherapy and psychoanalysis address "problems unique to the Being of Human Beings: problems having to do with the search for personal Meaning in the face of Meaninglessness, Loneliness, and Despair" (Leffert, 2020). This perspective suggests that meaninglessness is not reducible to other psychological conditions but represents a distinct clinical phenomenon requiring specific therapeutic attention. Traditional psychotherapies that focus on symptom

reduction or conflict resolution may be insufficient when the fundamental problem is the absence of meaningful engagement with life (Glaw, Kable, Hazelton, & Inder, 2016).

Empirical Evidence: Social Connection and the Experience of Meaning

Experimental Evidence from Social Exclusion Research: Experimental research on social exclusion has provided compelling evidence for the causal relationship between social detachment and meaninglessness. Twenge and colleagues hypothesized that socially excluded individuals enter "a defensive state of cognitive deconstruction" characterized by avoidance of meaningful thought, emotion, and self-awareness (Twenge *et al.*, 2003). Across a series of experiments, rejected participants demonstrated altered time perception, focusing on the present rather than the future and failing to delay gratification. Most significantly for the present analysis, rejected participants were more likely to agree that "Life is meaningless" (Twenge *et al.*, 2003).

These findings suggest that meaninglessness is not merely a cognitive state but a psychological defense mechanism. Following exclusion, individuals disengage from meaningful thought to avoid the pain of rejection. This deconstructed state represents a form of psychological retreat, a reduction of self-awareness and emotional engagement that protects against further hurt but at the cost of meaning. Excluded participants wrote fewer words, displayed slower reaction times, and avoided emotion words in implicit tasks, consistent with this interpretation (Twenge *et al.*, 2003). The phenomenon appears to be robust across different experimental paradigms and populations, suggesting that the link between exclusion and meaninglessness is fundamental rather than context-dependent.

The mechanism appears to involve shame as a mediating variable. Catton and colleagues found that social exclusion increases dissociative detachment, with these effects mediated by increases in shame and particularly pronounced among individuals with a high need to belong (Catton *et al.*, 2025). This suggests that detachment functions as a coping response to the shame of exclusion, creating a psychological distance that provides relief but simultaneously undermines the social connections necessary for meaning. The researchers found that individuals who reported a stronger need to belong experienced greater shame following exclusion, which in turn predicted higher levels of dissociative detachment.

Longitudinal Evidence from Birth Cohort Studies: Large-scale longitudinal research has confirmed and extended these experimental findings. Analysis of data from a UK birth cohort involving over 3,300 participants examined factors associated with meaning in life during emerging adulthood, a period of substantial social and psychological transition (Sundqvist *et al.*, 2024). The findings were remarkably clear: relatedness, emotional support, and practical social support were the strongest positive predictors of meaning presence. Conversely, health-related functioning problems were negatively associated with meaning presence.

This research also revealed the oppositional roles of meaning presence and meaning search. While presence of meaning predicted reduced odds of subsequent mental health difficulties including depression, anxiety, self-harm, and low wellbeing, search for meaning predicted increased odds of anxiety and low wellbeing (Sundqvist *et al.*, 2024). This finding challenges the romanticization of existential searching, suggesting that the absence of meaning, rather than the quest for it, is associated with psychological wellbeing. Search for meaning appears to reflect not a healthy existential engagement but a problematic lack of existential orientation. These findings align with meta-analytic evidence demonstrating that meaning in life is robustly associated with mental health outcomes (Boreiam & Schutte, 2023).

The relationship between meaning and health extends beyond psychological wellbeing to physical health outcomes. Czekierda, Banik, Park, and Luszczynska conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis finding that meaning in life is associated with better physical health outcomes, including reduced mortality risk (Czekierda, Banik, Park, & Luszczynska, 2017). Similarly, Cohen, Bavishi, and Rozanski found that purpose in life predicts reduced all-cause mortality and cardiovascular events (Cohen, Bavishi, & Rozanski, 2016). These findings suggest that meaninglessness is not merely a psychological discomfort but a condition with significant health implications.

Buffering Effects of Meaning and Competence: The COVID-19 pandemic provided a natural experiment for examining how psychological resources buffer against the effects of social disconnection. Research examining changes in social connection and wellbeing from before to after the pandemic onset found that decreases in connectedness and increases in loneliness predicted decreases in life satisfaction (Martinez, Regan, & Lyubomirsky, 2024). However, these effects were buffered among individuals who reported growth in learning, sense of meaning or purpose, and use of skills. This finding aligns with self-determination theory, which identifies relatedness, competence, and autonomy as fundamental psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When social connection is compromised, autonomy- and competence-fulfilling behaviors may compensate, providing alternative pathways to wellbeing (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). Critically, meaning or purpose emerged as a significant buffer, suggesting that maintaining a sense of meaningfulness can protect against the psychological costs of social disconnection (Martinez *et al.*, 2024). This compensatory function has important implications for intervention, indicating that fostering meaning may serve as a resilience resource when social connections are threatened.

Folk and colleagues examined social connection during the pandemic and found that declines in connection were particularly pronounced among extraverts, who typically derive more wellbeing from social interaction (Folk, Okabe-Miyamoto, Dunn, & Lyubomirsky, 2020). Okabe-Miyamoto and colleagues further found that changes in social connection during COVID-19 were associated with changes in well-being, with those who maintained or increased connection showing better outcomes (Okabe-

Miyamoto, Folk, Lyubomirsky, & Dunn, 2021). These findings underscore the fundamental importance of social connection for psychological wellbeing and the vulnerability that arises when connection is compromised.

Mechanisms Linking Detachment to Meaninglessness **Cognitive Deconstruction Following Social Exclusion:**

The experimental research on social exclusion suggests a specific pathway from detachment to meaninglessness through cognitive deconstruction. When individuals experience exclusion, they enter a state characterized by reduced self-awareness, attenuated emotion, and altered time perception (Twenge *et al.*, 2003). This state serves a defensive function, reducing the psychological impact of rejection, but its cognitive features, particularly present-focus and meaninglessness, represent the very phenomena of concern. The temporal dimension is particularly significant. Meaning depends upon the ability to integrate past, present, and future into a coherent narrative. Socially excluded individuals, however, focus on the present and fail to consider future consequences, as demonstrated by their inability to delay gratification (Twenge *et al.*, 2003). This temporal narrowing makes meaning impossible, as meaning requires temporal extension, the sense that present actions contribute to a meaningful future. King and Hicks have emphasized that meaning involves the perception that one's life has coherence, purpose, and significance, all of which require temporal integration (King & Hicks, 2021).

Bandura's work on self-efficacy provides a complementary perspective, suggesting that when individuals lack belief in their ability to influence outcomes, they disengage from meaningful action (Bandura, 1982). Social exclusion undermines self-efficacy by demonstrating that one's efforts to connect are futile, producing a generalized sense of inefficacy that extends to other domains. This disengagement represents a form of learned helplessness that further reduces meaning.

Erosion of Normative Frameworks: Drawing upon Durkheim's concept of anomie, a second pathway involves the erosion of normative frameworks that provide existential orientation. Normlessness involves "the expectancy that socially unapproved behaviors are required to achieve given goals," representing a breakdown in the cultural structure that aligns means with ends (Seeman, 1959). When norms lose their guiding power, individuals can no longer determine what actions are appropriate or meaningful. This condition is particularly relevant to contemporary social arrangements. As Seeman noted, meaninglessness is experienced "when the individual no longer understands the functioning of social organization of which he is a part" (Seeman, 1959). The complexity and opacity of modern institutions make such understanding increasingly difficult. When individuals cannot see how their actions connect to meaningful outcomes, they experience meaninglessness regardless of their personal psychological resources (Israel, 1971).

The school context provides a concrete illustration of this mechanism. Research on adolescent alienation found that students who felt disconnected from school experienced meaninglessness, questioning "the relevance of the subjects and subject content in connection with their future jobs" (Mau, 1992). For these students, the immediate experience

of schooling seemed disconnected from any meaningful future, producing not only disengagement but the conviction that their present efforts were wasted. Calabrese and Seldin similarly found that alienated adolescents reported that school activities lacked meaning and that they could not see the connection between education and future success (Calabrese & Seldin, 1987).

Loss of Relational Sources of Meaning: Research consistently identifies social connectedness as a primary source of meaning. The UK birth cohort study found that relatedness, emotional support, and practical support were the strongest predictors of meaning presence (Sundqvist *et al.*, 2024). This finding aligns with a broader literature identifying social connection as fundamental to human flourishing (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Schnell has found that individuals derive meaning from a variety of sources, with relationships consistently ranking among the most important (Schnell, 2011). When social connections are severed or attenuated, the sources of meaning they provide disappear. This loss operates at multiple levels: intimate relationships provide immediate experiences of love and belonging; friendships provide recognition and validation; community membership provides a sense of contribution to something larger than oneself; and cultural participation provides shared meanings and collective purposes. Detachment from any of these relational spheres reduces available meaning (Martela & Steger, 2016).

This understanding helps explain why social exclusion produces meaninglessness so directly. When others reject us, they withhold the recognition and validation that sustains meaning. The excluded individual is not merely alone but is denied the relational confirmation that one matters, that one's existence makes sense, that one belongs in a meaningful order. Meaninglessness follows as the psychological correlate of this relational deprivation. Research by McKnight and Kashdan has emphasized that purpose in life functions as a system that creates and sustains health and well-being, and that this system depends fundamentally on social relationships (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009).

Shame and Dissociative Detachment: The experimental research on social exclusion suggests shame as a mediating mechanism. Catton and colleagues found that social exclusion increases dissociative detachment, with these effects mediated by increases in state shame. Individuals with a high need to belong were particularly affected, presumably because exclusion is more painful and more threatening for those who most desire connection (Catton *et al.*, 2025). Dissociative detachment represents a withdrawal from full engagement with experience, a state of psychological distance from one's own thoughts, feelings, and surroundings. This state is characterized by derealization and absorption, experiences that fundamentally undermine meaning. When the world feels unreal, actions lose purpose; when one is absorbed in internal states, external engagement diminishes (Schachtel, 1959). This finding suggests a potentially vicious cycle: social exclusion produces shame, which triggers dissociative detachment, which further compromises social functioning, increasing the risk of future exclusion. Meaninglessness both results from and reinforces this

pattern, as the detached individual loses the capacities for meaning-making that depend upon full engagement with experience. Fromm's analysis of alienation as a "sickness of the self" captures this dynamic, describing how alienation produces a withdrawal from authentic engagement that perpetuates meaninglessness (Fromm, 1962).

Therapeutic and Clinical Implications

The Existential Vacuum and Clinical Presentation: Frankl's concept of the existential vacuum describes the experience of inner emptiness, purposelessness, and meaninglessness that characterizes modern neurosis (Frankl, 1967). This condition presents clinically as a sense that life lacks significance, that one's actions are futile, that nothing truly matters. Unlike classic neurotic symptoms, which involve conflict between wishes and prohibitions, existential symptoms involve the absence of motivating meaning. The existential vacuum manifests in various ways clinically. Some individuals present with depression that does not respond to standard treatments, suggesting that the underlying issue is not mood dysregulation but existential emptiness. Others present with anxiety that appears to stem not from specific threats but from the absence of meaningful direction. Still others present with substance use or behavioral addictions that appear to be attempts to fill the void left by meaninglessness (Frankl, 1967). The clinical presentation of meaninglessness has important implications for assessment and treatment. Standard diagnostic instruments may not adequately capture the phenomenon, as they focus on symptoms rather than existential concerns. Clinicians must be attuned to the possibility that meaninglessness may underlie presentations that appear to be primarily affective or behavioral. Glaw and colleagues have emphasized the need for integrated approaches that address both psychological symptoms and existential concerns (Glaw *et al.*, 2016).

Meaning-Centered Interventions: The recognition of meaninglessness as a clinical problem has generated specific therapeutic approaches. Meaning-centered interventions, including Meaning-Centered Group Psychotherapy and Individual Meaning-Centered Psychotherapy, have been developed and tested, with some evidence of effectiveness (Breitbart *et al.*, 2010). These interventions focus explicitly on helping individuals identify and cultivate sources of meaning in their lives. The emphasis on meaning as a therapeutic focus reflects the understanding that addressing meaninglessness requires more than symptom reduction. When individuals lack meaning, symptom reduction may leave them with an empty, albeit less distressed, existence. Meaning-centered approaches aim to fill the existential vacuum, providing the motivational orientation that makes life worth living (Frankl, 1967). The empirical findings reviewed in this paper suggest that such interventions should attend specifically to social connection. Given the robust relationship between social connectedness and meaning presence, interventions that facilitate reconnection may be particularly effective. This might involve helping individuals rebuild social relationships, engage in community activities, or find meaningful roles that connect them to others. Even when direct reconnection is challenging, compensatory activities, learning, skill use,

and purpose engagement, may buffer against meaninglessness (Martinez *et al.*, 2024).

Implications for Social and Institutional Intervention: Individual therapeutic intervention, while valuable, cannot address the social-structural conditions that produce widespread meaninglessness. The sociological analysis of alienation suggests that meaninglessness is not merely an individual problem but a predictable consequence of social arrangements. When individuals are excluded from decision-making, when their work lacks comprehensible purpose, when community bonds erode, meaninglessness follows regardless of individual coping resources (Blauner, 1964; Israel, 1971). This implies a role for social and institutional intervention. Workplace redesign that provides workers with understanding of how their labor contributes to meaningful outcomes may reduce meaninglessness (Blauner, 1964). Community development that strengthens social ties may provide relational sources of meaning. Educational reform that helps students perceive the relevance of their learning may prevent the alienation documented in school settings (Mau, 1992; Calabrese & Seldin, 1987).

These social interventions complement individual therapeutic approaches. While therapy can help individuals find meaning within existing social arrangements, those arrangements themselves may be the source of meaninglessness. Addressing meaninglessness thus requires attention to both individual psychology and social structure, recognizing that meaningfulness depends upon social conditions that support understanding, connection, and purpose (Fromm, 1962; Mészáros, 1970).

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications: The analysis presented in this paper suggests several theoretical refinements. First, meaninglessness is best understood as a social-psychological phenomenon rather than a purely individual cognitive state. While meaning is experienced individually, its sources are fundamentally social, arising from connection, understanding, and participation in meaningful collectivities (Seeman, 1959; Durkheim, 1951). This implies that theories of meaninglessness that focus exclusively on individual psychology are incomplete. Second, the relationship between detachment and meaninglessness operates through multiple mechanisms operating at different levels. Cognitive deconstruction following exclusion (Twenge *et al.*, 2003), erosion of normative frameworks (Durkheim, 1951; Seeman, 1959), loss of relational sources of meaning (Sundqvist *et al.*, 2024), and shame-mediated dissociative detachment (Catton *et al.*, 2025) represent distinct but interconnected pathways. These mechanisms may interact, creating feedback loops that amplify meaninglessness and make it resistant to change. Third, meaning presence and meaning search have opposing relationships with wellbeing. This finding challenges the romanticization of existential searching, suggesting that the absence of meaning is not a productive existential stance but a psychological risk factor (Sundqvist *et al.*, 2024). While philosophical reflection on meaning is valuable, the chronic experience of meaninglessness appears to be a clinically significant

condition requiring intervention. King and Hicks have similarly emphasized that the search for meaning is not inherently beneficial; it is the presence of meaning that is associated with wellbeing (King & Hicks, 2021). The conceptual distinction between meaning presence and meaning search has important implications for both research and clinical practice. Researchers must distinguish between these constructs, as they have opposing relationships with outcomes. Clinicians must assess both the presence of meaning and the intensity of meaning search, as these may require different interventions. Individuals who lack meaning may benefit from meaning-centered interventions, while those who are actively searching may need support in their search or help finding meaning.

Limitations and Future Directions: Several limitations warrant acknowledgement. The empirical literature on meaninglessness is less extensive than the topic warrants, with much research focusing on either related constructs or specific populations. Large-scale longitudinal studies are limited, with the UK birth cohort study representing an important but rare example (Sundqvist *et al.*, 2024). More research examining meaninglessness across the lifespan and in diverse populations is needed. Experimental research on social exclusion has established causal relationships but typically examines acute rather than chronic exclusion. The mechanisms identified, cognitive deconstruction, dissociative detachment, may operate differently in chronic social detachment. Research examining the long-term effects of sustained social isolation on meaning would extend this work. Cacioppo and Patrick's research on loneliness provides a foundation for such investigations, demonstrating that chronic loneliness has distinct effects from acute social exclusion (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). The relationship between meaninglessness and other psychological conditions requires further clarification. While meaninglessness correlates with depression, anxiety, and low wellbeing, its specific relationship to these conditions is not fully understood (Boreiam & Schutte, 2023). Research examining whether meaninglessness is a distinct phenomenon or a dimension of other conditions would advance theoretical understanding. Weziak-Bialowolska and Bialowolski have recently found reciprocal relationships between meaning in life and mental health, suggesting that meaninglessness and psychological distress may reinforce each other (Weziak-Bialowolska & Bialowolski, 2024). Finally, intervention research on meaninglessness is limited. While meaning-centered interventions show promise, more research is needed on their effectiveness and mechanisms of action (Breitbart *et al.*, 2010). Research examining whether interventions that facilitate social connection are more effective than those focusing primarily on cognitive restructuring would have important clinical implications. Similarly, research examining whether social interventions, such as community development or workplace redesign, reduce meaninglessness would provide evidence for the social-structural approach advocated in this paper.

CONCLUSION

The experience of meaninglessness represents one of the defining psychological challenges of contemporary life. This paper has argued that meaninglessness emerges not as

an individual pathology but as a predictable consequence of social detachment operating through multiple interconnected pathways. Social exclusion produces cognitive deconstruction and immediate meaninglessness; normative erosion undermines the frameworks that orient action; relational loss eliminates sources of meaning; and shame mediates dissociative detachment that further compromises meaning-making capacities. This analysis suggests that addressing meaninglessness requires attention to both individual psychology and social structure. While therapeutic interventions can help individuals find meaning within existing arrangements, the social conditions that produce meaninglessness, exclusion, complexity, normative fragmentation, and disconnection, require collective response. Meaningful lives depend upon meaningful relationships and meaningful social participation (Martela & Steger, 2016; King & Hicks, 2021). When these foundations erode, emptiness follows not as a philosophical conclusion but as a psychological consequence.

The social architecture of meaning thus demands attention from both psychological and social perspectives. Understanding how detachment produces meaninglessness, and how reconnection might restore meaning, represents a task for both research and practice. In an age of increasing isolation and disconnection, this task has never been more urgent. The work of rebuilding the social foundations of meaning must proceed alongside efforts to help individuals find meaning within existing arrangements, recognizing that these efforts are complementary rather than competing.

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