



The Meaningfulness of Life Among Parents Who Adopt Children with Autism: A Qualitative Psychological Perspective

¹Hannah Fadzila Saragih, ²Fitrania Maghfiroh

^{1,2}Surabaya State University, Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia

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Corresponding

Author:

Hannah Fadzila Saragih

[hannah.22121@](mailto:hannah.22121@mhs.unesa.ac.id)

mhs.unesa.ac.id

ABSTRACT: Adopting a child with autism presents unique psychological, emotional, and social challenges that differ significantly from those experienced by biological parents. In Indonesia, adoption involving children with autism remains relatively uncommon, and empirical studies examining the lived experiences of adoptive parents are still limited. Most existing research has focused on parental stress, coping strategies, and caregiving burdens, with little attention given to how adoptive parents construct and experience meaning in life through their parenting roles. This study aimed to explore the meaning of life among adoptive parents of children with autism by examining their subjective experiences and meaning-making processes. This research employed a qualitative case-study design. Participants consisted of a married couple who adopted a child diagnosed with autism through kinship-based adoption. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and triangulation with a significant other. The data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to meaning construction, emotional experiences, and parental roles. The findings indicate that adoptive parents construct meaning in life through acceptance, commitment, emotional resilience, and spiritual reflection in responding to parenting challenges. Parenting a child with autism becomes a source of personal growth and life purpose, despite ongoing emotional and practical demands. This study contributes to meaning-in-life literature by highlighting the distinctive experiences of adoptive parents and offers practical implications for psychological support and family-based interventions.

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INTRODUCTION

Child adoption remains relatively uncommon in Indonesia, particularly when it involves children with autism. Prospective adoptive parents must consider multiple challenges, including financial readiness, social perceptions, and the child's condition (Ramadhan & Astrawan, 2025). Autism is commonly associated with difficulties in communication, interaction, and social functioning, which require parents to possess strong mental preparedness, adequate knowledge, and greater caregiving capacity than is typically required for raising neurotypical children. Consequently, adoptive parents of children with autism face complex demands that extend beyond conventional parenting roles.

Parents who adopt children with autism encounter substantially greater challenges than those raising typically developing children. Hasanah (2023) argue that parents experience pressure in controlling behavioral problems in children with autism. Parents with autistic children also experience higher levels of stress compared to parents with children with other disabilities (Nisa et al., 2025). External factors are also involved, such as the lack of health services and special education, which increase the psychological burden on parents (Yulianti & Rudiyanto, 2024). Such experiences foster patience, commitment, and long-term caregiving perseverance (Arroisi & Mukharom, 2021). At the emotional level, parents often experience ambivalence, oscillating between fatigue and deep affection, pride, and responsibility toward their children (Fadhila, 2021).

Despite the growing body of research on parenting children with autism, most existing studies primarily focus on biological parents and emphasize psychological stress, coping strategies, or caregiving burdens. Limited scholarly attention has been given to adoptive parents of children with autism, particularly regarding how they construct and experience meaning in life through their parenting experiences. This indicates a clear research gap in understanding the subjective meaning-making processes of adoptive parents, whose parenting context involves distinct emotional, relational, and moral dynamics compared to biological parents.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining the meaning of life among adoptive parents of children with autism through their subjective experiences. Specifically, the study focuses on the processes through which parents build, discover, and sustain meaning in life within the context of adoptive parenting. The main research question guiding this

study is how adoptive parents of children with autism construct meaning in their lives through their parenting experiences.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design, aiming to obtain an in-depth understanding of the meaning of life experienced by adoptive parents of children with autism. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the research aimed to explore in depth the subjective experiences and meaning-making processes of adoptive parents of a child with autism. The case study design enabled the researcher to examine the phenomenon holistically within its real-life context and to capture the complexity of parental experiences related to meaning in life.

The participants in this study consisted of a married couple, AE (a mother) and DW (a father), who adopted a child diagnosed with autism. The adoption was conducted through kinship-based adoption, in which the child was adopted from within the extended family. The participants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria, namely: (1) adoptive parents of a child with autism, (2) having provided direct caregiving for the child daily, and (3) willingness to participate voluntarily in the study. To strengthen data credibility as a triangulation source, a significant other who was familiar with the participants' parenting experiences was also involved as a supporting informant. She is the child's maternal grandmother, who lived next door to the adoptive parents and had frequent interactions with both the parents and the child.

Data were collected using multiple qualitative techniques to ensure depth and credibility. The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to freely express their experiences, feelings, and interpretations related to parenting a child with autism and the meaning they derive from these experiences. Interviews were conducted in a flexible manner to encourage openness while still following the main research themes. In addition, non-participant observation was conducted to gain contextual understanding of daily interactions between the parents and the child. Observational data focused on parental behaviors, emotional responses, and interaction patterns during caregiving activities. Documentation and field notes were also used to record important information that emerged during the research process.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis process began with data familiarization through repeated reading of interview transcripts and observation notes. Relevant data were then coded, categorized, and organized into broader themes related to meaning in life, parental acceptance, emotional resilience, commitment, and spiritual reflection. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and consistency with the research objectives.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study applied triangulation of data sources and methods, including interviews, observations, and information from a significant other. Member checking was also conducted by confirming key findings with the participants to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences. These strategies were employed to enhance the credibility and dependability of the research findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the main themes derived from the data analysis. Rather than merely describing participants' experiences, the discussion interprets the findings by linking them to relevant theoretical frameworks, particularly Viktor Frankl's theory of meaning in life, as well as prior empirical studies on parenting children with autism. Through this analytical approach, the section explains how adoptive parents construct meaning in life while raising a child with autism and situates these experiences within existing scholarly discourse.

Theme 1: Adoption decision

The decision to adopt was shaped by the interaction between family encouragement and personal motivation, reflecting a purposeful action aligned with Frankl's concept of creative values. Adoption was not experienced as a mere familial obligation but as a conscious and meaningful life choice.

Family encouragement emerged as a decisive factor in both cases. The initiative to adopt originated from extended family members, particularly DW's father, who entrusted the child to the participants. This trust reinforced the parents' sense of moral responsibility, as reflected in the participants' statements:

"...so, Akung entrusted him (the child) to us..." (AE: W1:15).

"...the request came from my father..." (DW: W1:10).

In contrast to institutional adoption processes, kinship-based adoption in this study strengthened emotional readiness and responsibility from the outset. This finding expands previous studies by showing how family trust becomes a foundation for meaning-making, especially in the context of raising a child with autism.

Personal motivation further supported the adoption decision. AE expressed intrinsic affection toward children, stating: “...because I like little children...” (AE: W1:200), while DW emphasized readiness and responsibility, noting “we don’t have children yet, and we are still capable of providing for the child’s needs” (DW: W1:40). These motivations indicate that adoption was perceived as a meaningful life project rather than a burden, consistent with Frankl’s view that meaning arises from intentional and responsible action.

Theme 2: Dynamics of Childcare

Parenting an adopted child with autism involved complex caregiving dynamics characterized by challenges and sustained commitment. Rather than presenting these experiences descriptively, the analysis highlights how parents adapt to difficulties and transform them into meaningful responsibility.

Parents reported significant challenges related to work–life balance, physical exhaustion, and managing autistic behaviors. AE described prolonged fatigue due to disrupted sleep and caregiving responsibilities: “The child didn’t like to sleep at night... I would sleep at dawn, then leave for work” (AE: W1:145).

DW acknowledged difficulties in managing tantrums, especially before understanding autism:

“When tantrums happen, we didn’t know how to solve them” (DW: W1:160).

These findings align with parenting stress theory, which emphasizes the emotional and physical burden of caregiving for children with special needs. However, as parents gained knowledge and accessed therapy services, challenges became more manageable, indicating adaptive coping rather than persistent distress.

Despite these obstacles, parental commitment remained strong. Both participants made material, career, and energy sacrifices to prioritize their child’s needs. AE’s decision to resign from her job illustrates this commitment:

"I resigned... for the child. If I didn't care, I would have kept working" (AE: W1:125).

This finding supports Frankl's assertion that meaning is often discovered through responsibility and endurance in the face of hardship.

Theme 3: Emotional and relational dynamics

Strong emotional bonds with the child and supportive social environments emerged as key sources of meaning. Parents expressed deep affection and emotional attachment, regardless of the child's adoptive status. AE emphasized this bond by stating,

"We would love this (adopted) child more... because this is a responsibility" (AE: W1:60).

DW similarly expressed emotional closeness and guilt when acting harshly toward the child:

"...after that, I definitely feel regret" (DW: W1:170).

Support from neighbors and the surrounding community further reinforced parental resilience. Participants described receiving acceptance and assistance without judgment, as reflected in the statement,

"The neighbors here are actually supportive" (AE: W1:395).

This finding supports social support theory and previous research highlighting the protective role of community acceptance in reducing psychological burden for parents of children with autism.

Theme 4: Acceptance and appreciation

Acceptance of the child's condition developed through a dynamic and non-linear process. Parents experienced ambivalence in accepting their child's condition while simultaneously hoping for improvement. AE expressed this tension clearly:

"I just accept it... but there will definitely be a miracle" (AE: W3:165).

DW similarly stated,

"I want my child to be cured... I will try my best" (DW: W1:290).

Over time, acceptance became increasingly framed through religious values. Viewing the child's condition as destiny or divine trust enabled parents to reinterpret suffering as meaningful responsibility. As AE noted,

"This is destiny" (AE: W1:215),

while DW stated, *"I consider it a process from God"* (DW: W2:140).

This reflects attitudinal values in logotherapy, where meaning is found through chosen attitudes toward unavoidable suffering. Unlike

studies portraying acceptance as a final stage, this study highlights acceptance as an ongoing and adaptive process.

Theme 5: Hope and life goals

Participants' future orientation was grounded in responsibility toward their families and a desire to benefit others. For both parents, family constituted the core of their life purpose, and their primary hope was to bring happiness to their children, spouses, and parents. This was reflected in the following statements:

"The most important thing is family; there is no other choice" (AE: W1:105).

"What's certain is that I can make my little family happy. Every time I pray, I want to make my children, wife, and parents happy, that's all" (DW: W1:310)

Additionally, AE expressed a broader social aspiration:

"I just want to be useful to people, to help others, even if it's not much" (AE: W1:110)

These findings demonstrate a future-oriented meaning-making process in which responsibility and hope play central roles. This supports previous research suggesting that long-term goals help parents sustain psychological strength when facing chronic caregiving challenges.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on adoptive parents raising a child with autism, a population that remains underrepresented in existing literature, which predominantly examines biological parents. While prior studies consistently report high levels of stress, burden, and coping challenges among parents of children with autism, Solihin and Nur (2025) demonstrate that adoptive parents undergo a meaning-making process that is comparable to, yet distinct from, that of biological parents. In particular, ambivalence, religious acceptance, and sustained long-term commitment emerge as central features. In contrast to earlier research that often interprets ambivalence as an indicator of unresolved acceptance, this study shows that ambivalence functions as an adaptive psychological mechanism that allows parents to balance hope and acceptance simultaneously.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that meaning in life is constructed through interconnected processes, including the adoption decision, caregiving dynamics, emotional relationships, acceptance, and future-oriented goals. While Frankl's theory of meaning in life has been widely applied in studies of adversity, this study extends previous applications by demonstrating that meaning emerges through a dynamic interaction of action, emotional experience, and attitude.

Consistent with Kusnadi et al. (2023), caregiving responsibilities became a central source of meaning. However, this study adds nuance by showing that responsibility is reinforced not only by obligation but also by voluntary self-expression and social validation. Emotional attachment to the child further strengthened parents' sense of purpose, supporting findings by Istiqomah et al. (2024), while also highlighting affection as a transformative experience rather than merely a coping resource.

Religious acceptance played a crucial role in sustaining parental commitment, supporting findings by Addini and Eva (2025), who emphasize spirituality as a meaning-orienting framework rather than solely a stress-reduction strategy. Moreover, consistent with Rukmana and Mariyati (2024), family and social support systems validated parents' caregiver identities and reinforced their sense of legitimacy and meaning.

Finally, the findings demonstrate a continuous process of noodynamics, characterized by oscillation between hope for improvement and acceptance of current realities. While this pattern aligns with the Dual Process Model of Coping (Strobe & Schut (2010)), the current study extends this model by positioning oscillation as a core mechanism in meaning construction. Ambivalence, therefore, should not be interpreted as failure or denial, but as an adaptive process that allows meaning in life to evolve alongside caregiving responsibilities.

This study has several limitations. The findings are based on a small number of participants within a single case study, which may limit generalizability. In addition, the study was conducted within a specific cultural and familial context that may influence the meaning-making process. Future research is encouraged to involve larger samples, include comparative analyses between adoptive and biological parents, and explore diverse cultural settings to enrich the understanding of meaning in life among parents of children with autism.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the meaning of life for adoptive parents of children with autism is constructed through sustained parenting commitment, strong emotional bonds, and religious acceptance. These elements enable parents to adapt to caregiving challenges, accept unchangeable conditions, and maintain responsibility and hope for the child's future development.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on meaning in life by highlighting the unique meaning-making experiences of adoptive parents of children with autism, a population that remains underexplored. The findings extend the application of Frankl's theory of meaning in life by demonstrating that meaning is not formed through a single value orientation, but rather through a dynamic interaction between responsibility, emotional experience, and attitudinal acceptance over time. Practically, the findings provide a basis for developing psychological support and mentoring programs that strengthen resilience and spiritual well-being. Future research is encouraged to involve broader samples and diverse methodological approaches to enhance generalizability and deepen analysis.

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