



Comparing the Life Meaning, the Feeling of Loneliness, and the Image of God in Prisoners and Non-Prisoners

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Abstract

Background: This study aimed to compare the life meaning, the feeling of loneliness, and the image of God in two imprisoned and non-imprisoned groups.

Methods: The research design consisted of the type of comparative descriptive - causal studies and the statistical population is all prisoners of Semnan city, and to participate in the study, 60 prisoners and 60 non-prisoners were selected by the available method, as well as two groups, in terms of some demographic variables, were matched. The measurement tools of the study included the life meaning questionnaire (Steger), feeling of loneliness (Russell), and imagination of God (Greenaway). Questionnaires were analyzed after collection.

Results: The results of the study showed that there is a significant difference between the life meaning in two prisoners and non-prisoners groups and the mean score of the meaning of life in the prison group is significantly lower than the non-prison group. There is also a significant difference in loneliness between two prisoners and non-prisoners groups and the mean of loneliness scores in prisoners is significantly higher than non-prisoners. On the other hand, there is a significant difference regarding "image of God" between prisoners and non-prisoners individuals, and the mean "image of God" scores in prisoners are less than those in non-prisoners.

Conclusions: According to the result, it can be concluded that tests showed that all three hypotheses of the researcher were confirmed. In the following, the results of these tests will be reviewed.

Keywords: Life meaning, loneliness feeling, Image of God, Prison.

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Introduction

Trying to understand and examine criminal behavior requires the recognition of a wide range of scientific branches. Despite the involvement of anthropologists and statistics specialists in the analysis of crimes, the fundamental theories have originated from sociology, psychology, and psychiatry. Prison is a place designated by law for the safe custody of persons restricted due to antisocial behavior, to educate them to become useful citizens of society.¹ One of the most important issues in criminal psychology is the emotional training of prisoners. In the 1950s, criminologists recognized the unique value of working with prisoners as a contributing factor to the rehabilitation of prisoners.² Investigations into prisons and those in prisons are very few. But what is important is that the needs of this group are not ignored and marginalized. The total number of Iranian prisoners by 2017 is 240 thousand, which

ranks ninth in the world. The number of prisoners in the UK is 81,000 (office for national statistics, 2020) and 69% of UK prisoners are over 30 years old.³ Crazy (1995) considered the rehabilitation value of prisoners placed in reliable positions with expectations of a positive role. Reisman (1965) also noted the benefits of rehabilitating prisoners receiving assistance of a helper.⁴ The prison's closed space means the prisoners struggle with their sensory, social and beliefs-related limitations, and they should try to overcome the uncomfortable prison situation through creativity.⁵ Therefore, it is possible to apply the science of psychology to the Iranian prisons to witness the loss of prisoners' statistics. Psychology can help female and male prisoners. Therefore, one of the solutions that can be developed is to study variables such as life meaning, loneliness, and the image of God in prisoners. The result of research on prisoners shows a variety of mental problems in prisoners such as anxiety, sadness, shame, fear, reduction of passion, depression, and suicide. Mental problems affect people's ability to endure punishment and make life meaningless. The lack of human ability to achieve the meaning of life will lead to an unpleasant psychological effect in prisons.⁶ Over the last twenty years, research on the structure of life meaning and its psychological benefits has increased. Recent theoretical studies show that the life meaning consists of purpose (One feels that life is the result of valuable goals), coherence/understanding (one feels that life is rational), importance (feeling that one's life is in the important picture).⁷ Frankel coined the will of meaning in 1959 as one of the basic interests of humans to find meaning in life.⁸ Many researchers have examined the variable of meaning therapy in prison, for example, forgiveness therapy has shown useful evidence in increasing the positive attitude of prisoners in understanding the meaning of life.⁶ The inmates spend a lot of time on their own. Isolation is an important challenge for those in prisons, especially those in solitary confinement.⁹ Loneliness is one of the most important factors affecting the emotional state of prisoners. The loneliness for prisoners is more important than coping with life-related problems in prison.¹⁰ Loneliness consists of negative emotions, a lonely person feels social frustration, lack of support, lack of social network, and lack of sense of social belonging.¹¹ Prisoners are isolated from family and friends and maybe challenged to find new friends in prison due to negative crime labels. In a study of 479 men in North West England prisons, almost one-sixth of interviews described relationship formation and maintenance problems.¹² Sykes (1985) named loneliness as one of the sufferings of prisoners. These pains are deprivations beyond

deprivation of liberty and have a profound effect on a prisoner's feelings.³ In a Turkish sample in 2016, the average score of feeling lonely by 23 women prisoners in Kandira, Turkey was very low.¹³ In a Dutch study in 2017, out of 16 Dutch prisons, 93 older prisoners were interviewed and 75.3% of them reported feeling lonely.¹⁴ Also in Brown's study, Australian prisoners who scored low on loneliness had higher levels of frustration, depression, and suicidal behaviors.¹⁵ Zhao and Xi examined the relationship between loneliness, psychological effects, and source of control in 201 prisoners in China.¹⁶ One of the issues that have rarely been explored in prisons is the issue of religious belief in the image of God. In 2017, Jang et al. examined prisoners' beliefs about God the merciful and God the judge, and prisoners related the conception of God to God the judge.¹⁷ The individual's image of God is the subjective experience of people with God and others, which demonstrate as subjective representation. The growth of people's perception of God is formed along with their life experiences and is affected by the quality of people's attachment to God. People with a secure attachment to God have a more positive view of God and know that God is close to them and available and will rush to their aid when they ask for help.¹⁸ Humans create an image of God for themselves. Not only the image of God, but also the principle of guardianship, the essence of divine love has been instilled in the creation of man and woman, but this image almost disappeared with the onset of sin. The main purpose of the Bible is to restore the image of God in the church, the pillar, and the earth of trust.¹⁹ In psychology, levels of the image of God affect people's attitudes toward life concepts and behaviors ranging from choosing a friend and partner to drug use and the development of psychological disorders and social deviations.²⁰ Considering what has been said, it can be concluded that jail is not just a place for imprisonment and a term of conviction. There must be conditions for a better life in these places. Interested psychologists in the area should seek solutions to the prisoners' problems to open a new path for them after the completion of the prison term and seek a new life and pass the previous routes. Many prisoners resume violent and abnormal behaviors after imprisonment due to their lack of personal readiness to participate in society, as well as the poor conditions in society and the prevailing psychological atmosphere. Considering the little research that compares the life meaning and the feeling of loneliness and the image of God in prisoners and non-prisoners, it is important to study the subject of this present study, therefore, the main question of the present study is whether there is a difference between the life meaning, loneliness and the conception of God in prisoners and non-prisoners?

Materials and Methods

The research method is causal-comparative. The statistical population studied in this study was all prisoners in Semnan who were in the central prison in the summer of 2020. The selected statistical sample is 60 for prisoners and 60 for non-prisoners that were selected purposefully. That is, in total, the statistical samples of this research are 120 people. The two groups were matched in terms of demographic variables (age, sex, marital, status, and education) to control the intervention factors.

1- Life meaning questionnaire:²¹ The two dimensions of meaning in life, namely the presence of meaning and the search for meaning, are measured using 10 items on a seven-point Likert scale from completely false (1) to completely true (7). The questionnaire takes about 3-5 minutes to complete. Research shows the validity and stability of the questionnaire scores and their convergent and differential validity. For example, both internal consistency scales (alpha coefficients between 0.82 and 0.87) were reported to be very good, and at one-month intervals, appropriate validation validity (0.70 for the attendance subscale and 0.73 for the subscale of the search) have obtained).²¹

2- The image of God's questionnaire: This questionnaire has 27 items and 3 subscales, God's presence in life (item 11-1), God's care (item 12-21), and negative conception of God (item 22-27). The subscales of God's presence in life God's care are combined to form the scale of God's conception. Therefore, finally, the questionnaire consists of two main scales: positive perception of God and negative perception of God.

Khaksari (2006) in a study, using Cronbach's alpha on the factor of God's presence in life, God's care, positive image of God, and negative image of God, obtained the reliability of the test 0.76, 0.74, 0.74, and 0.68 respectively.²² Also, in Khosravi and Feyzabadi's research (2009), the validity and reliability of this questionnaire have been confirmed.²³

3. Loneliness questionnaire: This questionnaire was developed by Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona in 1980 and consists of twenty questions in 4 options, 9 negative sentences, and 11 positive sentences. In this questionnaire, "never" scores (1), "rarely" scores (2), "sometimes" scores (3), and "always" scores (4). In the study of Bahirayi, Delavar & Ahadi (2006) to measure the validity of the questions, the correlation coefficient between each questionnaire material with the total score was calculated and the calculations were obtained at a significant level. Therefore, the validity of the questions is acceptable. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for determining reliability was 0.88 and the correlation coefficient between depression and loneliness scores was 0.67. Therefore, the simultaneous validity of the questionnaire was also confirmed. The researcher obtained the reliability of the questionnaire through Cronbach's alpha of 0.86.²⁴ After determining the title of the research and collecting the necessary materials from different sources, appropriate questionnaires were selected for the research. Then the sample size was determined. Due to the corona virus conditions, the questionnaires were provided to the prisoners by the prison helper. Prisoners were selected from among the inmates of Semnan prison and non-prisoners were selected from among the residents of Semnan. After selecting a sample from the statistical population, questionnaires were given to the participants and tested. After collecting the information obtained from the questionnaires, the relevant statistical tests were performed. This research has the ethical code IR.IAU.SHAHROOD.REC.1399.060 from Islamic Azad university Shahrood. To review and analyze the data, statistical indicators such as sample description characteristics such as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation were used, and in the inferential statistics section, ANOVA and

MANOVA methods were used. Also, all statistical calculations of this research were performed using SPSS²⁴ statistical software.

Results

The two groups were almost equal in terms of demographic characteristics. The mean and standard deviation of the age of prisoners was 31.05 (SD: 10.35) and the mean age of non-prisoners was 30.43 (SD: 11.04) which were not significantly different (T: .316, P: 0.753). 32 prisoners and 30 non-prisoners were single, but there was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of marital status (X²:0.133, p:0.715). The multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to analyze the statistical data. The hypothesis of normal distribution of scores of research variables was investigated by Shapiro-Wilkes method and Skewness and Kurtosis indices and the distribution of scores of variables was normal. The Leven's test was used to examine the homogeneity of variances between the two groups of prisoners and non-prisoners. In most variables of the study, the variances of the two groups were homogeneous. Since the number of subjects in the prisoner and non-prisoner groups is equal, there is no prohibition on using the multivariate analysis of variance test. The M-Box statistic was not significant for all three multivariate analysis of variance (Pvalue>0.05) and therefore the assumption of homogeneity of the error covariance matrix was established.

Table 2 shows that the linear composition of the components of the variables of life meaning, the image of God, and the comparison of the total scores of the three variables are significantly different between the two groups. The effect of group membership on the components of life meaning (0.414) was

moderate, on the image of God (0.768), and on the total scores of the three variables life meaning, the image of God, and loneliness (0.841) was high.

According to table 3, the mean of the two groups are significantly different in the components of the presence of meaning and search for meaning, and according to table 1, the average of the non-prisoners group in both components of the presence of meaning and search for meaning is significantly higher. The effect of the group on these two components is less than average. Also, the mean of the two groups in the components of God's care in life, God's presence in life and negative image of God are significantly different, and according to table 1, the average of non-prisoners in the two components of God's care in life, God's presence in life is significant. It is higher and in the component of the negative image of God, it is significantly lower. The effect of group on God's care in life is low (0.048) and in the two components of God's presence in life (0.623) and negative image of God (0.579) is above the average. Finally, the mean of the two groups differs significantly in the total score of the variables of life meaning, loneliness, and image of God. According to table 1, the average of non-prisoners in the variables of life meaning and image of God is significantly higher and in the variable of the feeling of loneliness is significantly lower. The effect of group on the life meaning (0.431) is moderate, on the feeling of loneliness (0.821) is high and on the idea of God (0.426) is moderate on the feeling of loneliness (0.821) is high and on the idea of God (0.426) is moderate and on the feeling of loneliness (0.821) is high and on the idea of God (0.426) is moderate.

Table1. Mean and standard deviation of two groups in research variables

Variables	Groups			
	Prisoner (n=60)		Non-prisoner(n=60)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Presence of meaning	21.10	8.68	29.88	2.58
Search for meaning	17.90	10.05	28.76	2.59
The total score of life meaning	38.33	16.33	58.66	3.33
Feeling of loneliness	55.41	8.16	27.16	4.67
God's presence in life	37.33	8.72	53.40	1.75
God's care in life	41.35	8.89	44.18	1.40
Negative image of God	19.53	7.27	7.38	1.30
The total score of image of God	78.61	15.51	97.56	2.33

Table 2. Multivariate tests for comparison of groups mean in sub-scales of variables

Variables	Test	Value	Hypothesis df	Error df	F	Pvalue	η^2
Life meaning	Pillai's trace	0.414	2	117	41.252	0.0001	0.414
	Wilks' lambda	0.268	2	117	41.252	0.0001	0.414
	Hotelling's Trace	2.865	2	117	41.252	0.0001	0.414
	Roy's largest root	2.865	2	117	41.252	0.0001	0.414
	Pillai's trace	0.841	3	116	204.460	0.0001	0.841
Feeling of loneliness	Wilks' lambda	0.234	3	116	204.460	0.0001	0.841
	Hotelling's Trace	2.386	3	116	204.460	0.0001	0.841
	Roy's largest root	2.386	3	116	204.460	0.0001	0.841
Image of God	Pillai's trace	0.768	3	116	128.187	0.0001	0.768
	Wilks' lambda	0.436	3	116	128.187	0.0001	0.768
	Hotelling's Trace	3.125	3	116	128.187	0.0001	0.768
	Roy's largest root	2.125	3	116	128.187	0.0001	0.768

Table 3 Results of one-way ANOVA within the context of MANCOVA on subscales in experimental and control groups

Variable	Source of changes	Sum of squares	df	Mean squares	F	Pvalue	η^2
Search for meaning	Group	3542.533	1	3542.533	65.746	0.0001**	0.358
	Error	6358.133	118	53.882			
Presence of meaning	Group	2314.408	1	2314.408	56.407	0.0001**	0.323
	Error	4841.583	118	41.030			
Total of life meaning	Group	12403.333	1	12403.333	89.273	0.0001**	0.431
	Error	16394.667	118	138.938			
Feeling of loneliness	Group	23941.875	1	23941.875	540.706	0.0001**	0.821
	Error	5224.917	118	50.99	44.279		
God's presence in life	Group	7744.133	1	7744.133	195.353	0.0001**	0.623
	Error	4677.733	118	39.642			
God's care in life	Group	240.833	1	240.833	5.935	0.006**	0.048
	Error	4788.633	118	40.582			
Negative image of God	Group	4428.675	1	4428.675	162.136	0.0001**	0.579
	Error	3223.117	118	27.315			
The total score of image of God	Group	10773.075	1	10773.075	87.472	0.0001**	0.426
	Error	14532.917	118	123.160			

Discussion

This study aimed to compare the life meaning, the feeling of loneliness, and the image of God in two imprisoned and non-imprisoned groups. The results showed that all three hypotheses of the researcher were confirmed. In the following, the results of the tests will be reviewed. The results of this study showed that there is a significant difference between the life meaning in the two groups of prisoners and non-prisoners and according to the means of the two groups in the descriptive part, it was found that the dimensions of life meaning are significantly lower in prisoners than non-prisoners. The results of the present study showed that criminals feel less meaning in life than ordinary people. Also, this hypothesis is in line with the results of Mostafaei and Mahdavi (2015).²⁵ Zhouani (2015) also rated the life meaning in prison low.⁶ These studies show that the program to prevent and stop the tendency to risky behaviors in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions should include components to help people find goals and satisfactory coherence in their daily experiences.²⁶ Decades of empirical research have proven that the neural-psychological perceptual structure immediately shapes any stimulus that approaches us. The Gestalt movement in psychology, founded by Wolfgang Kohler, Max Wertheimer, and Kurt Koffka, led to extensive research in the fields of perception and motivation, which showed that we convert molecular stimuli, physical behaviors, and psychological information into Gestalts, that is, indexes or patterns. So, when a person is faced with an imperfect circle, he automatically completes it in his mind. In the same way, in our daily world, we encounter and organize random stimuli and events, and in the same way, we approach the existential situation.²⁷ We experience boredom in the face of a carefree and pattern less world, as well as in the search for patterns, explanations unified pattern, not only feels annoyed and dissatisfied, but also becomes desperate. The belief that a person has been able to decipher a meaning always brings him a sense of superiority. So, we desperately need meaning, and in its absence we are very confused. When a person does not feel meaning in life, he feels helpless and desperate and deviates towards risky behaviors. Therefore, lack of meaning in human life can lead to harmful social behaviors.²⁸ The results of this research showed that there is a significant difference between feeling lonely in prisoners and non-prisoners. According to the observed means, prisoners felt significantly lonelier than non-prisoners. For a prisoner, adjectives and loneliness have

different effects. Loneliness state indirectly affects positive emotions and loneliness attribute indirectly affects negative emotions. Studies by Joe (2014) and Zhang (2015) have shown that female prisoners' loneliness has a direct effect on positive emotions.^{29,19} In a Turkish sample in 2016, the mean score of feeling lonely by 23 women prisoners in Kandira, Turkey was very low.¹³ In a Dutch study in 2017, out of 16 Dutch prisons, 93 older prisoners were interviewed and 75.3% of them reported feeling lonely.¹⁴ Also, in Brown's study, Australian prisoners who scored low on loneliness had higher levels of frustration, depression, and suicidal behaviors.¹⁵ Zhao and Xi examined the relationship between loneliness, psychological effects, and source of control in 201 prisoners in China.¹⁶ Loneliness has various consequences for prisoners, including suicide and self-mutilation. Interventions to reduce feelings of loneliness in the prison environment can be effective.³⁰ Prisoners reported feeling more lonely than non-prisoners. This feeling of loneliness is a person's mental perception of the lack of satisfactory social relationships. People who feel lonely because of a lack of attachment or an intimate relationship with another person will tend to engage in risky behaviors. A person who feels lonely thinks that there is no one in his life can share his feelings and experiences with him, he finds himself unacceptable, unlovable, and worthless, while others have such an understanding about him. The feeling of loneliness deprives the person of pleasure and vitality and causes physical and mental fatigue. When a person is not in a natural relationship with others, he or she engages in violent and abnormal behaviors in society. Loneliness is one of the negative emotions that evokes not being lovable and includes negative emotional responses and perceptual dissatisfaction in one's social relationships and is accompanied by weakness in interpersonal and social relationships and social isolation. Therefore, a person who has a schema (I am not lovable) cannot love others, and his extreme compensation mechanism is to try dangerous and violent behaviors and to enter the prison society. One of the most basic things that neglect makes sense of loneliness is the lack of aim and loss of it. The clearer your choice of a detailed and conscious goal, and the angles of the path and the path to it will be clearer, the hope of achieving the goal further becomes clearer and the feeling of loneliness is eliminated.³¹ Therefore, one of the important causes of the loneliness of prisoners is the lack of meaning and purpose in life. According to the present study, the feeling of loneliness and the life

meaning in the group of prisoners is low. The results of the study showed that there is a significant difference in the image of God in prisoners and non-prisoners and according to the obtained mean, the image of God in prisoners is lower than non-prisoners. According to research, it seems that having a positive image of God can make man resilient and hopeful in the face of life's problems and crises. People who believe in a loving God do not lose hope, even when they have lost their social and emotional support; Faith leads them to believe that God will never leave them alone. Paragument's findings suggest that people who think of God as supportive and caring rely on Him in times of crisis and use positive strategies.³² In contrast, people with a weaker coping style experience helplessness, hopelessness, and lower levels of mental health, have a negative view of God and see God as a punisher. Prisoners also felt less positive about God. These people, who consider God to be a punisher and reprimanded, have poorer mental health because they feel they are not receiving the necessary emotional support from God. There are few reports in the study of the image of God with prisoners.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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