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The Who is Who of 'Meaning-Hunters': A Four-Level Socio-Psychological Analysis of Life Meaning-Making

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Abstract
The present study, centred on the meaning of life, employed a four-level socio-psychological analysis, categorizing participants ($N = 400$) based on intraindividual, interindividual, positional and ideological levels. Examining factors like self-construal, interpersonal discomfort, political self-positioning and social identity, the study revealed interconnections and combinatorial profiles. These groupings reflected interfaces between individual and interpersonal elaborations of meaning, extending into broader political, ideological and worldview contexts. These findings emphasize the permeable boundaries between socio-psychological levels, highlighting the complexity of meaning-making. The study contributes to the discourse on psychology's interdisciplinary nature, showcasing its role to unravel the complex interplay of personal, interpersonal and societal aspects in the pursuit of understanding the meaning of life.

KEYWORDS
applied social psychology, ideology, levels of socio-psychological analysis, meaning of life, personality

1 | INTRODUCTION

Throughout time, meaning of life, being directly linked to basic human motivations for understanding purpose of life existence, has constituted one of the greatest epistemological challenges (Battista & Almond, 1973; Frankl, 1966; Hicks & Routledge, 2013; Steger et al., 2009; Trzebiński et al., 2020). Particularly, since the beginning of the 20th century when existentialism came forth, meaning of life has been a focal point of psychological science as well as the starting point of several philosophical pursuits, psychotherapeutic interventions and socio-psychological schools of thought (Costin & Vignoles, 2020; Deconchy, 2000; Galanaki et al., 2023; Hill et al., 2015; King & Hicks, 2021; Martela & Steger, 2022). The concepts of self-acceptance and self-improvement (Costin & Vignoles, 2020; King & Hicks, 2021), coherence, purpose

and significance (Costin & Vignoles, 2020; Heintzelman et al., 2013; Martela & Steger, 2022), relational satisfaction, sense of belonging and bonding (Berscheid & Regan, 2016; Matera et al., 2019), self-efficacy (Allport, 1961; Seligman, 2002), personal growth and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Maslow, 1971) have served as the main concepts of meaning of life in different disciplines, emphasizing the continuum of intra and interindividual behaviour in the respective research interest in life meaning (Berscheid & Regan, 2016; Hicks & Routledge, 2013; Steger et al., 2009).

Based on the broader socio-psychological analysis (Doise, 1980) including four different levels (i.e. intrapersonal, interpersonal, positional and ideological), research has focused so far on the first two levels, which however have been studied as mere objects of invocation. In contrast, the present study aims to examine the

interconnection among the different levels and capture the contents and underlying axes-structures of content processing that are built around the signifier 'meaning'.

Ideologies both establish and reinforce lay beliefs about the nature and purposes of the human person, while they give context to societal concerns and certain precepts of individual life. Thus, it becomes a necessity to shed light on the interconnection of the four levels of socio-psychological analysis to identify the possible associations, inconsistencies and contradictions between them. By negotiating the concept of individualism through a broader social prism, this study attempts to track and identify objectifications regarding the meaning of life. Also, it raises issues ranging from the elaboration of the concept of self (e.g. personality traits, self-construal) and interpersonal relations to collective identities and ideological as well as worldview elaborations of social order and human existence. In other words, we aim to explore and verify the permeable boundaries between individual elaborations of meaning and the broader political/ideological and worldview context, by pointing out multilevel socio-psychological processes (e.g. elaborations of interpersonal relations and identity quests, perspectives of social class, worldviews).

The present study draws on efforts to link Clinical Psychology and Social Psychology, addressing the gap between theory and actual application in areas such as counselling, psychotherapy and applied clinical work (Flechsenhar et al., 2022; Haslam, 2014; Sarason, 1981; Zuo et al., 2021). It highlights the practical use of the socio-psychological perspective, discussing how its findings can serve as a valuable framework for content analysis in clinical and counselling contexts.

1.1 | INTRA-INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Researchers have long been interested in the existence and implications of multiple representations of the self. William James (1890), for example, distinguished the material, social and spiritual selves. Others made the later distinction into public and private self (Baumeister & Tice, 1986; Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984). The intraindividual level of analysis focuses on the mechanisms of organization and reception of the individual's lived experience upon contact with the environment, and the corresponding ability of the human mind to perceive and evaluate information.

In the present research, this level is assessed and evaluated through self-construal (Cross et al., 2010; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), personality traits (Buecker et al., 2020; McCrae & Costa, 1995; Nikčević et al., 2020), self-entitlement (Campbell, Bonacci, et al., 2004; Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004; Zitek & Schlund, 2021) and death anxiety (Abdel-Khalek, 2005; Lee et al., 2020; Tomer & Eliason, 1996). These are

concepts that have been extensively explored and are related both to each other and to the meaning of life but have not yet been studied simultaneously within the framework of a holistic attempt at multidisciplinary interconnection.

Based on the existing literature, there is a clear link between the meaning of life and personality traits (Eakman & Eklund, 2012; Halama, 2005; Van Tongeren et al., 2016), (Mikulincer et al., 2002) death anxiety (Cozzolino, 2006; Özdemir et al., 2019; Seto et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019) and self-construal (Çebi & Demir, 2022; Datu & Salanga, 2018). There is also evidence of a correlation with self-entitlement, due to its strong association with self-esteem (Hewitt, 2017; Stronge et al., 2019), which is directly linked to meaning-making processes (Barnett et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2019).

Self-entitlement, which refers to the unjustified demand for special treatment due to an individual's perceived abilities, characteristics and/or position as 'exceptional', constitutes an undesirable psychological state (Campbell, Bonacci, et al., 2004; Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004; Twenge & Campbell, 2009). It has been found to be associated with negative personality traits (Jonason & Luévano, 2013; Jonason & Webster, 2010; McLellan & Jackson, 2016; Özdemir et al., 2019), since it correlates negatively with agreeableness, emotional stability (Cross et al., 2000) and healthy narcissism (Emmons, 1984; Golec de Zavala et al., 2019; Howell et al., 2023; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Moreover, self-entitlement is related positively to death anxiety (Castano et al., 2011; Kesebir, 2014) and negatively to an interdependent self (Blincoe & Garris, 2017). On the other hand, interdependent self allows for more effective management of death anxiety (Juhl & Routledge, 2014; Orehek et al., 2014). Likewise, personality traits such as neuroticism and emotional instability correlate positively with death anxiety (Frazier & Foss-Goodman, 1988–1989), while there is a negative association with openness to change and new experiences (Yıldız & Bulut, 2017).

1.2 | INTERPERSONAL LEVEL

Meaning, as a fundamentally social construction, is also inscribed at the interpersonal level and is partially formed in the context of close interpersonal relationships and interactions (e.g. friendships, family and romantic relationships, attachment) (Andersen & Przybylinski, 2018; Debats, 1999; Lambert et al., 2013; Leary, 2022; MacKenzie & Baumeister, 2014; Niu et al., 2016; Yu & Chang, 2021).

Relationships raise issues ranging from the co-construction of reality, based on shared values and beliefs (Andersen & Przybylinski, 2018; Berscheid & Regan, 2016; Mikulincer et al., 2020; Przybylinski & Andersen, 2015), up to the management of

worldview-threatening cognitive and behavioural cues (Cox & Arndt, 2012; Mikulincer et al., 2002; Lambert et al., 2013; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2013).

Interpersonal relationships are almost exclusively approached, both theoretically and methodologically, through a positive lens, by addressing their benefits, as it has been well-documented by the existing literature (e.g. Andersen & Przybylinski, 2018; Mikulincer et al., 2020; Yu & Chang, 2021). However, this is exactly what drew our attention to approaching interpersonal relationships through their uncharted negative definition, namely the feeling of discomfort within close interactions. Our aim was to bring out the other side of the story, which is why we constructed the scale regarding discomfort within interpersonal relationships.

1.3 | POSITIONAL LEVEL

The positional level of analysis examines how relationships between social groups develop and the mechanisms involved in the formation of these relationships (Doise, 1980). It explores how social identities are constructed and how groups cope with realistic and symbolic threats, which are crucial to meaning making (Bagci et al., 2020; Hogg, 2021; Hogg et al., 2004; Hornsey, 2008). Social identities are cognitive in nature, since they arise through social categorization (Tajfel & Billig, 1974). They are also potentially competitive, as they involve acts of mutual comparison between groups (Tajfel et al., 1971), and they are conceptually distinct from the threats stemming from material competition (Turner, 1978). Their construction is driven by self-enhancement (Golec de Zavala et al., 2019; Sedikides & Strube, 1997) and uncertainty reduction, which are key human motivations. Therefore, their processing and negotiation both describe and prescribe aspects of the human subject's worldview (Bagci et al., 2020; Banas & Smyth, 2021; Hogg, 2000; Hogg & Abrams, 1990; Hogg et al., 2004). The thematic aspects that constitute identities, by default diverse and ranging from social origins (gender, class, ethnicity) to life choices and aesthetics (indicatively: sexual orientation, eating habits, political preferences), delimit the space of individual and collective self-definition, allowing for the interconnection of different levels, and often place the negotiation of identity dimensions as an ideological stake and, as such, extend reflections on meaning.

1.4 | IDEOLOGICAL LEVEL

The concept of ideology, encompassing both the individual and collective dimension of social attitudes and the relation of the human subject to social structures, institutions and organizations, constitutes a type of regulation and norm whose correctness is part of the patterns and contents of the reception and reproduction of the social order (Feldman, 2013; Jost et al., 2009; Jost et al., 2013). Conceived as a 'complex of representations, ready-made ideas, relatively coherent, mixing values and beliefs, but perceived by those who subscribe to it as true and globalized knowledge' (Lipiansky, 1991, p. 359), ideology mixes evaluative judgements with objective descriptions, links individual, social and political views, and allows for the avoidance and management of existential threat and the maintenance of important interpersonal relationships (Duckitt & Fisher, 2003; Jost, 2017, 2019; Jost et al., 2008). As a set of consensual shared beliefs that provide the moral and intellectual basis for a social, economic and political system, ideology imbues human existence with meaning and inspiration, reduces—though not always effectively—anxiety, feelings of guilt and shame, dissonance, discomfort and uncertainty (Chen & Tyler, 2001; Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

1.4.1 | Norm of Consistency: A Normative Ideological Organizing Principle

Consistency was included in this research because of its utmost significance as an ideological norm, socio-psychological concept and social value (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1946, 1958; Newcomb, 1953; Tsitseli & Prodromitis, 2023). In light of existential self-management and at the level of social attitudes, being inherent to the concepts of consistency, it constitutes the existential ground on which the social self is constructed. It is considered essential to personal and social harmony, provides the primary evidence of maturity and is a prerequisite for security and predictability of human thought and behaviour (Papastamou & Prodromitis, 2010). According to Papastamou and Prodromitis (2010), consistency is open to multiple readings. The positive perception of consistency norm, as a hyper-normative notion, relates to continuity, reliability and stability and is systematically contrasted with the adverse aspects of dogmatism and intolerance, the negative perception of consistency norm. The positive perception of inconsistency, being an organizational principle inherent to openness as a value and an element of individuality, praises flexibility and adaptability. The negative perception of inconsistency, which also forcibly frustrates the expectations of the subjects, underlines the notions of unreliability and abrasiveness. Therefore, the inclusion and co-examination of consistency as part of such a multidimensional approach of meaning-making reasonably follows, given

that the literature so far does not include it, at least not explicitly.

1.4.2 | Metaphysics and Anti-Metaphysics: The Territory of Beliefs

Beliefs, by functioning as a model of self-regulation and constitution of collective identities, ensure personal self-preservation and at the same time a key regulatory parameter of collective integration (Papastamou, 2008). They are directly linked to the processing, classification, evaluation and rationalization of abstract principles. They allow or even presuppose, the enclosure of the human subject within the intergroup by immunizing it cognitively against any information hostile to its worldview (Prodromitis & Papastamou, 2006). As a result, beliefs emerge as an important ideological factor, as well as an indicator of the impact of the worldview on the meaning-making of reality (Prodromitis & Papastamou, 2006).

Referring to the different levels of contents processed by social thought, beliefs capture, on the one hand, the tendency of devotion to the great monotheistic religions and the new forms of individualized religious. On the other hand, they refer to the metaphysical faith and the secularized, anti-metaphysical and pragmatic spirit of the times (Prodromitis & Papastamou, 2006; for an insightful overview on worldviews see Koltko-Rivera, 2004). At a more abstract level, they are related to the conceptualization of multi-level, fluid and fragmented reality. As organizing principles that facilitate the management of existential anxiety, beliefs enable the explanation of the inexplicable and allow for the pacification of the uncontrollable (Deconchy et al., 1998; Deconchy & Ragot, 1999).

1.4.3 | From Ideology to Social Practices: The Problematic of 'Adaptive Reactions'

The constitution of meaning is seen as both an individual task and the result of prevalent ideological organizing principles at the social level. Hence, it raises the more pressing issue of the relations between ideology and practice. In other words, it posits how the formation of a general worldview, which guarantees order and consistency, guides practical choices of individual life, which reassure self-preservation and at the same time function as a means of achieving goals and ideals. Among the multiple narratives of ideology-practice correspondences, Giddens' (1990) attempt to describe the possible ways of personal response to systemic threats and situations of risk in the contemporary post-modern world stands out. Giddens' proposal of the following four individual adaptive responses could be seen as an interesting perspective

from the sociological theory field on how different levels of analysis are interconnected.

Pragmatic acceptance focuses on survival and aligns with either a sense of pessimism or the preservation of hope, which sometimes coexist amphitheatrically. It refers to actual participation in everyday problems and tasks. *Sustained optimism*, on the one hand, closely linked to faith in divine providence, is associated with forms of religious ideals (*Faith in Divine Providence*), and on the other hand, it is linked to rational thinking and faith in the long-term security that science can offer (*Pragmatic Acceptance*). *Cynical pessimism* is associated with involvement in the distresses caused by dangers with great consequences and, unlike pragmatic acceptance. It is not indifference or fatalism, but a way of stopping the emotional effect of that distress. Pessimism may not influence action, but combined with cynicism can lead to practical consequences. Finally, *radical engagement*, as the explicit questioning of the apparent sources of risk, prescribes mobilization to reduce and overcome negative consequences and proposes action rather than faith in rational analysis and debate, using social movement.

In our research, we attempted to operationalize and include in our measurements the quadruplet of individual adaptive reactions. We consider that it covers the behavioural outcome of multilevel processes of meaning, thus it can provide useful insight into how meaning-making is embodied in real-life patterns.

2 | The Present Study

This study aims to thoroughly examine the potential interconnections of the four levels of socio-psychological analysis to define different perspectives of meaning of life.

The study explores the associations between intraindividual (death anxiety, personality traits, self-construal, self-entitlement), interindividual (discomfort within interpersonal relationships), positional (identity determination) and ideological levels of analysis (social order, consistency norm, worldview beliefs).

At the same time, this study examines the extent to which the ideological and worldview dimensions (e.g. beliefs) of social thought constitute organizing principles of the processes of meaning-making. It is hypothesized that ideological and worldview elaborations will be associated with different interpretations and specific conceptualizations of both the individual self and the public social self.

The aim of this multilevel approach is to map out individual typologies of social thinking, each reflecting a unique combination of the thematic focuses. These combinations link abstract representational elements to specific social practices. Therefore, we attempt to capture, systematize and classify the individual, collective, social and ideological aspects of human functioning, having

as references various thematic contexts (meaning of life, death anxiety, beliefs, religiosity, discomfort, interpersonal relations, identity, consistency norm) directly linked to supposedly intrinsic human characteristics and content-specific dispositions and issues.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Participants and Procedure

Four hundred ($N=400$) participants joined the study in May–June 2023 in Greece. A total of 248 women (62%), 106 men (26.5%), nine gender-selected self-identified (2.3%) and 37 people who refused to answer (9.3%) responded. Participants were between 18 and 66 years with a mean age of 30.66 years ($SD=11.41$). Participants completed the questionnaires in Greek, using versions validated in this language and were approached individually by researchers. They were asked to reply to a battery of questions related to ideological aspects of everyday life, various personal and social issues and life meaning-making strategies. They were presented with a series of statements and were asked to carefully read them and indicate their level of agreement using a seven-point scale from 1=*Strongly Disagree* to 7=*Strongly Agree*.

3.2 | Measures

3.2.1 | Baseline measures

Participants self-reported demographic characteristics (e.g. age, gender).

3.2.2 | Political Self-Positioning

Political self-positioning was measured on a 10-point scale ranging from 1=extreme left to 10=extreme right. Participants were also given the option to refuse positioning on the scale. After recoding the 10-point scale, four groups of political self-positioning were formed: 1=Left (1–4), 2=Centre (5–6), 3=Right (7–10), 4=Refusal.

3.2.3 | Intra-individual-level measures

Personality Traits
Personality traits were measured using the Ten-Item Personality Inventory, a widely recognized, reliable and efficient measure of the Big Five personality domains (TIPI; Gosling et al., 2003): *Extraversion* ('extroverted, enthusiastic' and 'reserved, quiet' [reversed]) ($r=0.25$, $p<0.001$), *Agreeableness* ('sympathetic, warm' and 'critical, argumentative' [reversed]) ($r=0.11$, $p<0.001$), *Conscientiousness* ('reliable, disciplined' and 'disorganized, careless' [reversed]) ($r=0.34$, $p<0.001$), *Emotional Stability* ('calm, emotionally stable' and 'anxious, easily upset' [reversed]) ($r=0.26$, $p<0.001$) and *Openness to Experience* ('open to new experiences, complex', 'conventional, not at all creative' [reversed]) ($r=0.19$, $p<0.001$).

Death Anxiety
Sixteen items from the Death Anxiety Inventory (DAI; Tomás-Sábado & Gómez-Benito, 2005) were averaged on a single index (*Death Anxiety,* $\alpha=0.89$). Example items include the following: 'I think I fear death more than most people'.

Self-Entitlement
Self-Entitlement ($\alpha=0.78$) was measured with nine items from the Psychological Entitlement Scale (PES; Campbell, Bonacci, et al., 2004; Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004). Example items include the following: 'I honestly believe that I deserve more than others.', 'I demand the best because I deserve it.'.

Self-Construal
Eighteen items from the Self-Construal Scale (Singelis, 1994) were averaged on two indices: *Independent Self* (nine items, e.g. 'It is important for me to act as an independent person') ($\alpha=0.67$) and *Interdependent Self* (nine items, e.g. 'I can sacrifice my own self-interest for the good of the group to which I belong') ($\alpha=0.66$).

3.2.4 | Interpersonal Level Measures

Discomfort within Interpersonal Relationships
This scale was constructed for the purposes of the present research and was developed following a two-stage pilot study. In the first stage, participants' responses to open-ended questions were subjected to thematic content analysis, resulting in an initial word pool. Then, from the quantitative second phase of the pilot survey, the words that scored more than 10% were selected. Participants were given 20 characteristics describing behaviours and attitudes that generally bother most people in their interpersonal relationships. They were then asked to select which ones they personally find most annoying (check list). Example items: 'irresponsibility', 'arrogance', 'stubbornness', 'meanness', 'jealousy' and 'uncultured'.

3.2.5 | Positional Level Measures

Social Identity
Participants were asked to choose among different characteristics which ones best define them. Informed by the relevant literature (e.g. Deaux et al., 1995), they were given the following: 'ethnicity', 'profession',

'political beliefs', 'religion', 'marital status', 'economic status', 'gender', 'educational level', 'social status' and 'personality/character'. The option of multiple answers was also available.

3.2.6 | Ideological and Worldview Level Measures

Ideology
This measure (Papastamou et al., 2022) consisted of 10 items representing different perspectives on social order: *Empathy* (single item; 'It hurts me when other people suffer'), *Relative Deprivation* (two items; 'I often find it difficult to get the things that I and my family need', 'I am satisfied with my life' [reversed], $r=0.24$, $p<0.001$), *Legalization of Power Differences* (single item, 'In this country, power differences between social groups will never change'), *Social Mobility* (two items; e.g. 'In our society, anyone who tries hard succeeds in the end', $r=0.55$, $p<0.001$), *Dangerous World* (single item; 'At this time in our country, life is unpredictable and dangerous'), *Collectivism* (single item; 'Only together with others in the same position can one strive to improve one's own'), *Reproduction of Social Order* (single item; 'Even if one is qualified, if one does not come from the upper classes, one will not succeed') and *Norm of Internality* (single item; 'I need to feel that I personally determine my own destiny').

Consistency Norm
The short version of the Consistency Norm Scale (Tsitseli & Prodromitis, 2023) was used. The endorsement of each perception was measured with two items: *Positive Perception of Consistency* (e.g. 'To be consistent and stable, one needs one's actions to always agree with one's ideas and principles', $r=0.31$, $p<0.001$), *Negative Perception of Consistency* (e.g. 'When one always behaves according to one's ideas and opinions, it is a manifestation of rigidity and inability to adapt to the changing world', $r=0.41$, $p<0.001$), *Positive Perception of Inconsistency* (e.g. 'To behave in a way that does not always agree with one's ideas shows an ability to be flexible and adapt to circumstances', $r=0.31$, $p<0.001$) and *Negative Perception of Inconsistency* (e.g. 'When a person's actions are not consistent with his previous actions, that person has an unstable personality', $r=0.22$, $p=0.001$).

Religious/Spiritual Beliefs
Three dimensions of beliefs (Prodromitis & Papastamou, 2006) were measured: *Anti-Metaphysical Beliefs* (e.g. 'The Church invokes miracles to increase its influence.', $\alpha=0.73$), *Orthodox Dogmatic Beliefs* ('The universe was created by God.', $\alpha=0.86$) and *Metaphysical Beliefs* (e.g. 'The stars influence our lives.', $\alpha=0.75$).

Adaptive Reactions
Participants were asked to answer questions about the different ways that humans can choose to cope with modern everyday life. This is an unpublished scale, which has Giddens' (1990) work as its main thematic references. The total of seven items constitute the following indices: *Faith in Divine Providence* (single-item, 'Faith in Divine Providence can maintain optimism about the future of humanity'), *Pragmatic Acceptance* (single-item, 'Man ought to concentrate his hope and concern on the problems and obligations of his daily life.'), *Rationalism* (single-item, 'Trust in rational thinking and science can provide the required security for society'.), *Radical Engagement* ('Personal membership and active participation in collective movements is the only hope for the future of humanity.' 'Mass movements of citizens are the only ones whose action can reduce the dangers that threaten the security of society.', $r=0.68$, $p<0.001$), and *Cynical Pessimism* ('All man can do is to engage in pleasures and amusements in his daily life.', 'All man can do is to settle for the existing facts of his life, however negative they may be.', $r=0.17$, $p<0.001$).

Lay Beliefs about Meaning in Life
The Lay Beliefs About Meaning in Life Scale was used (Heintzelman et al., 2020). Since this scale was administered for the first time in Greek and because of the low reliability of the indexes, as they were derived from the authors' recommended key, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to confirm the associations between the observed variables and the factors. The four-factor model fit the data acceptably: $\chi^2(38, N=400)=129.0$, $p=<0.001$, $\chi^2/df=3.39$, $CFI=0.88$, $RMSEA=0.07$ [0.06, 0.09]. The following indices were formed: *Effortful* ('Only a few people find meaning in life.', 'Finding meaning in life is something that is rare.', 'Living a meaningful life is difficult.' and 'Experiencing meaning in life takes a lot of effort', $\alpha=0.75$), *Created* ('The meaning of life is something people discover for themselves.', 'The meaning of life is something people have to create for themselves.' and 'The meaning of life is common to all people.' [reversed]) with acceptable reliability ($\alpha=0.62$), *Mysterious* ('The meaning of life is a mystery.' and 'The meaning of life is not something we can describe.', $r=0.44$, $p<0.001$) and *Common* ('Just about everyone experiences the meaning of life at any given moment.' and 'The meaning of life is experienced without effort.', $r=0.23$, $p<0.001$).

Meaning of Life
This scale was constructed for the purposes of this research and developed after a two-stage pilot study, following the same procedure as mentioned above (see Discomfort Within Interpersonal Relationships). Participants were given a total of 32 words describing

the meaning of life (indicatively: 'happiness', 'love', 'fun', 'peace', 'unknown', 'professional development', 'social challenge', etc). They were then asked to choose which of these words best defined the meaning of life for them personally. The option of multiple responses was available.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Analytical Strategy

Participants were grouped based on their perception and meaning-making of specific ideological (ideology) and beliefs (religious/spiritual beliefs, lay beliefs about the meaning of life) of social thought, their meaning-making function (meaning of life) and intraindividual level (personality traits, death anxiety, self-entitlement, self-construal). In addition, it was tested whether there were statistically significant differences per group of life meaning making regarding discomfort within interpersonal relationships, consistency norm and adaptive reactions to contemporary reality. The last part of the analysis focused on the multi-thematic, multi-dimensional interconnection of the various concepts that emerged from the analysis of each individual subtheme, with the aim of highlighting combinatorial profiles-groups of participants representing different meaning-making elaborations. No variable was excluded from the study.

4.2 | Clustering and FCA of Individual Scale Scores

For the K-means Cluster Analysis, multiple clustering solutions were tested to ensure statistically distinct and theoretically meaningful groups. The three-cluster solution offered the best balance of interpretability and cluster compactness, capturing key differences aligned with our theoretical aims. In Hierarchical Cluster Analysis, we specifically employed this method due to its suitability for clustering categorical data, which allowed us to generate explicit and distinct groupings. In statistical terms, hierarchical clustering helped us to extract the most distinct and meaningful groups based on the data.

4.2.1 | Social identity

Nine (out of 10) identity dimensions were subjected to Hierarchical Cluster Analysis to identify the individual groupings in the total sample (see Table 1). The dimension 'my personality/character' was included in the analysis as an additional variable, due to the particularly high percentage (92. 3%) of its reporting. The following

TABLE 1 Hierarchical cluster analysis on identity dimensions.

Typical responses[a]	Respondents in the sample (%)	Respondents assigned to each cluster (%)	Value test	p
Group 1: Basic Sociological Characteristics (78.6%)				
Political Views	16.8	26.3	4.38	0.0001
Profession	19.8	30.5	4.28	0.0001
Gender	15.8	23.5	2.94	0.0001
Educational Level	43.3	60.9	3.62	0.0001
Group 2:Economic Status (4.9%)				
Economic status	3.8	100	9.39	0.0001
Group 3: Religion/Nationality (16.5%)				
Religion	8.5	62.7	10.48	0.0001
Nationality	8.0	62.7	9.89	0.0001

[a]Typical responses are shown under each cluster. In hierarchical cluster analysis for binary variables, 'typical variables' in each cluster are those in-cluster percentage that presents a statistically significant difference from the respective percentage in the whole sample (Lebart et al., 1995).

groups emerged: Basic Sociological Characteristics (78.6%) ('my profession', 'my political views', 'my gender', 'my educational level'), Economic Status (4.9%) ('my economic status') and Religion/Nationality (16.5%) ('my religion', 'my nationality').

4.2.2 | Discomfort within Interpersonal Relationships

The relevant data were subjected to Factorial Correspondence Analysis (see Figure 1). The variables included in the analysis as active variables were those that scored a percentage of at least 10%. Based on the factor description method along the horizontal axis, *Lack of Empathy* (negative axis pole: 'indifference', 'insensitivity' and 'cunning') was contrasted with *Relationality Breach* (positive axis pole: 'irresponsibility', 'uncultured' and 'breaking the rules'). As for the vertical axis, *Lack of Relational Responsibility* (positive axis pole: 'haughtiness', 'arrogance' and 'stubbornness') is contrasted with *Dominance* (negative axis pole: 'insensitivity', 'indifference' and 'breaking the rules'). Mean factor scores were retained to be used as continuous variables in subsequent analyses.

4.2.3 | Ideology

Three groups of respondents were formed after subjecting data on ideology to K-means Cluster Analysis (see Table 2).

Moderate Passive Individualists (44.1% of the total sample) express to an intermediate degree, compared
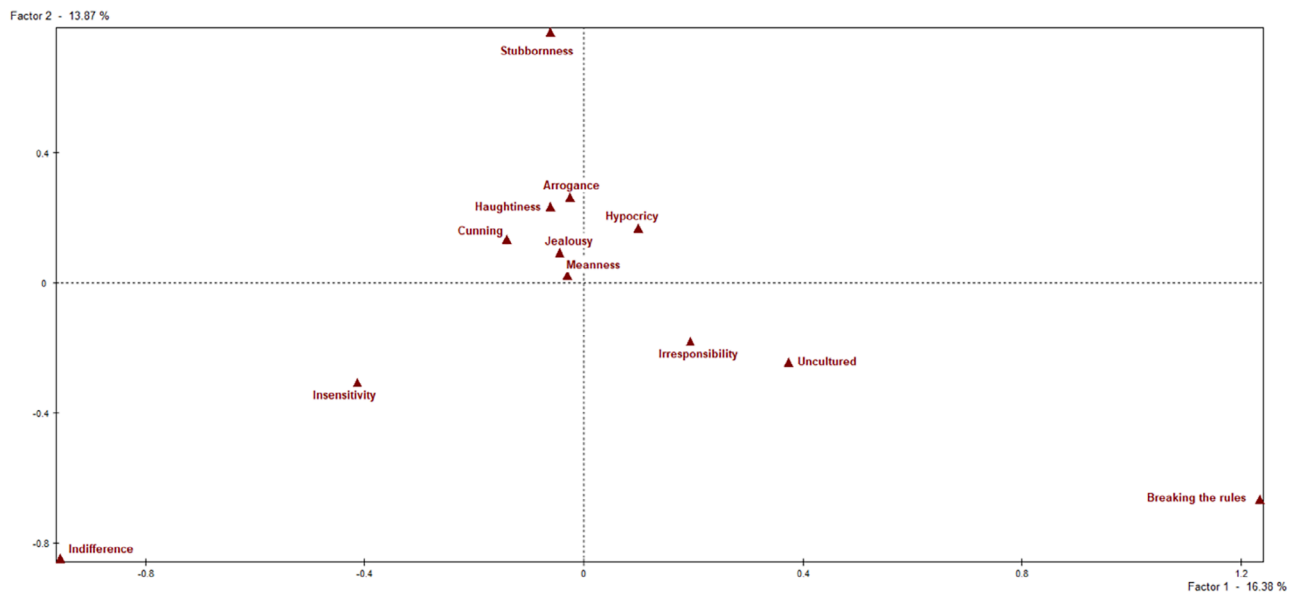
FIGURE 1   Factorial correspondence analysis on discomfort within interpersonal relationships.

TABLE 2   Grouping participants by ideological perceptions (K-means cluster analysis).

	Moderate Passive Individualists (44.1%)	Demobilized Collectivists (32.5%)	Neoliberals (23.4%)
Empathy	5.85	5.95	5.12
Dangerous World	5.56	5.65	3.39
Power Differences Legitimacy	5.15	4.49	3.23
Reproduction Of Social Order	3.12	4.85	2.38
Collectivism	3.45	5.22	3.29
Internalization Rule	4.95	5.24	4.70
Relative Deprivation	3.61	3.90	3.04
Social Mobility	4.75	3.17	4.29

to the other two groups, relative deprivation, believe in individual mobility and express the least degree of politicization. They express a neutral attitude towards collective activism, while their 'moderately optimistic' view of individual improvability is complemented by their rejection of the social reproduction perspective (individual success due to class origin). They express moderate levels of empathy and do not seem to perceive the world as a dangerous place.

Demobilized Collectivists (32.5% of the total sample) believe more than the other groups in the effectiveness of collective action and are more systematically involved in politics. They feel the greatest relative deprivation and assess the possibilities of social mobility as extremely limited. They seem not to perceive the world as a highly competitive place and clearly accepts the social reproduction perspective. This group displays elements of politicization and collective identity but also acknowledges the barriers that limit social mobility and frustrate collective action.

Neoliberals (23.4% of the total sample), more than any other group, believe in the possibility of social mobility, systematically avoid movement and assertive engagement, and reject the effectiveness of collective action. They do not perceive the world as unfair or antagonistic, and without feeling a sense of relative deprivation, they are less likely than other groups to reproduce views on power differentials.

4.2.4 | Religious/Spiritual Beliefs and Lay Beliefs of Life Meaning

Three groups of respondents were formed after subjecting data on worldview beliefs and lay beliefs about meaning in life to K-means Cluster Analysis (see Table 3).

The *Conventionalists* (20.1% of the total sample) express to an intermediate degree, compared to the other two groups, a metaphysical belief, and the orthodox doctrinal commitment, while at the same time expressing an equally neutral attitude regarding the anti-metaphysical position. This group believes that searching for the meaning of life does not require effort, nor is it something mysterious, any more than other groups. Finally, it expresses a neutral attitude towards the evaluation of meaning as common to all people.

Anti-Metaphysical Individualists (32.4% of the total sample) believe more than the others in the rationality

TABLE 3 Grouping participants by Worldview perceptions (K-means cluster analysis).

	Conventionalists (20.01%)	Anti-Metaphysical Individualists (32.4%)	Orthodox Metaphysicians (47.6%)
Antimetaphysical Beliefs	4.42	5.30	3.64
Orthodox Doctrinal Commitment	2.53	2.06	4.64
Metaphysical Beliefs	3.10	2.68	3.96
Effortful	3.90	4.98	4.53
Created	5.47	5.81	5.15
Mysterious	2.80	4.64	4.55
Common	3.15	2.97	3.39

TABLE 4 Grouping participants by intraindividual level variables (K-means cluster analysis).

	Passive Introverted Neuroticism (34.0%)	Equilibrium Relationality (34.3%)	Individualistic Neuroticism (31.8%)
Self-Entitlement	3.43	3.70	3.87
Death Anxiety	3.52	3.10	3.89
Extraversion	3.23	4.00	4.87
Agreeableness	4.63	5.43	4.52
Conscientiousness	4.58	5.74	5.03
Emotional Stability	3.82	4.99	3.09
Openness to Experience	4.35	5.67	5.54
Independent Self	3.98	4.67	4.52
Interdependent Self	4.69	4.81	4.75

of the anti-metaphysical way of thinking. They are fundamentally opposed both to metaphysical thinking and to the orthodox Christian dogma. Regarding the meaning of life, they believe more strongly than the other two groups that it is mysterious, effortful and created.

Orthodox Metaphysicians (47.6% of the total sample) express the greatest commitment to the orthodox Christian doctrine and believe more, compared to the other groups, in metaphysical beliefs. They reject anti-metaphysical positions and believe that the meaning of life is common to all people. Finally, they are the group that expresses the most negative attitude towards the prospect of constructing meaning individually.

4.2.5 | Personality Traits, Self-Entitlement, Self-Construal and Death Anxiety

Three groups of respondents were formed after subjecting data on personality traits, self-entitlement, self-construal and death anxiety to K-means Cluster Analysis (see Table 4).

The group characterized by *passive introverted neuroticism* (34% of the total sample) expresses less, compared to the other two groups, self-entitlement and moderate death anxiety. This group includes individuals who describe themselves as introverted, highly agreeable and conscientious, who avoid seeking intense and new experiences. Finally, these are participants with comparatively little sense of independent self.

The group characterized by *equilibrium relationality* (34.3% of the total sample) adopts a neutral attitude towards self-entitlement, as well as the lowest death anxiety. Participants in this group describe themselves as moderately extroverted and highly conscientious. They are characterized by high emotional stability and are more likely to seek new experiences compared to the

other groups. Finally, they report a balance between the patterns of independent and interdependent self.

The group characterized by *individualistic neuroticism* (31.8% of the total sample) expresses the highest death anxiety and retains more, compared to all groups, self-entitlement. It is the most extroverted group, with the least proselytizing. Participants in this group are characterized by the greatest emotional instability and a high tendency to interdependence. Finally, they adopt a neutral attitude towards the search for new experiences and conscientiousness.

4.2.6 | Meaning of Life

The relevant data were subjected to Hierarchical Cluster Analysis to identify the individual groupings on the total sample (see Table 5). Those variables that registered at least 10% were included in the analysis as active variables. The following groups emerged: *Social Bonding* (54.5%) (gratitude, sharing, fulfilment, peace, spirituality and sense of belonging), *Self-Enhancement/Hedonism* (32.5%) (career, productivity, fun, sexual satisfaction and love) and *Social Assertiveness/Solidarity* (13%) (social assertiveness and solidarity).

4.3 | Power Analysis

A post hoc power analysis was conducted to determine the statistical power of the one-way ANOVA, given the sample size and observed effect size. For a total sample size of $N = 400$ and a noncentrality parameter of $\lambda = 25$, with a critical F value of 3.018 at an alpha level of 0.05, the analysis yielded an achieved power of 0.99. This high level of power indicates that the study was well-powered to detect an effect of the observed magnitude,

TABLE 5 | Hierarchical cluster analysis on meaning of life.

Typical responses[a]	Respondents in the sample (%)	Respondents assigned to each cluster (%)	Value test	p
Group 1: Social Bonding (54.5%)				
Gratitude	17.5	22.9	4.83	0.0001
Sharing	48.0	58.6	4.25	0.0001
Fulfilment	26.8	39.0	3.08	0.0001
Peace	36.0	45.7	2.84	0.0002
Spirituality	33.8	41.4	2.42	0.0008
Sense of Belonging	29.0	40.5	2.38	0.0009
Group 2: Self-Enhancement/Hedonism (32.5%)				
Career	24.0	62.4	9.95	0.0001
Productivity	28.2	57.6	6.88	0.0001
Fun	37.0	68.0	6.37	0.0001
Sexual Satisfaction	16.5	34.4	5.39	0.0001
Love	62.3	79.2	2.50	0.0006
Group 3: Social Assertiveness/Solidarity (13.0%)				
Social Assertiveness	12.5	100	14.12	0.0001
Solidarity	34.0	58.0	2.47	0.0007

[a]Typical responses are shown under each cluster. In hierarchical cluster analysis for binary variables, 'typical variables' in each cluster are those in-cluster percentage that presents a statistically significant difference from the respective percentage in the whole sample (Lebart et al., 1995).

minimizing the risk of a Type II error. The analysis was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007), with the results suggesting robust support for detecting significant differences among the groups.

4.4 | Group Mean Comparisons

One-way ANOVA revealed statistically significant differences between the three groups of meaning in relation to adaptive reactions in terms of Distress within Close Interpersonal Relationships (see Table 6) in the Dominance-Lack of Relational Responsibility axe, $F (2, 368) = 3.21$, $p = 0.042$. Specifically, individuals focusing on Social Bonding (Bonferroni's Multiple Comparisons Test) express stronger discomfort for haughtiness, arrogance and stubbornness (Lack of Relational Responsibility), compared to those who focus on Social Assertiveness/Solidarity, who express greater sensitivity to indifference, rule-breaking and insensitivity. Statistically significant differences are not observed between Self-Enhancement/Hedonism and Social Bonding or Social Assertiveness/Solidarity.

One-way ANOVA showed statistically significant differences between the three groups on the Negative Perception of Consistency, $(F (2, 382) = 4.37, p = 0.013)$

and the Positive Perception of Inconsistency, $F (2, 382) = 4.17$, $p = 0.016$, dimensions of the Consistency Norm scale (see Table 7). Post hoc analyses using the Bonferroni post hoc criterion for significance indicated that those who believe in Social Bonding were more likely to favour the negative perception of consistency norm in comparison to those who believe in Social Assertion/Solidarity. Statistically significant differences were not observed between Self-Enhancement/Hedonism and Social Bonding or Social Assertiveness/Solidarity. Regarding Positive Perception of Inconsistency (Multiple Comparisons Test Bonferroni), individuals who prefer Social Assertiveness/Solidarity assign a more positive sign to inconsistency than those who focus on Social Bonding. No statistically significant differences were observed between Self-Enhancement/Hedonism and Social Bonding or Social Assertiveness/Solidarity.

One-way ANOVA revealed statistically significant differences between the three groups of meaning in relation to adaptive reactions (see Table 8) in terms of Faith in Divine Providence, $F (2, 369) = 4.24$, $p = 0.015$, Pragmatic Acceptance, $F (2, 369) = 4.52$, $p = 0.011$ and Radical Involvement, $F (2, 369) = 13.65$, $p < 0.001$. Post hoc analyses using the Bonferroni post hoc criterion for significance indicated that those who prefer Social Bonding reproduce more the belief in divine providence compared to those who make sense of life based on Social Assertiveness/Solidarity.

Regarding Self-Enhancement/Hedonism, no statistically significant differences were observed with either Social Bonding or Social Assertiveness/Solidarity. Those focusing on Self-Enhancement/Hedonism adopt a more pragmatic attitude compared to those who choose Social Bonding (Bonferroni's Multiple Comparisons Test). No statistically significant differences are observed between Social Assertiveness/Solidarity and Social Bonding or Self-Enhancement/Hedonism.

Lastly, those who express themselves through Social Assertiveness/Solidarity version of meaning adopt a more radical attitude compared to both those who focus on Social Bonding and those who focus on Self-Enhancement/Hedonism. Statistically significant differences are not observed between Social Bonding and Self-Enhancement/Hedonism.

4.5 | Overall Clustering and MCA

To identify the individual groupings on the total sample, the relevant data were subjected to Multiple Correspondence Analysis and then to Hierarchical Cluster Analysis (see Table 9). The analysis included as active variables the groupings of participants, as derived from the cluster analysis on ideology (Moderate Passive Individualists, Demobilized Collectivists, Neoliberals),

TABLE 6 Means, standard deviations and ANOVA statistics for distress within close interpersonal relationships by life meaning-making group.

$N = 371$	Social Bonding ($n = 205$) Mean (SD)	Self-Enhancement/ Hedonism ($n = 119$) Mean (SD)	Social Assertiveness/ Solidarity ($n = 47$) Mean (SD)	ANOVA (F, df, p, η_ρ^2)
Lack of Empathy (−) – Relationality Breach (+)	0.02 (0.39)	0.01 (0.35)	−0.04 (0.55)	$F(2, 368) = 0.55$, $p = 0.577$, $\eta_\rho^2 = 0.003$
Dominance (−) – Lack of Relational Responsibility (+)	0.01[a] (0.34)	−0.003[a,b] (0.37)	−0.13[b] (0.45)	$F(2, 368) = 3.21$, $p = 0.042$, $\eta_\rho^2 = 0.017$

Note: [a,b]Means that differ in superscripts are significantly different from each other ($p < 0.05$) according to the simple main effects analysis.

TABLE 7 Means, standard deviations and ANOVA statistics for perceptions of consistency norm by life meaning-making group.

$N = 385$	Social Bonding ($n = 210$) Mean (SD)	Self-Enhancement/ Hedonism ($n = 125$) Mean (SD)	Social Assertiveness/ Solidarity ($n = 50$) Mean (SD)	ANOVA (F, df, p, η_ρ^2)
Positive Perception Of Consistency	3.97 (1.18)	4.12 (1.21)	4.31 (1.10)	$F(2, 382) = 1.81$, $p = 0.166$, $\eta_\rho^2 = 0.009$
Negative Perception Of Consistency	4.06[a] (1.08)	3.82[a,b] (1.12)	3.58[b] (1.31)	$F(2, 382) = 4.37$, $p = 0.013$, $\eta_\rho^2 = 0.022$
Positive Perception Of Inconsistency	3.76[a] (1.00)	3.90[a,b] (1.08)	3.85[b] (1.17)	$F(2, 382) = 4.17$, $p = 0.016$, $\eta_\rho^2 = 0.021$
Negative Perception Of Inconsistency	3.99 (1.06)	3.68 (0.97)	3.62 (1.11)	$F(2, 382) = 0.70$, $p = 0.498$, $\eta_\rho^2 = 0.004$

Note: [a,b]Means that differ in superscripts are significantly different from each other ($p < 0.05$) according to the simple main effects analysis.

beliefs (Conventionalists, Anti-Metaphysical Individualists, Orthodox Metaphysicians), intraindividual level of analysis (Passive Introverted Neuroticism, Equilibrium Relationality, Individualistic Neuroticism), meaning of life (Social Bonding, Self-Enhancement/ Hedonism, Social Assertiveness/Solidarity), self-reported political positioning (Left, Centre, Right, Refusal) and social identity (Basic Sociological Characteristics, Economic Status and Religion/Nationality). The analysis resulted in four subgroups:

Conservative Communitarians (21.01%), identically linked to religion and ethnicity, are characterized by a clear and unequivocal commitment to orthodox Christian dogma. Seeking balance at a relational level, they adopt the version of meaning focused on Social Bonding.

People Next Door (18.84%), adopting a conventional worldview, are associated with a social identity based on economic status. Their neoliberal ideological constitution and passive introverted neuroticism, expressed at the level of intraindividual, are complemented by their search for social bonding as the source of their meaning-making function.

The denial of any metaphysical assumption by *Anti-Metaphysical Equalizers* (30.8%) is ideologically complemented by 'inert collectivism' and the pursuit of balanced relationality at the intraindividual level. Their meaning-making logic centred on Social Assertiveness/Solidarity, corresponds to a left-wing political self-positioning, and

is linked to political views, profession, educational level and gender (Basic Sociological Characteristics).

Self-Enhancement/Hedonism is expressed by the group of *Self-Contained Individualists* (29.35%). This is a group of centrist political character, which identically opts for the basic sociological characteristics. The individualism that seems to be a central organizing principle of this concept appears both at the intraindividual level and at the ideological level and is accompanied by their orthodox metaphysical thinking.

5 | DISCUSSION

Under the prism of Social Psychology and drawing on the problematic of existentialism (metaphysical vs. anti-metaphysical thinking), the present research attempted to verify the permeable boundaries between individual and identarian elaborations and negotiations of meaning, and the wider political/ideological and worldview context.

Starting from the problematic of the practical interconnection of the levels of socio-psychological analysis (intraindividual, interindividual, positional, ideological), the study aimed at mapping individual typologies of social thinking, each of which probably corresponds to a different interconnection of thematic focuses. These thematic concepts are ranging from the processing of the concept of self (self-entitlement, self-construal, death

TABLE 8 Means, standard deviations and ANOVA statistics for adaptive reactions by life meaning-making group.

$N = 372$	Social Bonding ($n = 205$) Mean (SD)	Self-Enhancement/Hedonism ($n = 120$) Mean (SD)	Social Assertiveness/ Solidarity ($n = 47$) Mean (SD)	ANOVA (F, df, p, η_ρ^2)
Faith in Divine Providence	0.10[a] (1.00)	−0.06[a,c] (0.94)	−0.33[b,c] (0.96)	$F_{(2, 369)} = 4.24$, $p = 0.015$, $\eta_\rho^2 = 0.022$
Pragmatistic Acceptance	−0.11[a] (0.96)	0.22[b] (0.93)	0.01[a,b] (1.14)	$F_{(2, 369)} = 4.52$, $p = 0.011$, $\eta_\rho^2 = 0.024$
Rationalism	0.03 (0.93)	−0.02 (1.06)	0.04 (1.05)	$F_{(2, 369)} = 0.10$, $p = 0.903$, $\eta_\rho^2 = 0.001$
Radical Engagement	4.65[a] (1.28)	4.46[a,c] (1.37)	5.61[b,c] (1.26)	$F_{(2, 369)} = 13.6$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_\rho^2 = 0.068$
Cynical Pessimism	2.58 (1.00)	2.81 (1.13)	2.67 (1.66)	$F_{(2, 369)} = 1.80$, $p = 0.166$, $\eta_\rho^2 = 0.01$

Note: [a,b,c]Means that differ in superscripts are significantly different from each other ($p < 0.05$) according to the simple main effects analysis.

anxiety, personality traits) and relationship to collective identities and the ideological and worldview elaborations of social order and human existence (social order, meaning of life, consistency norm, religious/spiritual beliefs). As part of this attempt to build on and extend Doise's (1980) problematics beyond laboratory and experimental Social Psychology, we have tried to shed light on coincidences, correspondences and mismatches between levels by considering intra and interpersonal-level negotiations, which, although not included in the original model, are important for modern man and have high external validity.

By emphasizing the conceptualization of the different levels of analysis and the explanations offered for each phenomenon in Social Psychology, the plurality and contradictoriness of social thought were highlighted, and groups were identified, each of which corresponds to a different composition of socio-psychological elaborations and rationalizing mechanisms.

Specifically, *Conservative Communitarians* benefit from the general sense of security offered by adherence to Orthodox Christian dogma, faith in beliefs and the emotional stability that characterizes them at the intra and interpersonal level. They present themselves as a positive version of religiosity, which finds meaning in social bonding (gratitude, wholeness, spirituality, a sense of belonging, peace). Their genuine and humanistically oriented attitude and their clearly metaphysical worldview, combined with the fact that both political positioning and ideologically loaded variables do not constitute characteristics of this group, imply acceptance of their status in the system. These findings are consistent with those of Schlenker et al. (2012), according to which conservatism, the rationalization of social inequalities and the system's justification, are associated with increased religiosity, moral clarity, transcendent moral beliefs, low tolerance of transgression and increased personal agency (e.g. self-worth, personal control, responsibility) and relational responsibility (e.g. belief in fairness).

People Next Door also appear to legitimize the system and accept their position within it adversely. They adopt a generally defeatist attitude towards the system's siege (low levels of relative deprivation, lack of faith in the effectiveness of collective action, neutral attitude towards social mobility, evaluation of the world as a relatively dangerous place). At a public level, they seem to rationalize dominant ideology, while they suffer and resent privately. The invocation of beliefs—not to an absolute degree—combined with a more anti-metaphysical logic and the passive introverted neuroticism that characterizes them at the intraindividual level (introversion, interdependence, avoidance of new experiences, moderate death anxiety), leads to their entrapment in the interpersonal level of analysis and to the strengthening of the demand for social bonding, as a means of relieving their psychological discomfort and covering, mainly, emotional needs (indicatively: acceptance, completeness).

The *Antimetaphysical Equalizers* represent the most politicized group, clearly ordered on a political and ideological level, a fact that is reinforced both by the multidisciplinary nature of their basic sociological characteristics (gender, educational level, political views), which they claim as part of their identity, and by their clear anti-metaphysical stance. By displaying in their profile all those elements that are potentially indicative of a politicized active entity (relative deprivation, collective action, politicization, rejection of social mobility), at the same time they admit the impenetrability of the upper levels of the social hierarchy (reproduction of the social order), thus displaying some elements of frustration and demobilization. Their profile refers to what Gergen (1991) described as a *saturated self*, since in the absence of harmonious coherence and good adaptation, they resent intensely and more actively, compared to the previous group. By conceptualizing their discomfort in different terms and amidst the projective assertion of collectivity, they express a pervasive demand for social assertion, showing that they perceive fulfilment as

TABLE 9 Hierarchical cluster analysis on ideology, worldview, intraindividual level, meaning of life, political self-positioning and identification.

	Typical Responses[a]	Respondents assigned to each cluster (%)	Respondents in the sample (%)	Respondents in cluster cluster (%)	Value test	*p*
Group 1: Conservative Communitarians (21.01%)						
Identification	Region/Nationality	58.62	16.5	80.95	9.19	0.000
Worldview	Orthodox Metaphysicians	93.10	47.6	45.76	8.96	0.000
Meaning Of Life	Social Bonding	84.48	54.5	35.77	6.03	0.000
Intra-Individual Level	Equilibrium Relationality	51.72	34.3	31.25	2.85	0.002
Group 2: People Next Door (18.84%)						
Worldview	Conventionalists	76.92	20.0	65.57	9.62	0.000
Identification	Economic Status	26.92	4.9	100	6.65	0.000
Ideology	Neoliberals	46.15	23.4	35.29	3.65	0.000
Intra-Individual Level	Passive Introverted Neuroticism	51.92	34.0	28.72	2.80	0.003
Meaning of Life	Social Bonding	65.38	54.5	24.82	2.38	0.009
Group 3: Anti-Metaphysical Equalizers (18.84%)						
Worldview	Anti-Metaphysical Individualists	75.29	32.4	65.98	9.18	0.000
Ideology	Demobilized Collectivists	65.88	32.5	60.22	7.33	0.000
Political self-positioning	Left	71.76	43.0	47.29	5.48	0.000
Identification	Basic Sociological Characteristics	97.65	78.6	37.73	5.40	0.000
Meaning of life	Social Assertiveness / Solidarity	32.94	13.0	66.67	5.08	0.000
Intra-Individual Level	Equilibrium relationality	47.06	34.3	41.67	2.70	0.003
Group 4: Self-Contained individualists (29.35%)						
Meaning of Life	Self-Enhancement /Hedonism	88.89	32.5	74.23	12.16	0.000
Ideology	ModeratePassive Individualists	66.67	44.1	46.96	5.29	0.000
Worldview	Orthodox Metaphysicians	64.20	47.6	44.07	4.50	0.000
Identification	Basic Sociological Characteristics	95.06	78.6	35.00	4.29	0.000
Intra-Individual Level	Individualistic Neuroticism	46.91	31.8	44.19	3.45	0.000
Political Self-Positioning	Centre	48.15	30.8	41.94	3.10	0.001

[a]Typical responses are shown under each cluster. In hierarchical cluster analysis for binary variables, 'typical variables' in each cluster are those in-cluster percentage that presents a statistically significant difference from the respective percentage in the whole sample (Lebart et al., 1995). The *V*-test assesses the difference between the % values within a specific cluster compared to the overall population % per value.

something that requires personal effort and active involvement in the first place.

The *Self-Contained Individualists*, a group of centrist political texture, identify themselves based on sociological characteristics, and compose a profile that in Schwartz's (2012) terms refer to Self-Enhancement. This generally individualistic attitude that permeates each of the four levels of analysis (belief in social mobility, low relative deprivation, lack of empathy, individualistic neuroticism, intense death anxiety, high extroversion, self-entitlement), leads to hedonistic patterns of thought whereby meaning is found in career development, productivity, fun, sexual satisfaction and love (Self-Enhancement/Hedonism). The above, combined with their increased belief in religious dogmas and the precepts of orthodoxy, are indications that this is a group that is particularly conservative at its core.

In summary, the four groups, as different versions of reproduction and reception of social order and positioning of the self in relation to others, extend the research tradition and attest to the complexity of meaning. Thus, *Conservative Communitarians*, through their adherence to dogma, seem to effectively adapt to reality and benefit from the sense of security that relationship offers, in contrast to the *People Next Door*, who express a defeatist dysphoric introversion and strive for social connectivity.

The two groups, although making both meaning based on social bonding, seem to express different psychological needs, giving a completely different charge to the concept of bonding. The *Antimetaphysical Equalizers*, being equally dissatisfied with the latter, constitute a conditionally assertive collective entity that seeks meaning in social assertion and collective action, while the *Self-Contained Individualists*, by legitimizing dominant ideology and aiming at self-enhancement, express great emotional instability and conservatism, so that the meaning for them lies in hedonism and self-enhancement.

Extending the concerns around meaning, as defined above and by observing types of reasoning, we also tested how meaning elaborations connect and define various stakes posed for today's man at different levels in general, and specifically at the interpersonal (discomfort within interpersonal relations) and ideological (consistency norm) levels, as well as at the level of social practices (adaptive reactions). Beyond issues and ideals in interpersonal relationships (i.e. understanding, pleasure, compassion) that are obvious and granted, we focused on the discomfort felt by human subjects within their intimate interpersonal relationships, to draw attention to interpersonal level of analysis. Specifically, *lack of relational responsibility* (arrogance, haughtiness and stubbornness) appeared to increase distress when meaning is found in social bonding as part of a greater need for caring and secure warmth relationships. In contrast, *cold dominance* (indifference, rule-breaking and insensitivity) corresponds to the counter-heroic demand for social assertion and collective action.

Regarding consistency norm, a socio-psychological concept highly relevant to this multilevel approach, it appeared that those who focus on social bonding denounce dogmatism (*Negative Perception of Consistency*). This underlines a major contradiction due to rationalization mechanisms since this rationale is associated with one of the most orthodox groups (*Conservative Communitarians*).

Finally, given that meaning making determines practical choices of individual life, as a mean of self-preservation, it is entirely consistent with the above, the finding that the increased belief in divine providence, as a manifestation of optimism, corresponds to the most theological version of meaning (spirituality, peace, fulfilment, a sense of belonging and sharing). On the other hand, *pragmatic acceptance* is identified as part of the meaning-making rationale that focuses on self-enhancement and hedonism. Radical involvement, in the context of social claims (social assertiveness/solidarity), is embedded within the context of questioning of real and symbolic sources of risk.

Assessing the contribution and innovation of the present research, and in addition to the attempt to capture structures for the processing meaning as part of the multidisciplinary and simultaneous interconnection of the four levels of socio-psychological analysis, this attempt also contributes to the discussion of interdisciplinarity in psychology. As part of the interdisciplinary highlighting of the practical applications of the socio-psychological gaze, the findings of the first sessions and the material gathered from the self-presentation of the client during history taking could be subjected to this potentially useful analysis grid, which has emerged from the present research. The multidimensionality we have captured can help clinical approaches to really tap into the levels of socio-psychological analysis, given that psychotherapeutic practice is not just an intrapersonal and interpersonal level event, but the field of activation of micro- and macro-level analysis.

6 | Limitations and Future Directions

While we focus on several meaningful antecedents by describing a contextually rich investigation of life meaning-making strategies, we are hereby aware of some limitations concerning our research. First, we employed convenience and snowball sampling strategies in this study; this may have contributed to a nonrepresentative sample of the population. Second, given that our findings are context-specific, our findings should not be considered as definite. For this reason, social identity was measured with a self-report tool, which captures specific dimensions, so a different type of approach (e.g. identity complexity theory) could highlight alternative aspects. Furthermore, given the high correlation of narcissism with the variables included in the intraindividual level of analysis, related measures could potentially be implemented. Lastly, we are aware that some of the results are constrained by culture (e.g. the Christian Orthodox religion). Since the study was conducted within a single-country context, it would be useful to examine whether the results can be replicated across other cultural settings. In such cases, the specific measurement of Christian Orthodoxy could be adapted or supplemented with measures relating to other cultural traditions, such as Muslim, Buddhist or Confucian contexts. However, we do not believe that our findings are culture- or country-specific, as the other constructs we examined are not inherently tied to any particular culture or country (e.g. individual differences, ideology).

The present study can form the basis for investigating further relationships between levels of analysis. While the present study utilized a selection of established measures to explore meaning-making and related constructs, several other measures could provide valuable insights into the phenomena under investigation. It would be interesting, for example, to explore dimensions of the intraindividual level as outcome variables (e.g. self-entitlement, self-construal). Moreover, meanness, as an individual difference and a potential predictor of radicalization (Besta et al., 2021), which has received a lot of research

attention recently, could be considered as the intersection of individualism and collectivism. Future research on this topic could also address issues of morality and social values as part of the ideological profiling (e.g. social values, social axioms). Finally, by operationalizing different perspectives of ideological and worldview orientation and using cultural products (e.g. theatre, art) as experimental stimuli, their influence on the formation and orientation of different socio-cognitive processes about meaning could be tested.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Antonia Tsitseli: Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; methodology; writing – original draft. **Gerasimos Prodromitis:** Supervision; writing – review and editing. **Vasiliki Yotsidi:** Supervision; writing – review and editing. **Vassilis Pavlopoulos:** Supervision; writing – review and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no conflict of interest to report.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All deidentified data are openly available at https://osf.io/dah4m/?view_only=becf520abab7491c95179d7169f98f86.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study reported in this article received ethics approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the author's university. The study is original and has been performed according to APA ethical standards for the treatment of human subjects.

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