

Mapping the Positive Path to Moral Courage: Through Belongingness, Meaning in Life, and Moral Disengagement

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Numerous studies have explored the factors that influence moral cognition and morally desirable behavior. Yet, that remains doubtful whether the beneficial effects of psychological need satisfaction on individual and social functioning extend to moral processes. To bridge this gap, the current study examined the psychological mechanisms through which a general sense of belongingness may foster morally courageous behavior, focusing on the mediating role of moral disengagement and the moderating role of meaning in life. A cross-sectional design was employed with 290 university students (68% women; Mean age= 22.18), who completed self-report measures assessing belongingness, meaning in life, moral disengagement, and moral courage. Results from a conditional process analysis indicated that moral disengagement had a mediating role in the association between belongingness and moral courage. Specifically, a higher sense of general belongingness was associated with lower levels of moral disengagement, which strengthened moral courage in return. Moreover, this indirect effect varied by levels of perceived meaning in life: the negative association between belongingness and moral disengagement was stronger among individuals with higher levels of meaning. These findings highlight the role of existential meaning in strengthening the moral benefits of social connectedness by reducing tendencies to morally disengage. Practically, the results suggest that interventions aimed at enhancing belonging and life meaning may help cultivate moral courage in academic, organizational, and civic contexts.

Keywords: General belongingness, meaning, moral disengagement, moral courage, prosocial behavior

Harmony of communities depends on their members' readiness to collaborate and support those in need. Prosocial behavior—any behavior benefiting others—encompasses various forms, including kindness, cooperation, and helping others, all of which play a vital role in fostering thriving societies. It promotes enhanced functioning at both the individual and societal levels by offering numerous benefits, including the development of supportive relationships within a community (Ding et al., 2018), alleviation of internalizing problems (Arslan & Coşkun, 2020), enhanced socio-emotional recovery (Lazar & Eisenberger, 2022), and prevention of anti-social behaviors (Mitsopoulou & Giovazolias, 2015). Thus, extensive research (for a review, see Pfattheicher et al., 2022) and practice (e.g., Berry et al., 2020) seek to enhance understanding and promote these behaviors more effectively.

Unlike prevalent forms of prosocial behavior such as helping, some actions benefiting others involve moral violations (e.g., abuse, mobbing, and discrimination) and require courage to intervene. These actions are referred to as moral courage, which is defined as protecting moral values even in the presence of potential risks associated with intervening (Halmburger et al., 2016; Skitka, 2011).

Moral courage emerges as a crucial phenomenon in fighting moral violations and sustaining societal functioning (Simola, 2018). Prior research has demonstrated that individuals possess the capacity to engage in morally courageous behaviors to confront and resist a range of moral violations. These include, for example, addressing sexual harassment (Goodwin et al., 2020), combating abuse (Pouwels et al., 2019), challenging unethical practices within workplace environments (Dungan et al., 2019), and opposing discrimination against outgroups (Sekerka & Marar-Yacobian, 2017).

A critical question, however, remains: Why do some individuals confront moral violations while others remain silent? Integrative model of moral courage (Halmburger et al., 2016), a theoretical approach to the phenomenon, offers valuable insights in explaining why some people stand up against moral violations and engage in morally courageous behaviors while others prefer being silent. The model presents a series of psychological steps that underpin moral courage: recognizing the situation, evaluating it as a breach of social norms, acknowledging personal accountability, assessing one's own ability to intervene effectively, and finally, making a decision based on a cost-benefit analysis of taking action. However, further investigation is needed to identify the factors that shape these underlying processes of moral courage (Osswald et al., 2011). Within this context, the present work aims to enhance the understanding of this relatively understudied concept by suggesting

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that the factors promoting human flourishing, such as meaning and sense of belongingness, may also encourage social behaviors such as moral courage. In that sense, it investigated the associations between the satisfaction of psychological needs for belongingness and meaningful living in relation to individuals' moral cognition and behavioral intentions.

Belongingness and Meaning

Underlined by decades of research and related theories, such as Self-Determination Theory, the need to form meaningful social bonds is fundamental human motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Belongingness, the sense of being accepted and valued within a group, has been shown to promote prosocial behavior such as helping, cooperation, and kindness (Cuadrado et al., 2016). These actions, in turn, reinforce individuals' integration into their communities (Ellemers et al., 2002), supporting both personal and social wellbeing (Arslan & Coşkun, 2023; Avcı, 2023; Begen & Turner-Cobb, 2015). In other words, people might engage in prosocial acts to be accepted by a group or a society (Zaskodna et al., 2013) as well as adopting these prosocial norms in order to cultivate a sense of belonging within their community (Ellemers et al., 2002). Thus, basic need for belongingness not only emerges as a key factor to both physical and mental health (Begen & Turner-Cobb, 2015) but has also long been recognized as a powerful driver of social behavior (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). That mentioned motivation is valid for people's moral behavior development in social situations, as well (Feigenberg et al., 2008).

Empirical research suggests that a strong sense of belonging enhances moral emotions and inhibits immoral conduct. For example, those who feel a greater sense of connection to others are more likely to experience moral elevation (Wang et al., 2025) and less likely to engage in unethical behaviors like immoral consumer choices (Maille et al., 2021). Despite these findings, the link between belongingness and moral courage –the willingness to act on moral principles despite personal risk– remains underexplored. One exception comes from the organizational context, where employee belongingness has been linked to moral courage at work (Fernando et al., 2022). Yet, the psychological mechanisms underlying this link and its generalizability to broader moral contexts remain unclear.

Similarly, meaning in life, a sense that one's existence is coherent and purposeful, has been associated with increased prosociality (Fu et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). People who view their lives as meaningful are more inclined to help others, while those experiencing a lack of meaning are at greater risk for antisocial behavior, materialism, and self-destructive tendencies (Ostafin & Feyel, 2019; Henry et al., 2014), which in return is associated with immoral risky acts (Lin & Shek, 2019) such as a heightened risk of developing addictions (Ostafin & Feyel, 2019) and committing suicide (Henry et al., 2014). Even people may find meaning in being beneficial to others, which provides a more meaningful living in return (Klein, 2017; Xie et al., 2023). Basically meaningful living itself requires taking personal and social responsibility (Arslan & Wong, 2022). Meaning, thus, appears to serve a prosocial function, motivating individuals to engage in socially constructive roles. Whether this extends to moral courage, however, is an open question. Given prior findings linking meaning to reduced immorality and enhanced social engagement, it is plausible that

meaning may also foster moral courage by strengthening one's commitment to act in alignment with ethical values.

Moral Disengagement

Moral disengagement encompasses socio-cognitive strategies through which individuals selectively deactivate internal moral standards, thereby enabling themselves to engage in conduct that would otherwise conflict with their ethical self-concept (Bandura, 1999; Bandura et al., 1996). Drawing from Bandura's social cognitive framework (Bandura, 1986), these mechanisms –such as moral justification, distorting consequences, displacement of responsibility, and dehumanization– function to prevent moral evaluations of the actions, diminish personal accountability, and alleviate anticipatory guilt. This conceptual framework explains how individuals may engage in unethical or aggressive acts while maintaining a morally intact self-image (Bandura, 1999). Early research findings have already demonstrated that moral disengagement decreases the sense of moral responsibility (Paciello et al., 2013), thereby eases immoral behaviors such as antisocial behaviors (Luo & Bussey, 2023) and criminal conduct (Walters, 2020) whilst hinders prosocial behaviors (Jiang et al., 2022; Li et al., 2025). Unsurprisingly, morally disengaged individuals are less likely to take moral responsibility to confront moral violations and help the victims (Baumert et al., 2013; Coşkun et al., 2024; Sjtsema et al., 2014; Thornberg et al., 2023).

In contrast, experiencing general sense of belongingness and acquiring meaning in life may act as protective factors, supporting the retention of moral values and preventing moral disengagement. Although empirical studies directly testing this relationship are scarce, the related literature offers some insights. For instance, people who securely attached and receive social support from others were found to be less likely to morally disengage and more likely to exhibit prosocial behaviors (Shi et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023). Furthermore, meaning in life is not a separate value from morality, but morality itself is an aspect of meaningfulness (Kipke, 2023). That gives an insight regarding the positive relationship between meaning in life and moral identity development (Goering et al., 2024), which, consequently, fosters prosocial behavior (Karduz & Özbey, 2021). Considering these findings, having a sense of belongingness and meaning in life –two closely related constructs (Lambert et al., 2013)– could enhance moral engagement and encourage individuals to break their silence in the face of moral violations to benefit others.

Present Study

Human beings are inherently social creatures, driven by the fundamental need to establish and maintain meaningful bonds with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). A well-functioning and harmonious society relies heavily on its prosocial members, whose behaviors contribute to the collective good (Ellemers et al., 2002). Accordingly, individuals tend to appreciate prosocial acts and take pride in being part of a prosocial community (Cuadrado et al., 2016). Moreover, benefiting others often elicits feelings of moral elevation and provides individuals with a sense of meaning, while living a meaningful life in turn nurtures prosocial motivations (Klein, 2017; Fu et al., 2022). Therefore, it is worth investigating what fosters individuals' moral responsibility, encouraging them to take active roles in benefiting others.

Nevertheless, this path from general sense of belongingness to engaging in prosocial behavior through the roles of meaning and moral disengagement has not been systematically questioned yet, especially for a specific type of prosocial act, moral courage. Compared to other forms of prosocial behavior, such as donating money or offering emotional support to close others, moral courage entails confronting moral violations and accepting personal risks, which makes it a rarer phenomenon (Halmburger et al., 2016; Simola, 2018). Nevertheless, moral courage still plays a pivotal role in preventing antisocial behavior and sustaining harmonious relations within society (Coşkun & Cingöz-Ulu, 2022).

Considering these factors, the current exploratory study examined whether achieving a general sense of belongingness and meaning in life facilitates individuals' moral engagement and fosters morally courageous behavior. While prior research has demonstrated that belongingness and meaningful living have positive intrapersonal, interpersonal, and societal impacts (Baldassarri & Abascal, 2020; Lambert et al., 2013; Lazar & Eisenberg, 2022), the present study extends these findings by exploring their roles in shaping moral cognition and the overall willingness to act courageously in the face of moral transgressions. To this end, this current study examined the following hypotheses: (H_1) A greater sense of general belongingness would positively predict moral courage, (H_2) moral disengagement would mediate the relationship between belongingness and moral courage relationship, (H_3) the indirect effect of general belongingness on moral courage through moral disengagement would be moderated by meaning in life, such that the mediation would be stronger at higher levels of meaning in life. This hypothesized model was displayed in Figure 1 below.

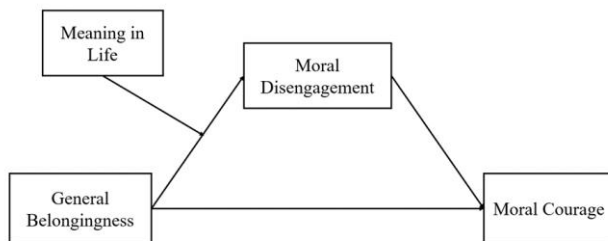


Figure 1. The Conceptual Model

Method

Participants

This study was conducted with an overall sample of 290 university students from a public university in Türkiye. The age of participants spanned from 17 to 40 years, with a mean age of 22.18 and a standard deviation of .46. Among these individuals, 191 identified as female (68.2%) and 89 as male (31.8%). Moreover, prior to gathering data, participants were given an informed consent form clarifying that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that all responses would remain anonymous and be used solely for research purposes. An online questionnaire, which included demographic questions along with the study's measurement instruments, was distributed to those students who agreed to take part in the research. Ethical approval was received from Kafkas University Ethics Board with decision date/number: 19.02.2025/79.

To determine whether the sample size was sufficient for detecting the hypothesized effects, an a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007). Based on conventional criteria, an alpha level of .05, a medium effect size ($f^2 = .15$), and desired power of .95, the analysis indicated that a minimum of 119 participants would be required to detect effects with adequate statistical power. The final sample of the study included 290 participants, which substantially exceeded this threshold, thereby increasing the reliability of the findings. Moreover, given the complexity of the moderated mediation model tested, this sample size also aligns with recent recommendations for ensuring model stability in conditional process analyses (Hayes, 2018).

Measures

General Belongingness. The General Belongingness Scale (GBS; Malone et al., 2012), is a 12-item self-report instrument for measuring general sense of belonging. Participants rate each item on a 7-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). An example item for the scale is that “When I am with other people, I feel included”. The scale has robust internal reliability in its Turkish adaptation (Duru, 2015). In the current study, the GBS also came out as a reliable measure with Cronbach’s alpha value of .90.

Meaning in Life. The Meaningful Living Measure (MLM; Arslan, 2020), a self-report instrument with five-item designed to evaluate individuals’ perceived sense of meaning and purpose in life within the Turkish cultural context. Each item is rated on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement (e.g., “My life has an ultimate purpose and meaning.”). Consistent with previous validation study findings, the current study also yielded a high internal reliability coefficient ($\alpha = .85$).

Moral Disengagement. Moral Disengagement Scale (Bandura et al., 1996) assesses propensity to disengage from moral self-regulatory processes by shifting responsibility to external circumstances. While the scale was theoretically conceptualized to capture eight different dimensions of moral disengagement-such as moral justification, euphemistic labeling, displacement of responsibility, distortion of consequences, directing blame attribution to external factors, and dehumanization (Bandura, 1986, 1996)- both the original validation (Bandura et al., 1996) and the Turkish version (Gezici-Yalçın et al., 2016) could not confirm this multidimensional structure. As a result, this 5-point-Likert type instrument is typically utilized as a unidimensional measure comprising 24 items of, higher scores showing greater tendencies toward moral disengagement. The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency in the current sample ($\alpha = .92$). Some example items are as follows: “Slapping and shoving someone is just a way of joking” and “It is alright to fight to protect your friends”.

Moral Courage. The Moral Courage Scale developed by Bronstein et al. (2007) comprises 15 items aimed at assessing individuals’ intentions to engage in morally courageous behavior, exemplified by actions such as challenging discriminatory remarks. The original scale encompasses two dimensions: moral courage and moral reticence. In the present study, participants responded using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true, 7 = very true). The Turkish adaptation conducted by Yalçındağ (2009) yielded a unidimensional

factor structure. Accordingly, a compound score was calculated by reverse-scoring the moral reticence items, whereby higher scores reflected greater intention to act with moral courage. The internal consistency coefficient for the scale in the current sample was $\alpha = .78$. Participants responded items like “When I hear someone make a derogatory remark or joke about some person or group, I say something to challenge it” and “When someone says something dumb or mean, I let it pass, rather than risk making them angry” (reverse coded).

Data Analysis Plan

In the initial stage of data analysis, descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations were computed for the primary variables under investigation. The normality of the data distribution was evaluated through skewness and kurtosis indices, with values falling within the acceptable threshold of ± 2 , as recommended by Kline (2015). Subsequently, Pearson's correlation coefficients were computed to evaluate the associations among the variables. In the second phase, a moderated mediation analysis was conducted to investigate whether meaning in life moderated the mediating effect of moral disengagement on the relationship between general belongingness and moral courage. This analysis was performed using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (version 3.5, Model 7; Hayes, 2018). The statistical significance of the indirect effects within the moderated mediation framework was determined via a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples, generating 95% confidence intervals.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Before testing the primary hypotheses, preliminary evaluation of descriptive statistics, scale properties, assumptions of normality, and intercorrelations among the main variables were carried out. Initially, as part of the data screening and cleaning process, ten multivariate outliers were identified and removed based on the Mahalanobis distance criterion. Assumptions of normality were evaluated and met, with skewness and kurtosis values falling within acceptable ranges of $<|2|$ (Kline, 2015, see Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics ($N=280$)

| Variables | Mean | SD | Skew. | Kurt. | α |
|---------------------|------|-------|-------|-------|----------|
| Belongingness | 63.6 | 13.70 | -.494 | -.418 | .90 |
| Meaning in Life | 33.5 | 6.40 | -.792 | .613 | .85 |
| Moral Disengagement | 63.8 | 17.53 | -.049 | -.176 | .92 |
| Moral Courage | 73.7 | 12.97 | .111 | -.721 | .78 |

Furthermore, Pearson correlations among the main variables and age showed generally small to moderate associations (see Table 2). Moral courage was positively correlated with general belongingness and meaning in life, and negatively correlated with moral disengagement. Belongingness and meaning were strongly and positively related while both negatively associated with moral disengagement. Age correlated positively with meaning in life and negatively with moral disengagement but was not significantly related to belongingness or moral courage. All these correlational findings were presented under Table 2.

Conditional Process Analysis

A conditional mediation analysis (Model 7; see Figure 1) was performed to examine the mediating role of moral disengagement in

the relationship between general belongingness and moral courage and to test the moderating effect of meaning in life on the mediating role of moral disengagement in this given association. The model predicting moral disengagement was significant, $F(3,276) = 9.00$, $p = .000$. General belongingness ($b = -.27$, $p = .004$) significantly and negatively predicted moral disengagement, but not meaning in life ($b = -.25$, $p = .231$). However, the interaction effect between belongingness and meaning on moral disengagement was also significant ($b = -.03$, $p = .010$), suggesting that the effect of belongingness on moral disengagement also depends on levels of meaning in life. The model accounted for 9% of variance in moral disengagement. Moreover, a simple slope analysis revealed that at moderate (mean; $b = .09$, $p = .004$) and high levels (+1 SD; $b = .12$, $p = .000$) of meaning in life, the effect of belongingness on moral disengagement was significant, but not at low level (-1 SD) of meaning ($p > .05$; Figure 2). That suggests that increased meaning amplifies the protective role of belongingness against moral disengagement.

Table 2. Bivariate correlations

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|------------------------|--------|--------|--------|------|---|
| 1. Belongingness | - | | | | |
| 2. Meaning in Life | .62** | - | | | |
| 3. Moral Disengagement | -.26** | -.19** | - | | |
| 4. Moral Courage | .33** | .36** | -.23** | - | |
| 5. Age | .10 | .14* | -.21** | -.01 | - |

Note: * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$.

The second stage model, predicting moral courage, was also significant $F(2,277) = 20.965$, $p = .000$. Moral disengagement emerged as a negative predictor of moral courage ($b = -.12$, $p = .007$) whilst direct effect of belongingness on moral courage was positive ($b = .27$, $p = .000$). This model explained 13% of variance in moral courage. Furthermore, considering the conditional indirect effects, potential mediating role of moral disengagement was questioned at low, moderate, and high level of meaning in life. According to the results, the mediation effect was significant at moderate ($b = .03$, 95% CI [.005, .067]) and high ($b = .06$, 95% CI [.012, .108]) levels of meaning, but that was not the case at low level of meaning. The index of moderated mediation was significant ($b = .01$, 95% CI [.001, .008])

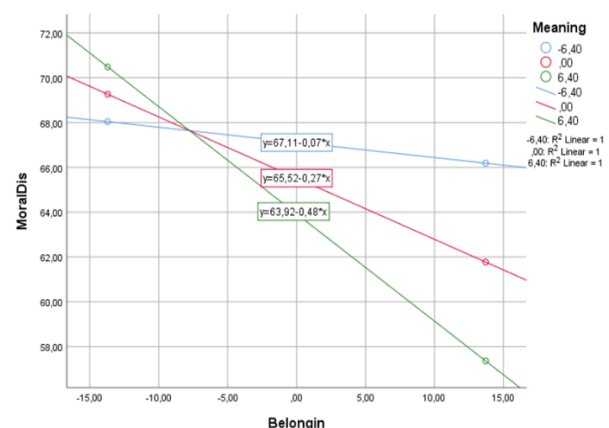


Figure 2. Moderation effect of meaning

Table 3. Unstandardized coefficients for the moderated mediation model

| Consequent | | | | | | | | |
|---|--------|-----------|----------|----------|--|-----------|----------|----------|
| <i>M</i> (moral disengagement) | | | | | <i>Y</i> (moral courage) | | | |
| Antecedent | Coeff. | <i>SE</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | Coeff. | <i>SE</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
| <i>X</i> (belongingness) | -.27 | .09 | -2.89 | .004 | .27 | .05 | 4.98 | .000 |
| <i>M</i> (moral d.) | - | - | - | - | -.12 | .04 | -2.71 | .007 |
| <i>W</i> (meaning) | -.25 | .20 | -1.19 | .231 | - | - | - | - |
| <i>X</i> x <i>W</i> | -.03 | .01 | -2.57 | .010 | - | - | - | - |
| Constant | 65.51 | 1.21 | 53.94 | .000 | 81.08 | 2.82 | 28.67 | .000 |
| <i>R</i> ² = .09, <i>F</i> = 9.00; <i>p</i> = .000 | | | | | <i>R</i> ² = .13, <i>F</i> = 20.96; <i>p</i> = .000 | | | |
| Conditional indirect effect of belongingness on moral courage through moral disengagement | | | | | | | | |
| Meaning | Effect | | BootSE | | BootLLCI | | BootULCI | |
| -1 SD (-6.40) | .001 | | .014 | | -.018 | | .041 | |
| M (.00) | .031 | | .016 | | .005 | | .067 | |
| +1 SD (6.40) | .056 | | .024 | | .011 | | .106 | |

Note: SE = Standard Error, Coeff. = Unstandardized coefficient, d.= disengagement. Bootstrap sample size= 5000.

as well, indicating that meaning in life significantly moderated the indirect effect of general belongingness on moral courage through moral disengagement. The related findings were given under Table 3.

Discussion

The current study examined the psychological mechanisms through which a sense of belongingness may contribute to morally courageous behavior, with particular attention to moral disengagement and meaning in life. More specifically, a moderated mediation model was tested in which moral disengagement was hypothesized to mediate the association between belongingness and moral courage, and meaning in life was posited to moderate the strength of this indirect association. The findings indicated that moral disengagement mediated the relationship between belongingness and moral courage, such that individuals with a stronger sense of belonging reported lower levels of moral disengagement, which in turn was associated with greater moral courage. Furthermore, the results indicated that this indirect pathway was contingent on individuals perceived meaning in life because this mediation effect disappeared at low levels of meaning. In other words, the mediating role of moral disengagement was stronger among participants with higher levels of meaning in life, highlighting the amplifying role of existential meaning in the translation of belongingness into morally motivated behavior. As a result, the current results draw a picture of how intrapersonal and interpersonal level social and existential factors predict moral cognition and behavior.

First, the related literature is lack of findings regarding how satisfaction of belongingness needs or threat to it influences moral courage. However, based on the prosocial behavior literature in general, satisfying the need to belong was revealed to be related to increased prosociality (Collie, 2022; Hodge et al., 2022). This basic need satisfaction is likely to lead to moral elevation and engage in benefiting others (Wang et al., 2025). Even threat to it generally has adverse effects like eliciting aggressive behaviors while diminishing prosocial ones (Quarmly et al., 2022). It seems that the positive role of general belongingness also applies to morally courageous intentions as the present study highlighted.

Moral disengagement emerged as a potential explanation for general belongingness and moral courage relationship. According to previous research, the sense of belongingness increases empathy (Shu-Liang et al., 2020) and provides moral elevation (Wang et al., 2025) while lack of social connections or being excluded makes people perceive life meaningless (Heine et al., 2006; Twenge et al., 2003) and dehumanizes others more (Shin & Kim, 2020). Thus, people with positive connections with others tend to have stronger moral sensitivity and intervene in immoral behaviors (Shi et al., 2024) because it flourishes traits like empathy, which is negatively linked to moral disengagement (Detert et al., 2008).

Finally, meaning in life appeared to be a strong factor in determining the role of general belongingness in preventing moral disengagement and encouraging moral behavior. These findings can be further interpreted through the lens of Frankl's Self-Transcendence Model, which highlights the human capacity to rise above self-interest in pursuit of a greater purpose or moral ideal (Frankl, 1985). Within this existential framework, meaning in life is not merely a cognitive belief but a motivational orientation that enables individuals to act beyond their personal needs. This self-transcendent striving, seeking value outside the self, might reduce tendencies toward moral disengagement and promote moral agency. Wong (2016) extends this view by emphasizing self-transcendence as a key pathway to becoming one's best self, particularly in morally demanding situations. From this perspective, individuals with a strong sense of meaning may be more attuned to moral concerns and moral excellence (Wong, 2014). Thus, the moderating role of meaning in life observed in this study may reflect its deeper existential function: enabling people to anchor their actions in moral conviction and purpose, ultimately facilitating morally courageous behavior.

As a result, meaningful living emerges as a multi-functioning concept that fosters adoption of societal values and socially meaningful roles (Zhang et al., 2022), which defend against committing immoral acts (Lin & Shek, 2019) and flourish prosocial behaviors (Cheng et al., 2020; Fu et al., 2022). Indeed, people both find and increase meaning in their lives as well as meaning in life motivates being prosocial (Xie et al., 2023). Hence, they are intertwined concepts, but the current study aimed to attract attention

to how meaningful living amplifies the worthwhile contribution of belongingness need on moral sensitiveness and morally desired behaviors. People should actively search for meaning in life because it motivates people to turn their self-interest to more societal interests (Brassai et al., 2011), increasing their moral motivation (Bailey & Wojdyski, 2015), enabling them to take care of others, and doing good for society (Baumeister, 2013). That function of meaningful living seems to be valid for moral courageous actions as the current study explored.

Limitations and Implications

Despite its contributions to capturing how psychological needs contribute to moral cognition and behavior, the current study is not without some limitations. Initially, its cross-sectional nature limits inferring causal conclusions for the hypothesized model. Longitudinal and experimental research designs should readdress the current hypotheses to come up with robust conclusions. Moreover, the current sample only relies on university students, so replicating the study with other groups from different ages and cultures would improve the generalizability of the results.

In addition to research strategy and sample characteristics, the current study only handled general belongingness level and its relation to general tendency to display moral courage. However, strong social connectedness or social identity to specific group might also have detrimental effects on social behavior. For instance, strong identification with one's ingroup might amplify moral disengagement, which in return leads to committing immoral behaviors for the sake of the ingroup (e.g., Zhu et al., 2024). Even strong ties with close others satisfy the belongingness need but may also cause disconnection from and dehumanization of others (Waytz & Epley, 2012). The present study does not focus on and distinguish between different outcomes of belongingness. Here, the main focus is on general belongingness, which is an overall basic psychological need that is acquired by having emotionally meaningful and secure social relations. That quality belongingness decreases dehumanization of others (Haslam, 2022), and motivates benefiting others (Angelis & Pensini, 2023). Rather than a limitation, readers and researchers should also consider these facts in evaluating these findings.

Finally, the present study solely applied a self-report tendency measurement for moral courage. However, several types of moral courage exist based on their content (e.g., racism, bullying, whistleblowing or sexual harassment) and their risks to intervene (e.g., risk of losing job for whistleblowing vs. risk of death for intervening in a physical abuse situation). Thus, future research should also investigate how the influence of belongingness and meaning in life on moral disengagement and moral courage changes in various scenarios.

Despite these limitations, this exploratory study takes an important initial step in understanding how factors that contribute to human flourishing are also related to moral cognition and behavior. Accordingly, educators, mental health workers, other practitioners and policy makers should give more importance to guiding children and youth in developing a sense of belongingness and finding meaning in their lives. By doing so, a society might build itself as a prosocial structure having individuals who internalize and defend its moral norms as well as take care of each other.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Ethical Approval. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Ethical approval was received from Kafkas University Ethics Board with decision date/number: 19.02.2025/79.

Informed Consent. Consent was obtained from all participants included in the study.

Data Sharing Statement. The data file for this study is available upon request.

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