

Meaning in Life

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Abstract

In this chapter, it is argued that meaning in life is an important variable for human well-being. Literature supporting this contention is reviewed, and complexities regarding defining meaning in life are discussed. Definitions of meaning have focused on several components, two of which appear central and unique to meaning in life, suggesting a conceptual framework of meaning in life comprised of two pillars: comprehension and purpose. Comprehension encompasses people's ability to find patterns, consistency, and significance in the many events and experiences in their lives, and their synthesis and distillation of the most salient, important, and motivating factors. People face the challenge of understanding their selves, the world around them, and their unique niche and interactions within the world, and the notion of comprehension unifies these domains of understanding. Purpose refers to highly motivating, long-term goals about which people are passionate and highly committed. In the framework presented in this chapter, it is suggested that people devote significant resources to the pursuit of their purposes, and that the most effective and rewarding purposes arise from and are congruent with people's comprehension of their lives. Literature is reviewed regarding where meaning might come from, and other dimensions of meaning are considered (i.e., sources of meaning and search for meaning). Suggestions for future research are proposed.

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Life's central challenge is adaptively identifying, interpreting, and engaging with the most important features of one's environment. Among the many sights, sounds, aromas, and tactile stimuli one experiences, only some will be useful or important. Some of these stimuli may offer paths to valued goals, such as a "Help Wanted" sign. Some provide clues to one's status with other people, such as a warm smile. Others signify pernicious threats, and most amount to little more than random noise. The same stimulus can be viewed in completely opposite ways by two different people. One person might feel that a metropolitan smoking ban protects individual rights to be in public spaces without being subjected to cigarette smoke, whereas another person might feel the same ban transgresses individual rights to use a legal consumer product. The stimulus is the same, but the interpretation varies greatly because its

"meaning" differs from person to person. In some ways, the ability to derive meaning from experience and environment is fundamental to the success of humanity. Our transactions are conducted through behaviors varying in content, intonation, rapidity, volume, and body language, each with enormous implications. Diplomatic endeavors grind to a halt over a few words among thousands. Burning paper stokes different reactions if it has been printed with a flag, or Thursday's tire sale advertisements. Oedipus did not pierce his eyes because he just found out Jocasta was his long-lost "barber." Generating such examples could become a catchy new parlor game, and, in fact, we see children frequently playing with meaning ("Why does this person laugh and that person glower when I mention certain bodily functions?"), which is as it should be—meaning permeates our lives. Meaning matters.

As a species, we have developed profound abilities to harvest meaning from the world around us. Given human facility with and immersion in meaning, we should expect that just as people struggle to understand the meanings of natural disasters, medical diagnoses, works of art, or their marriages, they also strive to understand the meaning of their own lives. Meaning in this sense enables people to interpret and organize their experience, achieve a sense of their own worth and place, identify the things that matter to them, and effectively direct their energies. The term meaning in life has been used to describe the construct underlying all of these dimensions, and at its heart, meaning in life refers to people's beliefs that their lives are significant and that they transcend the ephemeral present.

Meaning in Life Research

The scientific study of meaning largely has concentrated on understanding the consequences of believing one's life is meaningful. Frankl (1963) famously argued that it is imperative for people to have a clear sense of what they are trying to do with their lives, in other words, what the purpose of their existence is. Since then, dozens of studies have been conducted which repeatedly demonstrate that people who believe their lives have meaning or purpose appear better off (for review, see Steger, in press). For example, they are happier (e.g., Debats, van der Lubbe, & Wezeman, 1993); profess greater overall well-being (e.g., Bonebright, Clay, & Ankenmann, 2000), life satisfaction (e.g., Chamberlain & Zika, 1988; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan & Lorentz, 2008), and control over their lives (e.g., Ryff, 1989); and feel more engaged in their work (Bonebright et al., 2000; Steger & Dik, in press). Those reporting high levels of meaning also report less negative affect (e.g., Chamberlain & Zika, 1988), depression and anxiety (e.g., Debats et al., 1993), workaholism (Bonebright et al., 2000), suicidal ideation and substance abuse (e.g., Harlow, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1986), and less need for therapy (Battista & Almond, 1973). Meaning also appears stable and independent from other forms of well-being over the course of a year (Steger & Kashdan, 2007).

Research has also illuminated the question of who has meaning, with results from several studies generally confirming what we might suspect. Those who have dedicated their lives to an important cause, or an ideal that transcends more mundane concerns, report higher levels of meaning than other people. For example, Anglican (Roberts, 1991) and

Dominican nuns (Crumbaugh, Raphael, & Shrader, 1970), as well as Protestant ministers (Weinstein & Cleanthous, 1996) and recently converted Christians (Paloutzian, 1981) all report high levels of meaning in life. Likewise, those who are struggling with psychological distress, such as psychiatric patients (e.g., Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), members of substance abuse treatment groups (e.g., Nicholson et al., 1994), and disruptive presecondary school students (e.g., Rahman & Khaleque, 1996), report lower levels of meaning in life. Other researchers have reported that "normal" university students reported more meaning than both psychiatric patients and those who had utilized mental health services more often (Debats et al., 1993). Finally, enhancements in meaning have been reported in psychiatric patients at posttreatment versus pretreatment (Crumbaugh, 1977; Wadsworth & Barker, 1976), and there is some evidence that treatment of psychological distress enables people to rebuild meaning in their lives (e.g., Wadsworth & Barker, 1976). Thus, research is consistent in affirming that meaning in life is part of the complex picture of human well-being and optimal functioning (see also King & Napa, 1998; Ryff & Singer, 1998).

Definitions

Despite consensus regarding the importance of meaning in life, definitions and operationalizations of meaning in life have varied across theoretical and empirical works, generally defining meaning in terms of purpose, significance, or as a multifaceted construct.

Purpose

Frankl's (1963, 1965) theory of meaning was heavily focused on the idea that each person has some unique purpose or overarching aim for their lives, comprehended in light of one's values, and enacted in reflection of one's community. Here, meaning is experienced as what people are trying to do to enact their values. Thus, meaning refers to people's pursuits of their most important strivings and aims in life. Others have defined meaning in terms of purpose and goals as well (Emmons, 2003; Klinger, 1977, 1998; Ryff & Singer, 1998).

Significance

Another approach to defining meaning is a semantic one, focusing on lives from an informational significance point of view (Baumeister, 1991; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Yalom, 1980). If

one asks the question, “what does my life mean?” it is in some ways equivalent to asking, “what does this word mean?” Such an approach suggests that meaning in life consists of what a life signifies, and thus people experience meaning in life when their lives make sense or convey some comprehensible information or message. In other words, lives have meaning when they stand for something. A related extension of such a definition was suggested by Bering (2002), who argued that the same information processing abilities that enabled humans to discern what the behaviors of their social counterparts signified are those responsible for human efforts to understand what life signifies. Under this “existential theory of mind,” meaning in life is created through people’s efforts to interpret their experiences in terms of “life’s” intentions and significance, whether “life” has inherent meaning or not.

Meaning-systems approaches yield a differently nuanced view of meaning as significance, describing people as meaning makers “insofar as they seem compelled to establish mental representations of expected relations that tie together elements of their external world, elements of the self, and most importantly, bind the self to the external world” (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006, p. 89). Baumeister and Vohs (2002), in their entry on the pursuit of meaningfulness in the previous edition of this Handbook, also argued that “the essence of meaning is connection,” (p. 608), and that such connections are a primary way in which people attach a sense of stability to the fluctuating and dynamic conditions of their lives.

Multifaceted Definitions

Thus, the two major unidimensional approaches to defining meaning in life have been primarily motivational (purpose-centered definitions) or cognitive (significance-centered definitions). Multidimensional definitions of meaning in life often combine these two dimensions with an affective dimension referencing people’s fulfillment in their lives. For example, Reker and Wong (1988) defined meaning in terms of the ability to perceive order and coherence in one’s existence, along with the pursuit and achievement of goals, and feelings of affective fulfillment arising from such coherence and pursuits (see also Battista & Almond, 1973). From these perspectives people who believe their lives are meaningful would think they have life figured out, have clear goals, and be filled with warm feelings about the grand scheme of things.

Issues in Defining Meaning in Life

There are theoretical and practical reasons to be cautious when incorporating affective fulfillment in definitions of meaning in life. From a theoretical point of view, the elements of meaning in life that make it most unique among many related psychological variables are the motivational and cognitive elements. Several motivational constructs exist that shed light on how people pursue their goals over short (current concerns, Klinger, 1977), intermediate (personal projects, e.g., McGregor & Little, 1998), and extended (e.g., life planning, Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004; life tasks, Cantor & Sanderson, 1999; personal strivings, Emmons, 1986) time frames. Motivational and goal constructs may be integral to understanding how people attempt to enact or attain meaning in their lives (see Emmons, 2003); however, they occupy more specific and time-constrained positions in a hierarchy topped by overarching missions, aspirations, and purposes at the most abstract and long-term level. Frankl’s (1963) idea of purpose centered on understanding what people live their lives for, rather than what endeavors occupy people’s attention and efforts for particular moments in time. Such a perspective is analogous to the desire to understand the intent behind the entirety of Hieronymus Bosch’s triptych, “Garden of Earthly Delights,” rather than any one of its figures, design elements, or panels.

Likewise, there are many cognitive constructs that focus attention on the importance of understanding one’s self (e.g., identity) or one’s world (e.g., worldviews), but the cognitive component of meaning in life provides a unifying framework for conceptualizing how people understand both themselves and their worlds, as well as how they view the interplay between themselves and the world (see Heine et al., 2006). Understanding one’s life as a whole necessitates comprehension at the highest level of information organization. Such comprehension subsumes ideas about one’s identity, one’s world, and the many constituents of each, and distills the most important, salient, and motivating features. It is difficult to imagine someone who could say they comprehend their existence but they do not understand who they are. Thus, the cognitive component of meaning in life theoretically organizes and prioritizes the most pertinent information about the myriad objects, facets, and domains of life into a coherent whole. By extension, this cognitive component also offers promise for understanding the particular niches, roles, and degree of fit people perceive for themselves in the world. In conjunction

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with the motivational component, the construct of meaning in life integrates personal ideas about self, world, interactions and fit between the self and world, as well as an understanding of what one is trying to accomplish and sustain in one's life (see also Steger & Frazier, 2005; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006).

Recent research also challenges the place of affective fulfillment in the core of any understanding of meaning in life. Whereas multifaceted definitions of meaning suggest that fulfillment occurs *because* one has attained a sense of purpose or significance, experimental research suggests that inducing someone to experience positive emotion exerts a strong influence over meaning in life self-reports (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006; Hicks & King, 2008). These findings, at the very least, suggest that the causal pathway between meaning and positive emotional states is bidirectional, leading both from meaning to positive emotions, as well as from positive emotions to meaning.

An additional implication of such findings is that efforts need to be made to identify the critical and unique components of meaning in life, in order to confirm its importance to human functioning and to distinguish it from other variables. There are numerous preexisting affective or fulfillment variables, and it is difficult to see how the type of fulfillment achieved through comprehending life and establishing overarching purposes would be distinguishable from the positive emotions that might arise from other sources. In fact, it is possible that truly meaningful moments might unfold in the absence of positive emotions (see Ryff & Singer, 1998). One such possibility is suggested by Frankl's (1963) emphasis on the attitude one takes toward suffering as a route to meaning. Other attempts have been made to identify uniquely existential experiences of fulfillment, and an analysis of the items used in such "existential happiness" measures reveals they rely heavily on the types of items already associated with existing constructs (e.g., "I am a happy person," "I often feel tense"; MacDonald, 2000). From a practical point of view, any degree of conflation of meaning in life assessment with affective items runs the risk of conjointly assessing mood-related constructs, such as affective disposition and personality (see Steger, 2006, 2007).

Definition of Meaning in Life

Purpose and significance appear central to psychological definitions of meaning in life, and they capture the idea that meaning is about

understanding where we've been, where we are, and where we're going (see Steger, *in press*, for more discussion). In contrast, existential affective experience seems to be a by-product of purpose and significance and is hard to differentiate from several existing constructs. Because of these considerations, it seems prudent to define meaning in life as the extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission, or overarching aim in life.

Where Does Meaning Come From?

It can be surmised that, depending on the definition, meaning in life should arise from comprehending one's existence, identifying and achieving valued goals, feeling fulfilled by life, or combinations of these three. Beyond this, several ideas have been forwarded regarding the elements essential to finding meaning in life. Frankl (1963) suggested that people find meaning by engaging in creative endeavors, through elevating experiences, or through their ability to reflect upon and grow from negative experiences and suffering. Baumeister (1991; Baumeister & Vohs, 2002) identified four domains that give rise to meaning: feeling a sense of purpose, having a basis for self-worth, clarifying the values system by which one judges what is right and wrong, and developing a sense of efficacy in the world. Perspectives that argue that people's sense of meaning is derived from the stories and narratives that explain their lives (e.g., McAdams, 1993; Niemeyer & Mahoney, 1995) are consistent with Baumeister's view (e.g., Baumeister & Newman, 1994) and are well suited for illuminating the creation of meaning. For example, it is thought that the process of writing about life events is beneficial because it facilitates the integration of events into a larger, overarching meaning system (see King & Pennebaker, 1996). Researchers have also found that people who tell a story in terms of their ability to overcome an adverse event and discover positive results of their efforts were better adjusted (e.g., higher generativity; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997).

Emmons (2003) identified a four-part "taxonomy" of meaning, consisting of work/achievement, intimacy/relationships, spirituality, and self-transcendence/generativity. In some ways, this taxonomy reflects investigations into the specific sources from which people draw meaning, rather than the broader theoretical

underpinnings of the processes by which meaning is found. Research on specific sources of meaning will be more thoroughly addressed in a later section of this chapter. Seligman's (2002) proposal that meaning comes from the dedication of one's signature talents to some entity beyond one's self reflects the last item from Emmons' taxonomy, self-transcendence. Reker and Wong (1988) also argue for the importance of self-transcendence, predicting that people experience meaning in life more deeply as they achieve greater degrees of self-transcendence.

A related field of research has developed regarding event appraisals, or meaning making following adverse or traumatic life events, showing that those who find meaning in traumatic events report better outcomes than those who do not (e.g., Bower, Kemeny, Taylor, & Fahey, 1998; McIntosh, Silver, & Wortman, 1993). Although it is largely unknown how finding meaning in a particular event is related to finding meaning in one's life as a whole, as Frankl (1963) argued, people's experiences with suffering and overcoming adversity are likely linked to meaning in life (see Janoff-Bulman & Yopyk, 2004; Park & Folkman, 1997, for further consideration of the interplay between event appraisals and meaning in life).

Finally, some experimental work has been conducted to examine the causal mechanisms underlying meaning in life. Most directly related is the research by King et al. (2006), which used several experiments to demonstrate that inducing positive affect leads to higher assessments of meaning in life. A significant body of research has been conducted under the auspices of terror management theory (TMT; see e.g., Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). TMT theorists postulate that existential motives are a primary influence over human social behavior, in that the human capacity to both value ourselves and also recognize our inevitable, unpredictable demise leads to efforts to quell our fear of death through championing our culture's worldviews and/or through bolstering our sense of self-esteem. Because it suggests we use our culture and self-esteem to force structure and meaning onto the chaos of life, TMT research has implications for the etiology of meaning in life. For example, following reminders of death, people feel their lives are more meaningful if they are given the opportunity to profess support for their culture's worldview, and less meaningful if they are not given that opportunity (Simon, Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1998).

Thus, perspectives on the essential underpinnings of meaning are somewhat varied. Nonetheless, there is concordance around the idea that meaning is most fully achieved when people actively engage in pursuits that transcend their own immediate interests (e.g., religion or culture), possibly including transcending the short-term devastation of traumatic events. Meaning may be further enhanced when people engage in important pursuits while operating under a clear understanding of one's worth, capabilities, and attributes.

Dimensions of Meaning in Life Research

Meaning in life research has focused overwhelmingly on the presence or absence of beliefs that life is meaningful. However, the theoretical space of meaning in life also includes an emphasis on understanding the sources from which people say they draw meaning and the degree to which people are engaged in the search for meaning.

Sources of Meaning in Life

Research on sources of meaning in life has generally used one of two methods to understand the normative sources from which people draw meaning in life. The first method gathers responses to questions "What gives your life meaning?" (e.g., Ebersole & DeVogler, 1981), which are analyzed and coded. This research has identified several common sources of meaning (e.g., relationships, religious beliefs, health, pleasure, personal growth). Across many studies, most people have indicated that relationships with others are the most important source of meaning in their lives. The second method presents people with a list of potential sources of meaning and asks them to rate each source's importance to them (e.g., Bar-Tur, Savaya, & Prager, 2001). Relationships are usually seen as most important using this method as well (see Emmons, 2003).

The Search for Meaning in Life

Another dimension of meaning in life concerns people's search for meaning. Empirical and theoretical work on meaning in life has argued for maintaining a distinction between having meaning and searching for meaning (e.g., Steger et al., 2006). The search for meaning in life refers to people's desire and efforts to establish and/or augment their understanding of the meaning, significance, and purpose of their lives. Some who are searching for meaning are struggling to establish some minimal level of meaning in their lives, whereas others might consider themselves to be engaged in a lifelong search for

meaning, constantly striving to deepen their comprehension of the sense and significance of themselves and their lives (Steger, Kashdan, et al., 2008). Very little research has been conducted on the search for meaning in life. That which has been conducted has indicated that those searching reported having less meaning in life (Crumbaugh, 1977; Steger et al., 2006), although factor analysis has confirmed that the search for meaning is independent from its relative presence (Reker & Cousins, 1979; Steger et al., 2006). Research using a recently developed measure¹ has found that the search for meaning is associated with higher neuroticism, negative affect, anxiety, and depression (Steger et al., 2006), but also with openmindedness (Steger, Kashdan, et al., 2008). Finally, those searching for meaning seemed to prosper marginally more from meaning in life-focused therapeutic interventions than those not seeking meaning (Crumbaugh, 1977).

Both the sources of and search for meaning are deserving of vigorous empirical investigation. Numerous studies attest to the fact that the presence of meaning in life is associated with more positive human functioning. Although it is still interesting to continue to explore the nature of these relations, understanding the sources and search for meaning offers more dynamic ways to understand pressing, unresolved questions, such as how people find meaning, from where meaning comes, and why people benefit from having it. Gaining a clearer idea of the characteristics of those who are searching for meaning and the dynamics of their search, how people come to acquire sources of meaning, and whether such sources generate a general sense of meaning cannot be accomplished by focusing solely on the end product of the presence of meaning in life.

An Agenda for Future Research

Humans seem frequently stirred to ponder “the deep questions” about the ever-changing diversity, complexity, and inscrutability of the world around us. We might gaze at ancient ruins, the moon’s face, or a cicada’s discarded husk and wonder, “What does all this mean?” Such questions transcend psychology’s bounds, but there is some consolation in knowing that psychology can help answer an equally important question—“What does ‘my life’ mean?” So far, psychologists can say that having an answer to

that question is important to a person’s well-being. We also can say that our relationships will influence the answer and that we feel life is more meaningful when we feel good, whether because of positive affect, important religious commitments, or freedom from distressing psychopathology.

Future research should seek to examine these conclusions and, more importantly, expand our knowledge in several key directions. One important direction lies in understanding the development and change in meaning over the life span (e.g., Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987; Ryff, 1991; Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, in press). For example, meaning in life predicted successful aging (i.e., greater well-being and physical health, less psychopathology) 14 months later, controlling for demographic variables and traditional predictors, such as social and intellectual resources (Reker, 2002). We should also endeavor to identify the neurological substrates (e.g., Urry et al., 2004) and biological markers (e.g., Ryff et al., 2006) of meaning in life. Future research should also prioritize assessing the role of meaning as a facilitator and an outcome of psychological treatment, clarifying how meaning contributes to optimal functioning, and investigating cultural expressions of, and influences on, meaning in life.

A combination of methods is necessary to advance these lines of research. Quasi-experiments comparing those with psychopathological symptoms and normal population samples would replicate some previous work, but meaning in life should receive scrutiny not only as a positive outcome of therapy but also as an active ingredient in the therapeutic process. Clinical research that tracks meaning across sessions could assess meaning as a mediator of improvement. Rigorously performed random clinical trials comparing meaning-centered interventions with validated treatments could help determine the viability of focusing on meaning as a therapeutic aid. Research suggests a potential interplay between event-specific meaning and broader meaning in life, and this possibility could be profitably investigated using multiwave longitudinal methods. Research also suggests a number of daily life activities that are associated with greater meaning in life (e.g., personal growth and relationship tending; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008). Experimental methods gauging both the antecedents of meaning (e.g., positive affect) and the effects of temporary manipulations of meaning would help explicate the causal mechanisms of meaning in life. Cross-cultural research would expand our notions of

¹ The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006) can be downloaded for free at <http://michael.f.steger.googlepages.com/home> or <http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/ppquestionnaires.htm>

the constituents, expressions, and “meaning” of meaning in life. It appears that, like other well-being variables, those from cultures that emphasize individual happiness (i.e., United States) report higher meaning in life than those from cultures that stress collective harmony to a greater degree (e.g., Spain; Steger, Frazier, & Zacchanini, in press; and Japan; Steger, Kawabata, Shimai, & Otake, 2008). Further comparisons should be considered, and efforts should be made to explore the specific mechanisms by which cultures encourage differences (see Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006).

Meaning and Life

Positive psychology emphasizes the necessity of understanding the factors that elevate human lives and exploring those features of life that make it not merely tolerable, but fulfilling, vital, and rich. Eliminating the meaning people perceive in their lives would also seem to dismantle the interconnecting filament on which are hung the most savory and desirable qualities of a full life. Life without meaning would be merely a string of events that fail to coalesce into a unified, coherent whole. A life without meaning is a life without a story, nothing to strive for, no sense of what might have been, or what has been. Perhaps, just as meaning links the moments of people’s lives, meaning in life research holds some promise of uniting the many ways in which psychologists attempt to understand the events, states, traits, and institutions that define and determine human happiness.

Questions about the Future of Meaning in Life Research

1. The historical roots of psychological work on meaning in life lie in applied work. Given the similarities between the conceptual framework of meaning in life presented here and some of the core tenets of cognitive approaches to therapy (e.g., both emphasize people’s interpretations of themselves and their interactions, and both emphasize the importance of goals), will future research show that focusing on meaning in life in the context of effective therapy helps consolidate gains or adds some other therapeutic benefit?

2. Emerging research suggests that positive affect serves a role in sustaining, and possibly stimulating or enhancing, people’s judgments that their lives are meaningful. Will future research identify boundary conditions related to positive affect on the experience of meaning in life such that popular

notions of “sadder but wiser” phenomena are invalidated to a degree?

3. There are few reliable methods of even temporarily enhancing people’s experience of meaning in life. Yet, in order to fully understand the possible causes and benefits of meaning in life, the field needs interventions that are specific in increasing meaning in both the short term and long term in a general population. Will future research develop such interventions, or will it prove impossible to increase meaning in life without also increasing related constructs such as positive affect and life satisfaction?

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Chapter 64

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