2. Literature Review

The goal of this study is to explore Mizo midlife women’s meaning in life. In this chapter unique characteristics of the Mizo culture will be briefly mentioned and glimpses of lifestyle of Mizo women. There is very little literature on Mizo women other than the role of Christianity as agent of change in the lives of Mizo women. After this the review will give an overview of guiding theories as well as previous literature related to meaning in life to midlife. Key aspects and concepts of studies on meaning in life will be discussed in terms of health, menopause, leisure, career, education, religion and spirituality and being single at midlife.

Comprehending why we are here and purpose in life are considered to be some of the most primary existential questions. Most individuals want to have life that gives them a sense of meaning, positive engagement and pleasure (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Finding meaning in life and the importance of the meaning in life concept is coming to the forefront of psychological research, in the wave of ‘positive psychology’ (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Meaning in life is seen as a positive human strength, and has been assumed as a factor contributing to overall well-being in individuals (Lent, 2004). In an article in The Counseling Psychologist, Frazier, Lee, and Steger (2006) listed meaning in life as one of four research areas where counselling psychologists could make significant contributions.
2.1. **Mizo culture and values**

In this section an introduction to Mizo culture and a brief mention on women will be highlighted with selective and brief emphasis on cultural nuance like the institution of *zawlbuk*, (bachelor’s dormitory), the Mizo philosophy of *tlawmngaihna* (self-sacrifice) and some elements of festivals as these play and important part in the Mizo culture (Lawmsanga, 2010).

Mizoram is located in the North East of India sharing border with Tripura, Assam, Manipur and international border with Myanmar and Bangladesh. More than 98% of Mizoram is hilly and mountainous. Its covers an area of 21087 sq. kms with a population of 10.97 Lakhs according to the 2011 census and presently is the third highest in literacy rate in the country with 91.33%. Mizo culture have been inherited from the Asian culture and influenced by it; however Mizo has its unique culture and values established through its history and tradition (Lawmsanga, 2010).
Figure 1 Map of India locating Mizoram

Source: Directorate of Information and Public Relations, Government of Mizoram
The word, *Mizo* literally means, Highlander (*mi* for people and *zo* for highland), an apt term to describe the short, stocky, muscular people who, with great physical vigour, easily climb the steep hills (Hluna, 1992, Lalbiak Thanga, 1978). *Mizo* is a generic term that refers to all Mizos living in Mizoram. The lingua franca is Mizo. Mizos have been known as *Lushai* or *Lusei* unfortunately a misnomer. But the entire officialdom and missionary record and reports before Indian independence and up to the 1960s, represented the Mizos as *Lushais*. The most prominent ruling clan at the time of the Colonial regime was the *Lusei* rulers. Perhaps their prominence led the British to misrepresent the whole nation as *Lushai* (Lawmsanga, 2010). The villages in Mizoram are built along the ridges of the mountains on the top of the hills where the air is fresh. These sites were originally chosen primarily considering the strategy of defensibility against surprise raids of enemies. This of course has a disadvantage because water supply was a perennial problem, and it had to be fetched from springs below in bamboo tubes. Houses are usually built in two parallel rows along the ridge, with a road in between. The chief’s house and the *zawlbuk* (bachelor’s dormitory) were constructed at the centre of the village.

Here I will selectively look at two most significant roles in Mizo popular culture which continue to leave their impact are the institutions such as *zawlbuk*, (Bachelor’s dormitory) the Mizo philosophy of *tlawmngaihna* (self sacrifice) and some elements of festival and the Mizo women. The first institution has ceased to function and second continues till today.
2.1.1. Zawlbuk (bachelor’s dormitory)

In the book *The Mizos*, Labiak Thanga (1978) a retired government officer did an extensive study on zawlbuk, which literally means, ‘a big house built for young men to sleep together and keep a vigil at night against enemies’. Village life then, apart from the head-hunting and inter-village feuds, there was the constant fear of wild animals attacking people and encroaching on their domestic animal. Here young men stayed together and learned the technique of war, fighting, wrestling, singing, customs, traditions to uphold, etiquette, religion and all things necessary for their lives in their own context. It provided formal training for adolescents where they were shaped to take responsibilities of their tribe. Though security was its primary concern, the zawlbuk was also concerned for the total welfare of the village community such as agricultural work, youths were instilled with the spirit of service to the community, respect and obedience of elders. After the colonial rule of the British government, security, peace, law and order was restored to its maximum level. In other words, the colonial administration had taken over the role of zawlbuk. Zawlbuk no longer exist today, but we the spirit pervades in the social welfare organisations called the Young Mizo Association (YMA). The YMA is open to bother boys and girls. New education introduced by missionaries contributed to the extinction of zawlbuk.
2.1.2. *Tlawmngaihna*(self-sacrifice)

Even though *zawlbuk* ended the spirit of *zawlbuk* known as *tlawmngaihna*, still survives in every Mizo village and town. In all the villages and towns, Young Mizo Association (YMA), a voluntary organisation is formed. They are the zealous guardians of Mizo traditions. The YMA organises all community events and serve the public in time of disaster even at funerals. One has to attend a Mizo funeral to fully understand the spirit of *tlawmngaihna*. Though no *zawlbuk* institution can be seen, yet the spirit of *zawlbuk* together with *tlawmngaihna* is actively functioning within the Mizo community. To this day every town and village in Mizoram can call the community for *hnatlang* (community workday) whenever there is disaster or a clean drive in respective locality.

*Tlawmngaihna* literally means, self-denial, humility and diligence for the cause of community and individuals who were in need (Thanzauva, 1989). J.H. Lorraine (1975) in his Dictionary of the Lushai Language, tried to explain the concept of *tlawmngaihna* as, to be self sacrificing, unselfish self denying, stoical, prestige, to be too proud to give in. Since *tlawmngaihna* was regarded as the highest quality of life, everyone tried very hard to get the title *tlawmngai*. The Mizos will compete with one another to be the first to help, even total strangers.
2.1.3. Mizo traditional festivals

The Mizos have three festivals *Chapchar kut, Pawl kut and Mim kut*. Here I will highlight only *chapchar kut* as it is the popular and important festival. *Chapchat kut* is celebrated every year in March to give thanks to *Pathian (God)* for his protection from all kinds of injury and blessing he bestowed during farming in the field (Pachuau, 2002). It's a weeklong festival where every home prepares ‘zu’rice beer and the chief of the clan slaughters pig for the feast. Since the coming of Christianity, the church has declared the celebration of traditional festival of *chapchar kut* as anti-Christian; it was considered as secular and worldly. Today, contemporary Mizo Christians have begun retrieving and reinterpreting traditional festivals, in particular *chapchar kut*, with the aims of contextualising and reviving the lost culture. In 1995 under the initiation of the Government of Mizoram the popular harvest festival *chapchar kut* was celebrated with much publicity and grandeur. This was an effort made to reconstruct the cultural traditions of the past. With Christianity, traditional Mizo customs and dance rituals were condemned, as such behaviour might pull people back to their ‘pagan ways’. In the souvenir published on the occasion of *chapchar kut*(1995) R.L. Thanzawna wrote, ‘enlightened Mizo society does no longer look askance at our cultural heritage as detrimental to our integrity to the faith but rather as an enrichment of Christian brotherhood worldwide.’ Today *chapchar kut* is celebrated every year to keep alive traditional dance forms. One traditional Mizo dance *Cheraw* made its way to the Guinness World Record as the largest and longest bamboo dance. On 12 March 2010, an event was organised by the Government
of Mizoram in Aizawl. This dance event set a new record. This was achieved by 10,378 dancers along a 3 kilometre stretch, danced simultaneously for eight minutes wearing the traditional dresses.

The origins of kut(festival) among the Mizos is mythologised as follows. Many years ago, there was a great famine in the Mizo land that lasted for three years. The fourth year was good and prosperous. There was abundant harvest. This good fortune was ascribed to the blessing of Gods and the chief instructed the people to honour their Gods (Lalrinawma, 2005). Celebration of chapchar kut is to praise God for the protection, security and safety while cutting jhums (Zawla, 1974). One element of chapchar kut is sharing one’s food or resources with neighbours and others. Sharing is a Mizo cultural virtue. A British observer Parry (1928) describes chapchar kut as a feast, sharing one’s resources with the community and to be a blessing to others who are in need. Chapchar kut is celebrated with new perspective by honouring God, by making peace, sharing resources and uniting all people to build the kingdom of God here and now. It is no longer seen as a pagan festival but as a cultural festival with a new religious meaning.
2.1.4. Mizo women

Mizo society is distinctly patriarchal with man as the head of the home. He occupied high and respected positions not only in the family, but also in social life as a whole. They were solely responsible to provide food for the family and protect them (Chhangte, 1993). Even the right to inheritance is reserved for paternal descent. Women had many responsibilities; working in the field, fetching water at daybreak, collect firewood and prepare meals. In her spare time she spun and wove clothes. This tradition is dying out as technology has replaced the simple loom so very few girls today know how to weave. Women had little say in the family administration and even if they raised their voices; their words were never accepted simply because they were the words of the women (Hnuni, 1989). Christianity was the prime agent in bringing about a change in the lives of women. Education is mainly responsible for the emancipation of women. This has seen a rise in the women employed. A survey done by National Sample Survey organised in 2011/2012 shows Mizoram displaying high women participation rates in employment, as seen in Figure 2. Women entrepreneurship can also be seen in the market place in Mizoram, as most shops are managed by women, even the vegetable vendors are women.
There are several women’s organisation existing in Mizoram, the most prominent one is the *Mizo Hmeichhe Insuiakhawm Pawl* (MHIP) which was established in 1974. Today it is the largest and most active organisation of Mizo women. It has branches throughout the state. The MHIP is oriented towards the service of others. The empowerment of women of the state was its primary objective, since 1997 women empowerment and protection of women’s rights were two of its objectives. A major milestone for Mizo women is the Mizo Marriage Divorce and Inheritance of Property Act, 2014, as till then Mizo women could not inherit any property and when divorced, under the Mizo customary law she leaves the husband house with nothing. All this will change with the new Mizo Divorce Law. All Mizo women and girls are members of MHIP from the age of 14 years after contributing a minimal membership fee.
Midlife women is difficult to construct for Mizo women. Mizo women in their midlife are called *Nuvalai*. Married women when referred to have a prefix to their name *Pi*. The prefix *Pi* is also used to address married women, single women in respectable jobs to show respect, also used to refer to grandmother by her grandchildren, and also used to refer to an old woman. Midlife is called the ‘sandwich generation’ (Kingsmill and Schlesinger, 1998). In the last decade it came to be accepted that midlife fell between forty and around the age of sixty (Santrock, 2009). In the Mizo Youth Fellowship called *Kristian Thalai Pawl* (KTP) when members cross the age of 40 years, they remove their membership as they are considered not a youth or *thalai* any longer. Midlife for Western women is...
defined in relation to menopausal. The concern faced by women is the attitudinal change of other people (especially men) towards her as not as attractive as she was in her earlier adulthood (Greer, 1992). In a study done among Thai women, midlife women were referred to as ‘ancient lady’ (Arpanantikul, 2001). A study done in Singapore to understand the menopausal experiences the ethnic Chinese considered this phenomenon as a natural process of life and uneventful, however it was linked to aging (Lim and Mackey, 2012). A similar study was done in Chandigarh, India that revealed women viewed menopause positively (Kaur, Walia and Singh, 2004). To date there is no available studies on Mizo women menopausal transition or meanings they attribute to such.

Despite seeing women emancipation is several areas, in the religious setting Mizoram church is most unopened to full and free participation of women in ministry and decision making bodies (Lawmsanga, 2010). The Mizoram Presbyterian Church is the largest church denomination in the state, has many women theologians serving in various capacities and has yet to ordain women as priests and church elders. The Baptist Church of Mizoram, the second largest denomination in the state has ordained three women theologians and one ordained woman in Church of North India (CNI).

Developmental theorist reason that whether one goes through midlife period as a crisis or not women will react in several ways; maturation or individuation as Jung (1966) refers to or as generativity according to Erikson (Santrock, 2009); as ‘slide’ referring to passing through midlife with minimal problems; crazies, as Sheehy (1998) refer to irresponsible and rebellious behaviour in search for new meaning and excitement in life.
2.2. History of meaning in life

The meaning of life has been a major topic for philosophers throughout history (Baumeister, 1991 and Eckstein, 2002). Baumeister and Eckstein noted the changes that have taken place in how humans understand their place in the world throughout history. Former people had no need to question the meaning of life because it was provided for them by their religion or station in life. They were born into a social stratum and a religion that provided very clear guidelines for their roles and behaviours. In approximately the sixth century B.C. people began to challenge the culture’s prescriptions for conduct. People began to develop an awareness of the self as individual and separate from others. The questions of morals, ethics, religion, science, self, and the meaning of life have grown since that time (Baumeister, 1991 and Eckstein, 2002).

The ancient Hindus had four stages of life course, focused primarily on men:-

The student apprentice, householder, forest dweller, and renouncer. According to Menon (Lachman, 2001) in modern idiom middle age can be identified as coinciding with the third stage of life, that of the forest dweller. To them the middle condition is the phase that lies between youth and old age, it also connotes the mature intelligence and wisdom that comes from experience, from simply having lived in the world for many years. The Japanese in general view middle age as a time for one to come into their own and to experience and display their individuality and uniqueness (as cited by Menon, in Lachman, 2001).
In considering psychological approaches to meaning in life, one is struck by two clear realities. First, we know that meaning in life is important. Second, we don’t necessarily know precisely what it is. To be sure, research has clearly shown that meaning in life is associated with many important outcomes such as life satisfaction (Steger & Kashdan, 2007; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), quality of life (Krause, 2007), hope (Feldman & Snyder, 2005), coping with physical illness (Jim & Anderson, 2007); and the effects of not having meaning in life such as depression (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005), alcohol and drug use (Lecci, MacLean, & Croteau, 2002), suicidal ideation (Heisel & Flett, 2004).

Alfred Adler (1931) wrote about the meaning of life as a primary drive toward attaining cooperation with others. Adler emphasised that meaning arises from connection and relationship. He saw it as a developmental process that began with the mother-child dyad.

Many theorists have argued that a meaningful life is a life that is imbued with satisfying goals or purposes. According to Frankl (2006) and Austrian psychiatrist and author of *Man’s Search for Meaning* an inmate at Auschwitz and two other camps during World War II; meaning is essential for life. Frankl realised that survival required being able to find meaning in suffering. He found that freedom is found in choosing one’s attitude towards one’s condition regardless of the desirability of that condition (Frankl, 2006). Even the dehumanising condition of the concentration camps could not take away that freedom. Inmates found meaning in living to see others, to tell others about the horrors of their existence,
for revenge, or to complete some life project. For Frankl, surviving gave meaning to his anguish, and he affirmed that optimism, commitment, and self-transcendence allow one to retain their integrity and sanity under the most trying conditions experienced while in a Nazi concentration camp and described the resulting psychotherapy technique he created known as Logotherapy. He proposed that humans have a ‘will to meaning’ and it is this attempt to find meaning in one’s life that acts as a motivational force in majority of human beings. He posited that there are three ways individuals find meaning in life. The first is through work, or occupation, achievement or service. This may include not only one’s career but also hobbies or volunteer work. Essentially, work may be seen as any task to which one is devoted. In midlife, a person may look at what they have done thus far and derive meaning from it even though this may not involve financial remuneration (Frankl, 2006). Second, Frankl suggested that meaning is drawn from love. This is found in close relationships with other individuals such as one’s spouse, children, or good friends. By loving and being loved, individuals have the opportunity to really know another person and see his or her potential. They may encourage the other person to realise their potential and pursue it. Life experiences and pursuits are shared thus enriching the meaning in each situation. Frankl’s final and most emphasised point was that meaning can be found in suffering, in how we approach and carry the inevitable suffering on our lives. Meaning is found in the dignity with which we face and accept our suffering as well as our perseverance during suffering (Frankl, 2006). Individuals who are motivated to live because of their work or because of love are more likely to be able to find meaning in suffering. Frankl quotes Nietzsche: ‘He who has a why to
live for can bear with almost any how’ (Frankl, 2006). The belief that life has meaning and is worthwhile acts as an integral aspect of psychological health. Frank (2006) recalled instances where men would walk through the huts at the concentration camps and comfort others, even giving away their last piece of bread. He saw these men as proof that no matter how many rights you take away from a person, one’s ability to choose his or her attitude in any given situation cannot be taken away. Suffering is unavoidable; what distinguishes individuals from one another is how they choose to respond to their suffering. For women in midlife as they experience losses that are common late in life (e.g., spouse, friends, health, mobility), they have the opportunity to find meaning in their suffering despite the circumstances that surround them. Frankl (2006) had written that ‘man’s main concern is not to gain pleasure or avoid pain, but rather to see a meaning in life’.

Other theorists have strictly referred to the cognitive component of meaning suggesting that a meaningful life is one that makes sense to the individual (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). From this perspective, the experience of meaning in life implies that one has made connections with different aspects of life and experiences and find it to make some coherence. Researchers have verified: ‘Lives may be experienced as meaningful when they are felt to have significance beyond the trivial or momentary, to have purpose, or to have a coherence that transcends chaos’ (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006).
Researchers have asked people whether they feel their lives are meaningful. Here the meaning of ‘meaning in life’ is largely left to the intuition of respondents. For instance, researchers routinely ask individuals to rate themselves on items such as ‘I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful’ (from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), ‘I feel I have found a really significant meaning in my life’ (Krause, 2007), ‘My life is very purposeful and meaningful’ (from the Purpose in Life test; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), ‘How often have you thought that there is little meaning in the things you do in your daily life?’ (a reverse-keyed item from the Sense of Coherence scale; Antonovský, 1993).

Philosophers and psychologists approach meaning in life questions differently. The first group think that mental states are too subjective, particularly to the question of what is a meaningful life. The latter (psychologists) consider that mental states are an appropriate area for research. From a psychologist standpoint meaning in life has been addressed from two different points of view – positive psychology and existential psychology: the former stress on human strengths and brighter side of human functioning (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) while existential focus on human suffering, death, freedom and responsibility (Heidegger, 1949).
Martin Seligman raised the question of what makes life worth living in 1999, thus launching a field of study now recognised as positive psychology. Post World War II, there was a shift in psychology from disease model of human functioning to the idea put by Seligman (1999) for psychologist to focus on actions that 'lead to well-being, to positive individuals, to flourishing communities and to a just society'. In 2002 when the journal American Psychologist featured an issue on 'Happiness, excellence and optimal human functioning', where Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi proposed a catalyse of change in the focus of psychology from repairing the worst to also building positive qualities. The shift now is on human inner strength and meaning that acts as a buffer against the mental strain and suffering an individual face in life’s journey.

Meaning in life has proven to be a protective element in adolescent physical health behaviours such as drug use, sexual health, physical inactivity and diet (Brassai, Piko, and Steger, 2011) this study also reported that a lack of life meaning was associated with poor psychological health and quality of life among Romanian adolescents. This study proved to be highly relevant for the at risk age cohorts of adolescents and emerging adults, who are in an age where they are prone to take risks (Arnett 2000). Henry et al. (2014) reported that life meaning may play a mediating and moderating role (in females and males, respectively) in the relationship between bullying and suicidal ideation. Kiang and Fuligni (2010) demonstrated that life meaning acts as a mediator in the relationship between ethnic identity and adjustment. Wilchek-Aviad (2014) examined life meaning and suicidal tendencies in Ethiopian immigrant youth and native-born
Israeli youth (n = 277). A negative relationship was found between suicidal tendencies and life meaning, with the author concluding that meaning in life is critical to reducing suicidal trends in youth from both cultural groups.

Researchers use questionnaires to study the meaning in life. While such questionnaires are subjective, they show that individuals who rate their lives as meaningful (whatever that means) are better off than those who rate their lives as meaningless. One problem is that they have not shown whether an outside observer would agree with or even detect such subjective evaluations. Generally a close person such as parent, peer group member or romantic partner’s assessment will correlate well with the individual’s own ratings. However as the experience is inherently private, the close person may well recognise that a loved one is unhappy even though there may be no clear outward signs. Klinger in 1977 noted, ‘Meaningfulness is something very subjective, a pervasive quality of a person’s inner life. It is experienced both as ideas and as emotions. It is clear, then, that when we ask about the meaningfulness of someone’s life we are asking about the qualities of his or her inner experience’. Dunne & Dunn-Maxim (2004) noted that even very close others fail to recognise the signs that a loved one is living a life of quiet desperation, finding their life to be meaningless. They are intensely shocked when this leads to suicide.
From the above literature we see that meaning in life is subjective and therefore can be considered biased judgement, but this does not reduce its validity. Being able to identify the dynamic amorous ways that human beings judge their lives as meaningful we will be able to enhance this important ingredient more and more in our lives.

2.3. The Construction of Meaning

Thaddeus Metz (2002) presented a meta-analysis of current philosophical theories of meaning in life found in the literature since 1980. He divided the theories into two: supernatural based theories and naturalistic based theories. Supernatural theories are formed on the premise that meaning is conferred on life by supernatural forces such as God or the soul. A life is only meaningful in so far as one attains the proper relationship with ‘some purely spiritual realm’ (Metz, 2002). Naturalistic theories are based on the premise that ‘certain ways of living in a purely physical world can be sufficient for meaning in life’ (Metz, 2002). They assert that the individual determines whether or not his or her life is meaningful based on personal experience and that there are predicable qualities of life that can be objectively identified as constituting meaning such as certain ethical or moral behaviours.
Culture offers a choice of meanings to individuals that explain social rules, history, morals, and codes of conduct. People ‘acquire language, knowledge, attitudes, guidelines for emotion and rational thinking, and value judgments from their society’ (Baumeister, 1991). So ‘meaning is owned by the culture and society and passed along to each new member’(Baumeister, 1991). We can conclude that people from different points in history would have differing worldview that would affect how they constructed and experienced meaning in their lives.

According to Baumeister (1991) humans have four needs for meaning that must be satisfied in order to realise a sense of meaning in their lives. The inherent needs are 1) to have a purpose 2) to be self-efficacious 3) to be valued (having a justification for our life and actions) 4) to have a sense of self worth. If one of these areas are incomplete Baumeister claims that a person would experience a sense of loss and meaninglessness. To compensate for this the person would first attempt to gain more meaning from the other three areas. If this fails s/he would attempt to find new sources of meaning in the specific need that is unsatisfied. Meaning enables us to make sense of our lives. Most of us develop this through experiences with family, religion, work, political causes, self, spirituality, etc. Spirituality has also emerged as a theme throughout the meaning in life literature (Baumeister, 1991; Eckstein, 2002; Frankl 2006; Metz, 2002; Naiditch, 2000).
The literature is clear that purpose and meaning in life are often re-evaluated and may change when we are faced with major events such as births and deaths, job changes, retirement, financial gains and losses, health crises, loss of physical functions, and the proximity of death.

Reinhoudt (2005) in her qualitative study explored factors related to ageing well in a group of 188 adults. The analysed factors were hardiness, optimism, religious values, frequency of attending religious services and existential meaning. The results showed that existential meaning, which is awareness of meaning and purpose in life contributed significantly to well being in general, maintaining mental health on an optimal level, and increasing vitality and social functioning. In a study of 606 Chinese students studying abroad, Pan et al (2008) revealed that meaning in life has a strong and positive contribution to life satisfaction, that it mediates the relation between life stressors and life satisfaction.

It is clear that the construct of meaning in life has been approached in different ways; a sense of coherent existence and order in one's life (Reker and Wong, 1988), pursuit of worthwhile goals and purpose in life (Damon, Menon and Bronk, 2003), a general sense that life is significant (Yalom, 1980). Meaning, according to Steger has two dimensions: the search for meaning and the existence/presence of meaning, which denotes the comprehension of one's life, and the acknowledging a lifelong purpose. Search for meaning is considered to be the desires that people have and the efforts that they make to establish and/or supplement their awareness of meaning. Presence of meaning in one's life refers
to an individual’s perception of his life making sense and matter through an understanding of his own self, identities, experiences and unique fit in the world, which indicates comprehension and his possession of a highly valued, life purpose or mission or a set of overarching goals, which indicates purpose (Steger, 2009). In 2012 Steger came up with a detailed definition of meaning in life as: ‘the web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our experience and formulate plans directing energies for the achievement of our desired future. Meaning provides us with the sense that our lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are more than the sums of our seconds, days, and years’ (Steger 2012).

2.4. Meaning in life

The question of ‘meaning of life’ has been in existence since the birth of civilisation (Auhagen, 2000). It represents our most inner need to understand where, why and how we came to existence as a collective group. On the other hand, the question of meaning in life represents the focus on how individuals gain meaning from their lives (Steger & Frazier, 2005). Meaning in Life, as opposed to the Meaning of Life is the primary interest of this study. Frankl (1985) has described meaning as something that exists simultaneously alongside personal accomplishments, encounters with others or encounters with art and nature. The research addressing meaning in life in the current literature is immense. Some investigations have addressed social support, regret, purpose in life, well-being and psychosocial adjustment (Krause, 2007; King & Hicks, 2007; Lent 2004).
Barash (2000) has asserted that life’s meaning is not aliveness itself, but what we attach to being alive, what people make of their existence. This indicates the belief that existential philosophers have urged human beings to establish meaning in their own personal lives. Barash (2000) goes on to explain that an existentialist point of view would argue there is no reason to assume that meaning in life comes pre-packaged with being alive, rather it is something we must construct. It has also been suggested that a low sense of meaning in one’s life is related to low levels of well-being, and that a more strongly perceived meaning in life is accompanied by a positive sense of well-being (Auhagen, 2000).

Steger et al. (2006) designed a measure to address these issues. This measure defines meaning in life as the sense made of, and significance felt toward one’s being and existence. The purpose for this was to develop a tool that encompasses all of the major definitions of meaning and allows participants to use their own personal, subjective definition of meaning. In general, meaning in life is tied to positive well-being and crisis management strategies and is negatively related to depression. Martin Seligman (2002) describes how a hedonistic approach results in short-term happiness, whereas pursuing a path in which a cause or an institution supplies a sense of commitment to something greater than oneself provides the most lasting form of well-being. He refers to this highest stage as a meaningful life.
The importance of having meaning in life has been emphasised throughout history. Aristotle emphasised the concept of *eudaimonia* in which a good life is one that flourishes, achieving its potential through meaning and purpose. According to existentialist theory the critical issues of life are isolation, death, freedom and meaning. Only in the past few decades has empirical research been conducted in psychology where lack of meaning can easily be associated to various forms of psychopathology - suicide ideation, substance abuse, or anxiety, a high level of meaning is related to both good physical health and efficient functioning in the world (Elmore & Chambers, 1967; Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987; King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006).

According to Kaufman, (1987) life must be considered as a number of fragments of story lines, a series of meaningful activities, quests, and goals, rather than as a whole. Reker and Wong (1988) claimed that life meaning is the cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfilment. Meaning differs from person to person, what is important is the specific meaning of a person’s life at a given moment. Yalom (2000) affirmed that there is no such thing as the meaning of life, but the meaning of my life.
2.5. Health and menopause

Literature about Mizo women experiencing midlife transition is limited since this is not a subject openly discussed and therefore there is lack of awareness especially when it comes to health and menopause. Current knowledge of women menopausal experience is very limited since this is not a subject for open discussion in the Mizo community, resulting in feeling of isolation when it does hit them and lack of awareness. From personal talks with Mizo women there is this understanding that with any menopausal complications the woman becomes aah or mad, displaying peculiar mannerisms due to not handling menopause well. Research on midlife transition in women revealed that they were often described in terms of the physical symptoms relating to menopause (Woods & Mitchell, 2005), with relatively little mention of emotional well-being. It is a complex period in women’s lives in which hormonal factors, family and personal relationships, work status, and self-concept change (Matthews & Bromberger, 2005).

The biological/medical model is the most familiar and widely researched, and results are widely known. This model assumes that the midlife transition is one of a state of deficiency whose only remedy is that of life-long treatment with hormone replacement (Lindh-Astrand, Hoffman, Hammar, & Kjellgren, 2007). Traditionally, menopause was seen as a natural event of aging and considered a point of positive role and status change in Korean women (Im & Meleis, 2000). However in their study of Korean immigrant women in the US, found that although
Menopause was viewed as ageing, it carried with it negative images of physical limitations, ugly appearance, decreasing work capability, greater financial dependency, and feelings of hopelessness. Generally speaking, in contrast to Western studies, the concept of menopause and midlife transition has been defined in non-Western cultures as a natural event with little significance within the context of women’s daily lives (Im & Meleis, 2000).

Other studies suggested that the menopausal transition has the potential, different for every woman, to be a time of self-reflection and/or psychological growth (Busch, Barth-Olafsson, Rosenhagen, & Collins, 2003). Studies have shown that women’s midlife transition process is inevitable, yet unique for every woman. The transitional period have the potential for personal development for most women. The interrelated changes resulting from biological, psychological, cultural, and social factors are also inevitable, but women’s specific responses to those factors are not. Research has shown that how a woman perceives and copes with stressful life changes can impact her experience of menopausal symptoms and overall mood in midlife (Glazer et al., 2002; Martin & Westerhod, 2003; McLaren, Hardy, & Kuh, 2003). Healthier women have been found to report less menopausal symptoms (Avis et al., 2003). Positive coping, such as physical activity, has been found to decrease menopausal symptoms, improve mood states, and decrease weight fluctuation during the ageing process (Mirzaiinjmabadi, Anderson, & Barnes, 2006). Thus women’s ability to cope with changes during midlife is likely to influence their satisfaction at this time.
2.6. Career

American society had been structured around agriculture, which gave way to industry and then to a service based economy. With industrialisation and modernisation this required social changes particularly among women to move outside the home for work. Featherman (1989) suggested that this increased women’s motivation to seek higher education in order to increase their career choices. These changes stimulated changes in family structures, gender roles and rules.

Amy Wrzesniewski is known for her research in the area of career, especially job crafting. Wezesniewski (2003) has described three different work orientations that affect the meaningfulness in work. According to her, a job is defined as a source of material benefits that fulfil the other sections of life. She considered career as functioning as a source of progress, social status and respect. Individual who see their careers as calling display eagerness to make sacrifices to be engaged in work that others would not. The concept of Calling was views as an end to itself, and having a belief that it contributes to a greater good. Pratt and Ashforth (2003) suggested that people find meaning in work when a sense of the job contributing to a greater good is experienced. Emmons (1999) said that ‘seemingly small tasks can have tremendous personal meaning if they are framed as a connection to something larger.’ Michaelson (2008) in his research found that meaningful work correlated with both subjective concern such as self esteem and happiness and objective concern such as working for the greater good and social contribution for work.
Anderson et al. (1994) noted that for single women whose lives are not lived in the traditional manner, as well as for divorced or widowed women, work can become an increasingly important source of self-satisfaction and a way of developing rich relationships with others. Work also contributes significantly to a woman’s sense of independence in addition to her sense of self-satisfaction, competence, and self-definition.

Another significant finding in the Anderson et al. (1994) study was that, as women aged, their sense of meaning and pleasure from their work increased. Midlife women who were divorced with grown children reported that midlife had freed them to immerse themselves in their work., and that they were just coming to realise their potential. Anderson et al. (1994) suggested that once these women were in midlife, they were no longer waiting to find a husband, and instead were refocusing their energies into their work. Furthermore, never-married women have an advantage over married women because they are viewed by employers as having fewer demands on their time and energy.

In another study with 286 women between the ages of 38 - 47 years who completed online surveys indicated that wellness was significantly higher for women who had advanced degrees, higher income levels, and were in a parenting role. Full-time employment and higher education levels were significantly related to higher feelings of meaning in life for women, but being in a parenting role was not linked to higher meaning in life (Smithson, 2011). Wallerstein (1986) studied divorced and never-married women and found that success in a new career was often associated with a striking rise in self-esteem, as reflected in greater ease and poise in social relationships.
Wellbeing in midlife did increase for the women who managed to transform regrets from choices made in early adulthood into desired life-change (Stewart and Vandewater, 1999). As women have started entering the workforce and created careers for themselves, the post-parental period may not be as life altering as it was in previous times. Norton (2003) proposed that even if these do affect midlife women to some extent, it has also been found that they are not as universally detrimental as previously believed.

2.7. Religion and spirituality

The midlife year for women is a process of increased energy, independence, freedom, and psychological growth (Hydock, 2005). Some women report a powerful spiritual awakening (Howell, 2001) and gained understanding of their place in the universe (Geetsma & Cummings, 2004). Perz and Ussher (2008) saw women becoming wiser and more self-aware with a higher self-worth. From my personal observations the number of Mizo female religious followers outnumber the men, and are more involved and take active participation in religious activities than men. In a study by K.S. Lee (1996) midlife Korean women find source of energy from religious activities to overcome situation of poverty, sickness, family conflicts and even aid in their search for meaning in life. Generally, we learn about religion through formal structured church institutions. Women with religion have a clearer sense of the meaning of life, more positive attitude, less anxiety, and less depression. This may be due to religion providing stability and comfort during midlife women’s physical,
sociocultural and psychological changes that may threaten their identity (Hong and Lee, 2006). Hong and Lee (2006) contend that midlife women’s religious life eases emotional crisis as well as provide a higher life satisfaction level.

There have been attempts to understand the link between religion and psychological health (Pargament et al. 1998; Schumaker 1992). Schumaker’s (1992) extensive work compiles evidence of the role of religion in preventing depression, suicide, fear of death as well as improving psychological well-being. Spirituality has shown to influence the process of recovery from chronic illness and to influence the course of medical and psychological interventions (Piedmont, 2004). Of particular interest to researchers examining the link between religion/spirituality and wellbeing is how this influence is exercised. Various psychosocial factors that may mediate this link have been studied. These include the role of religion in providing social support and a sense of identity (Elliott and Hayward, 2007) and the role of spirituality in providing a sense of meaning in life (Emmons, 2005).

The present use of the term spirituality highlights a general sense of transcendence and connection with something larger than one’s self. Previous research has shown that meaning in life is positively related to spiritual satisfaction among the elderly (Gerwood, LeBlanc, & Piazza, 1998) and spiritual well-being and the importance of spirituality among college students (Harris & Standard, 2001). People high in meaning report a larger number of transcendent experiences (Kennedy, et al. 1994), and score higher on measures of existential
transcendence (Harris & Standard, 2001). Mascaro and Rosen (2006) studied spiritual meaning, defined as the belief that life has meaning that can be discovered as well as participated in, emphasised that meaning in life is a buffer developing resilience from the negative effects of stress on one’s life. People with satisfying religious or spiritual lives report greater meaning in their lives (Steger, 2012).

2.8. Single women in midlife

According to Anderson et al. (1994), this is a crucial developmental task for single women. In the Anderson study, some participants found that when they gave up the dream of marriage, they were not accepting a life of deprivation; rather, they were making an affirmation of the self and were coming to the realisation that marriage is neither the only way a woman can find happiness nor necessarily the best way to live. Remaining single is not a rejection of men, but rather an affirmation of the capacity to create what is needed to find satisfaction in life. The women in the Anderson et al. study who accepted their single status reported that a crucial step for them was in the recognition that they had made choices all along that contributed to their remaining single. For example, delaying marriage for education, travel opportunities or career, or involvement in long term relationships in which the male partner is ambivalent about marriage or committed to delaying marriage for fulfilment of his own personal needs or goals.
According to Lewis and Moon (1997) in order for a single, midlife woman to accept her single state, she must accept the ambiguity of living life single, grieve over her lost dreams, and learn to separate her grief as a single woman from her family’s grief. This concept does not mean giving up the hope of someday marrying; however, it is giving up waiting for marriage in order for one’s life to begin.

In a qualitative study of single, midlife women Dalton (1992) investigated the meaning of singleness to nine, never married, childless, heterosexual women between the ages of 32 and 54. Dalton found that single, midlife women perceived their singleness as multifaceted, with multiple and varied meaning for the group and for individual women, depending on their perspective at the time. Thirteen categories reflecting the meaning of singleness evolved from the data: singleness as a trade-off, singleness as freedom and independence, singleness as loneliness, singleness as choice, singleness as a transition, singleness as opportunity, singleness as loss, singleness as self-reliance, singleness as a burden, singleness as a social role, singleness as ‘rootlessness’, singleness as ‘openness’, and singleness as self-acceptance (Dalton, 1992). Dalton emphasised that each unmarried woman is unique, and that it is important for single women not to allow the prevailing experience of her singleness to define the totality of her experience as a never-married woman.
The single woman’s family of origin and extended family relatives can be a valuable resource for the single woman if the family members have come to accept her single status. They can provide psychological support and can be helpful in the management of household and daily tasks. In fact, Rubenstein and Shaver (1982) found that in general, single women 55 to 65 years of age and over, with strong family or friendship networks, reported less loneliness with age.

We have learned from these researches that it is possible for single, childless, midlife women to attain a sense of life satisfaction and meaning when certain conditions are present in their lives such as; strong, positive family ties, close friendships, overcoming financial instability, finding a rewarding profession, finding a way to accept the life of single, never-married, childless state.

Theorist of development identify meaning to be highly salient at midlife, there is heightened introspection and stock taking of life purpose and goals, and being deeply involved in clarifying issues of meaning (Santrock 2009). Studies suggest that older adults have a more integrated, coherent, holistic, and consolidated conceptualisation of meaning in life.

Women react to this transitional period in different ways, depending a lot on the importance she place on it. The concept of midlife is not universal it depends on the historical and social conditions specific to the individual or groups of women (Arpanantikul, 2004; Carolan, 2000; Chirawatkul, Patanasri, & Koochayiasit, 2002). This reflects in the meaning women give to their experience of midlife.
Midlife is a natural process that every woman must go through and experience. Woods and Mitchell (2005) implies that there is an arbitrary age range, at which time women are expected to decline in health, are devalued due to loss of youth and reproductive ability, and begin to question their overall purpose and usefulness. As such women are inclined to think of this transition as decline and decay than of a time of expressing their unique experiences.

Arpanantikul (2004) studied the phenomenon of the midlife experiences of Thai women from diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. She found their experiences to be a ‘product of the interrelationship of biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors’.

As women embark into midlife there are specific challenges which include transitions into various aspects of life: childrearing (Raup and Myers, 1989; Sampselle et al, 2002; Woo, 2009), marital status (Uhlenberg, Cooney and Boyd, 1990; Woo, 2009), career (Gilligan, 1982; Leiblum, 1990; McNulty, 2009; Wong-Fong, 2008), social norms (Neugarten, 1996; Setterson & Hagestad, 1996; Wray, 2007), identity (Greer, 1992; Sheehy, 1998; Wray, 2007), and physiology (Abramson, 2007; Kurpius & Nicpon, 2003; Vliet, 1995).

In summary we can say the studies have shown that midlife is a natural process of the developmental period, affected by the endocrine and lifestyle factors as well as the sociocultural situation and ageing per se.