Dedication

This issue of the International Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Christopher Peterson. He was a friend and supporter of INPM. At the 2012 Meaning Conference in July, he was a keynote speaker. His paper published in this volume would probably be his last paper, before he unexpectedly passed away on October 9, 2012.
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How do we solve the meaning puzzle?

Paul T. P. Wong

When one psychologist’s research shows that finding meaning is as easy as breathing, while another psychologist claims that meaning is too complex, too subjective to be studied scientifically, you have to conclude that these two psychologists probably talk about two entirely different kinds of meaning.

The lack of consensus about a comprehensive definition remains the biggest obstacle to meaning research. By the same token, our over-reliance on simple rating scales presents another obstacle to meaning research, because raters may equate meaning in life with happiness or their understanding of the cultural stereotype of meaningfulness.

This current issue, which was largely based on the invited addresses of the last Meaning Conference 2012, captures both the vitality and tension in meaning research. It is worth reading for all those who are serious about meaning-oriented research and interventions.

I want to draw readers’ attention to the lead article by the late Dr. Christopher Peterson for two reasons. First, like most of his previous research and publications, Peterson’s paper presents a balanced and nuanced view of the positive psychology of meaning. Secondly, this may probably be the last academic paper he wrote because he passed away unexpectedly shortly after submission of this paper.

Finally, I want to apologize for the delay in publishing this important issue. I have been in and out of the hospital three times. I am grateful that I am now healthy enough to catch up with the important task of writing and editing. May you find more treasure and inspiration in the pages of this issue.

Paul T. P. Wong
Meaning and Positive Psychology

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Abstract

Positive psychology is the scientific study of what makes life worth living. Meaning is always included by positive psychologists as an element of the good life, but actually figures importantly in all topics of substantive concern to positive psychology. Research is described that links meaning to life satisfaction, character strengths, and physical health. In conclusion, this paper addresses why positive psychology is more often identified as the study of happiness than the study of meaning and how this situation might be remedied.

Meaning and Positive Psychology

The meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person’s life at a given moment.

—Viktor E. Frankl (1959, p. 110)

Positive psychology is the scientific study of what goes right in life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It is a new perspective within psychology that rests on certain assumptions (Peterson & Park, 2003). First, what is good about life is as genuine and relevant as what is bad, thus deserving equal attention from psychologists. Second, life entails more than avoiding or undoing problems. Someone without symptoms or disorders may or may not be living well. Positive psychology urges attention to what is taking place on the other side of the zero point of being problem-free. Third, explanations of the good life must do more than take accounts of problems and stand them on their head.

We emphasize the scientific basis of positive psychology. This perspective will rise or fall based on what the data show, not on its inherent and intuitive appeal, which of course is immense. Positive psychology is not to be confused with “pop” psychology or untested self-help approaches. It is not a secular religion. It is not a modern version of The Power of Positive Thinking (Peale, 1952) or a contemporary companion to The Secret (Byrne, 2006). Positive psychologists study optimism and affirmation, to be sure, but do not urge these psychological stances on anyone. Research shows that optimism sometimes has desirable consequences and sometimes not, and the value of positive psychology is to articulate the relevant circumstances (Peterson, 2000). With this information available, people can make informed choices about how best to approach life given their values and goals (Seligman, 1991).

Positive Psychology Background

One of the triggers for the introduction of positive psychology was the realization that since World War II, psychology as a field had devoted much of its effort to the identification, the treatment, and—occasionally—the prevention of problems like anxiety and depression (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The yield of these problem-focused efforts has been impressive, but a myopic view of the human condition has resulted. It is as if psychology views all people as fragile and flawed, and if not in the throes of disorder, then in denial or in recovery.

The premise of positive psychology is that the rest of the human condition deserves scientific attention as well. This premise is sometimes misunderstood as a claim that human problems are of no concern to positive psychology. What results is criticism of this new perspective as naïve or elitist. In point of fact, positive psychologists are not indifferent to suffering. The goal of positive psychology is to complement and extend the problem-focused psychology that has proliferated in recent decades, and an important idea from positive psychology is that one way to solve problems is by identifying and leveraging someone’s strengths and assets (Park, Peterson, & Brunwasser, 2009).

It has been observed that positive psychology is nothing new, meaning that occasional psychologists throughout the 20th century studied topics of concern to contemporary positive psychology, such as subjective well-being, genius, and character (Peterson, 2006). Furthermore, the questions raised by positive psychology about the good life reprise those posed centuries ago by Athenian philosophers in the West and by Confucius and Lao-Tsu in the East (Dahlsgaard, Peterson,
Positive psychology has more recent predecessors as well. The 1946 charter of the World Health Organization defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity;” a definition thoroughly consistent with contemporary positive psychology, especially as it has been used to make sense of physical well-being (cf. Seligman, 2008). In 1958, Marie Jahoda wrote a prescient book—*Current Concepts of Positive Mental Health*—which made the case for understanding psychological well-being in its own right and not simply as the absence of disorder or distress.

If positive psychology is the scientific study of what makes life most worth living, it necessarily entails the study of meaning. Central figures in the psychological study of meaning, like Viktor Frankl (1959), Carl Rogers (1961), Abraham Maslow (1970), and Rollo May (1953), are among the individuals upon whose shoulders contemporary positive psychologists stand, whether or not these important thinkers are regularly acknowledged. Damon, Menon, and Bronk (2003) noted the similarity in particular between Frankl’s approach to meaning and the general premises of positive psychology. Both hold that higher human characteristics are neither produced by nor derived from more basic needs or drives.

Despite ample precedents, contemporary positive psychology still has considerable value as an umbrella term for the study of what makes life worth living. Contemporary positive psychology draws together what have been scattered lines of theory and research and encourages their simultaneous consideration. For example, we have followed this strategy in our research looking at strengths of character and well-being (Park & Peterson, 2006; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

**Parsing Positive Psychology**

Several attempts to categorize the topics of concern to positive psychology have been made. So, one familiar distinction is between *hedonism* and *eudaimonia* (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Hedonism emphasizes the pursuit of pleasure, whereas eudaimonia emphasizes the actualization of human potential and the pursuit of a meaningful life (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005).

In setting an agenda for positive psychology, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) called for the study of *positive experiences* like pleasure, happiness, and the psychological state of flow; *positive traits* like strengths of character, talents, and a sense of meaning and purpose; and *positive institutions* like families, schools, and businesses that enabled positive experiences and traits.

Seligman (2002) proposed that “authentic” happiness entailed *pleasure, engagement* (i.e., deep involvement in ongoing life), and *meaning*. Park and Peterson (2009) added *good social relationships* between and among family members, friends, colleagues, and neighbors to this list, and even more recently, Seligman (2011) added *accomplishment*. A consensual parsing of positive psychology does not exist and may ultimately be elusive (Peterson, 2013). Existing attempts to categorize the concerns of positive psychology have tried to propose the basic elements of the good life, à la chemistry’s periodic table, and this may be a category mistake if there are no basic elements. Everyone seems to agree that “meaning” is an important topic for positive psychology but including it as simply one of several basic elements may be conceptually problematic. Perhaps meaning cuts across and characterizes all topics of concern to positive psychology.

Nowadays we take another approach to conceptualizing positive psychology by looking at what people actually do that contributes to the psychological good life for themselves and others (cf. Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007). This approach emphasizes behaviors and activities rather than hypothesized processes and mechanisms (Rozin, 2006). We have identified work, love, play, and service as important domains of human activity, and these all are apt to be most fulfilling when they are meaningful (Peterson 2013).

Meaningful work is engaging (Wagner & Harter, 2006). Meaningful love is secure (Bowlby, 1969). Meaningful play is passionate (Vallerand, 2008). Meaningful service is generative (Erikson, 1963). Can one have a fulfilling life without meaning (cf. Steger, Oishi, & Kesibir, 2011)? Perhaps one can be a short-term hedonist, but we believe that deeper and lasting fulfillment requires or at least is facilitated by a sense of meaning about what one does.

**The Psychological Study of Meaning**

When psychologists, including us, study meaning, our work can often be faulted for being content-free. That is, research participants are typically asked if they do or do not have meaning and purpose in their lives. Their responses are then linked to outcomes of interest.

Researchers rarely take the further step and ask about the source of meaning and purpose (Schnell, 2009; Wong, 1998), although some sources seem more worthy and apt to be fulfilling than are others. We can imagine two research
participants who report a high level of meaning. Person One derives his sense of purpose from ruthless competition—winning at all costs. Person Two, in contrast, derives her sense of purpose from selfless service—making the world a better place for others. Treating these two people as equivalent vis-à-vis their sense of meaning is likely to be misleading.

However, some researchers have focused on the specific content and context of meaningful activities. Dixon (2007) asked older adult research participants to whom they most mattered and their answers usually pointed to specific people—friends, children, and grandchildren—rather than people per se. Debats, Drost, and Hansen (1995) posed open-ended questions to their research participants, asking them to describe when their lives had the most meaning as well as when their live seemed meaningless. The interpersonal context of meaning was emphasized. Participants experienced “meaning” when in contact with others, and “meaninglessness” when separated or alienated from others.

So, we conclude that meaning is specific and in particular social. When someone reports that his or her life has meaning, we assume that the source of this meaning is often found in specific relationships with other people. This typical content should be kept in mind when interpreting results from other psychological studies of meaning, even when the source of meaning is not explicitly ascertained.

Our own investigations of meaning have often used the Orientations to Happiness survey we devised based on Seligman’s (2002) formulation that there are (at least) three ways to pursue an authentically happy life: Through meaning, through pleasure, and through engagement (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005). This is a self-report survey that asks respondents to rate the degree to which statements reflecting each of these orientations apply to themselves. This measure had good psychometric properties, and three orientations are empirically distinct. See Table 1 for sample questions.

All three orientations predict life satisfaction, but meaning and engagement prove to be more robust predictors than pleasure. Furthermore, there is evidence of synergy among these orientations, meaning that people who score relatively high on all three of them are especially satisfied with life. So, meaning, engagement, and pleasure as approaches to life need not compete. They may actually be allies, and those with the fullest life have the best life.

We have also examined the cross-sectional associations between meaning assessed by the Orientations to Happiness and our measures of various strengths of character (Peterson & Park, 2012; Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007). Meaning is most strongly associated with religiousness and spirituality, although a number of so-called strengths of humanity are also linked to meaning (see Table 2). Strengths of humanity are social in nature, and this finding supports our earlier argument that “meaning” often has interpersonal sources.
Table 2
Strengths of Character Robustly Associated with Meaning (N = 29,987)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character strength</th>
<th>r with meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religiousness</td>
<td>.66*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>.54*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>.50*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zest</td>
<td>.48*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective (wisdom)</td>
<td>.48*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>.46*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>.45*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>.41*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social intelligence</td>
<td>.39*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindness</td>
<td>.38*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .001

These findings have been replicated in samples of participants from different nations: The United States, Switzerland, and Australia (e.g., Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; Ruch, Harzer, Proyer, Park, & Peterson, 2010; Vella-Brodrick, Park, & Peterson, 2009). They also hold at the level of nations, when aggregate scores from 27 different nations are computed for the three orientations and correlated with an aggregate score of life satisfaction (Park, Peterson, & Ruch, 2009). Interestingly, the aggregate score of meaning for a given nation is positively associated with its emphasis on religion. Also of interest is our finding that a nation’s aggregate score for pleasure is negatively associated with national gross national product (GNP).

Using other measures, we have also studied the prospective association between meaning and physical health, finding for example that older adults higher in a sense of meaning are less likely to have a heart attack, even when the usual suspect risk factors for poor health are controlled (Kim, Sun, Park, Kubzansky, & Peterson, 2013). Similar findings linking meaning to good health have been reported by other research groups (e.g., Perissinotto, Cenzer, & Covinsky, 2012; Sone et al., 2008).

Conclusion: Positive Psychology, Happiness, and Meaning

We have argued that meaning should be a central concern to positive psychology as it attempts to characterize a fulfilling life. Having a sense of meaning and purpose is importantly linked to psychological well-being as well as physical well-being.

The question therefore arises about why positive psychologists have not placed meaning at the center of this new perspective. Instead, “happiness” is usually on focus, despite protests by positive psychologists from the very beginning of the field that positive psychology is not to be confused with “happiology” (e.g., Seligman & Pawelski, 2003).

One obvious explanation is that happiness as a topic is more appealing to the general public, an assertion readily verified by the relative popularity of positive psychology trade books as judged by amazon.com sales ranks. Books with “happiness” or close synonyms in their titles usually outsell other books that address topics like gratitude, forgiveness, character, or—indeed—meaning.

Furthermore, people especially in the United States desire quick and simple solutions for problems. Unhappiness seems more amenable to a quick fix than are alienation, anomie, and meaninglessness. Indeed, research shows that the search for meaning can be difficult, even painful (Park, Park, & Peterson, 2010).

A deeper explanation of the popularity of happiness and its place as “the” public and sometimes academic face of positive psychology points to the emergence of positive psychology within the United States and its long intellectual tradition of utilitarianism and hedonism, fancy words for happiness (Peterson, 2006). Think psychoanalysis and behaviorism, the two most important traditions in 20th century psychology. Although using different terms (drive reduction or positive reinforcement), each in effect emphasizes feeling good as the guiding principle of human conduct.
Yet another explanation for positive psychology sidestepping the study of meaning is that religion provides an important source of meaning and purpose in life (Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007). Psychologists are often ambivalent about religion, not only because psychologists themselves are a strikingly non-religious group (Gross & Simmons, 2009) but also because of their reticence to be seen as endorsing a given set of values (Peterson & Park, 2007). However, one can study a topic without endorsing it one way or another. Those interested in positive psychology must investigate what matters to people, and religion matters to many.

Psychologists who study meaning and purpose must also bear some responsibility for the neglect by positive psychology of their topic. “Meaning” sounds ponderous, the subject of dusty books and Philosophy 101 courses as opposed to the central feature of ongoing life for all. We all want to matter; we all want to make a difference; and we all want to be connected with a purpose larger than the self. Discussions of meaning by psychologists are—frankly—not always very interesting because they tend to be abstract and overly concerned with semantic distinctions. If the study of meaning could be reframed to stress its specific and social content, which speaks to people’s real lives, we believe it would become a more salient concern within positive psychology.

References


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**Footnote**

1. A notable and instructive exception is Viktor Frankl’s (1959) *Man’s Search for Meaning,* which remains a top-selling book many decades after its first publication. Its appeal, we suspect, is that it speaks directly to people and the actual lives they lead.
The Commonplace Experience of Meaning in Life

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Abstract

Popular and scholarly treatments of meaning in life often focus on this aspect of experience when it is missing, searched for, or in need of creation. In this article, I propose that if, as many believe, meaning in life is essential for human adaptation, it must be commonplace, just as other necessities are commonplace. I assert that, at least in terms of its cognitive component, meaning in life is, in fact, the default of human existence: Like oxygen, our bodies are wired to procure it from an environment that is filled with it. I review research that shows the sensitivity of meaning in life ratings to manipulations of variables that are themselves potentially trivial (such as positive mood) or quite common (the presence of pattern and coherence in stimuli). I review, as well, evidence for the notion that meaning in life levels, as endorsed by participants in a range of studies, is not horrifically low, but rather moderately high. I close by considering the implications of this approach for the apparently insatiable human need for meaning in life.

The Commonplace Experience of Meaning in Life

“The human needs a framework of values, a philosophy of life...in about the same sense that he needs sunlight, calcium, and love” (Maslow, 1968, p. 206).

Any walk down the self-help aisle of a bookstore (or quick search on Amazon.com) will give the strong impression that a meaningful life is commonly viewed as something that is longed for and sought after, an ineffable mystery. Even the verbs we use to talk about meaning in life (in science and in life) suggest that it is a rarity, that it is difficult to come by, devastating in its absence, and often the product of great human effort. It is telling that Frankl’s landmark volume was entitled *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Since the beginning of scientific interest in the experience of meaning, it has been something that we search for. More recently, the Meaning Maintenance Model (MMM), (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006), has defined meaning as “the expected relationships or associations that human beings construct and impose on their worlds” (p. 90, emphasis added). Within the MMM, as well as in research on narrative constructions of life experiences (e.g., King, Scollen, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000) and studies of coping with traumatic life events (Park, 2010), humans are often dubbed “natural meaning makers,” emphasizing the ways that meaning comes from human effort. Similarly, in everyday life, we often speak of “making sense” of experience or struggling to “find meaning” in life and life events.

Yet, consider that many scholars agree that the experience of meaning in life is adaptive—that is, it is proposed to play a role in survival. Clearly, nothing that human beings require to survive can be an abject rarity, chronically missing from our existence, or we would all be dead: *Homo sapiens* would have been rendered extinct long, long ago, brought down by our unfortunate need for meaning. If meaning in life is vital to survival, “in about the same sense” as the necessities described by Maslow, then it must be something that can be obtained without buying a self-help book, attending a workshop, or hiring a particularly effective life coach.

If we wish to take seriously the notion that the experience of meaning in life plays a role in adaptation, and if it has a role to play in *survival*, meaning in life must be taken off its pedestal in the pantheon of the Goods of Life, and rendered, instead as commonplace as all of the other things we need to survive, such as air, water, food, and each other or, in Maslow’s words, “sunlight, calcium, and love.” If meaning in life is as essential to our existence as these various nutriments, then it must be as common as they are. Anything that is adaptive (i.e., not just nice to have but essential to survival) must be commonplace, and so it must be for meaning in life (Halusic & King, in press). The challenge would seem to be to come up with a way to think about meaning in life not so much as a hotly sought after but little found commodity, but rather an inherent aspect of life, like water or air.

The language we use to talk about meaning often involves searching, seeking, struggling, and creating. Certainly, these verbs reveal that meaning is a vital human motivation. The loss of meaning is felt keenly, perhaps nearly as keenly as the loss of oxygen or water. The ways we talk about meaning suggest that it is certainly important to us, but also that it is something we create. The implication is clear: Meaning comes (perhaps only) from human beings and their effortful activity. In this sense, then, the experience of meaning in life is a true and at times extraordinary human accomplishment.
Under normal circumstances, we do not talk about water or air (or calcium or sunlight) in this way. Unless we have just been rescued from near drowning, we do not think of our capacity to breathe as an accomplishment or even a very big deal. In everyday life, getting oxygen from the air is something we do without thought or effort. Generally, we go about our lives without thinking very much about getting oxygen. In many ways, under normal circumstances, breathing is experienced as simply happening. If our attention is drawn to breathing, we might notice that it is happening. We might occasionally open a window in a noticeably stuffy room but, generally, when it comes to this thing that is vital to our survival, our bodies are wired to procure it from an environment that is filled with it. What if meaning were in some real ways like oxygen? What if, similarly, our bodies were wired to procure it from an environment filled with it? This “what if” is precisely what I think represents an unspoken and largely unnoticed aspect of meaning in life. This very possibility is my focus in this article. If meaning in life is even a little like oxygen, we ought to be able to use different verbs to talk about it. Interestingly, Frankl (1963/1984) himself used a potentially unexpected verb in describing meaning in life, “The meaning of our existence is not invented by ourselves, but rather detected” (p. 101, emphasis added). Can we hold with conviction some faith in Frankl’s words? Can we come to understand the experience of meaning in life not simply as a human invention, not only as something that is searched for but something that is found? To begin thinking about meaning in life in this way, let’s consider an apt analogy for the scientist interested in understanding meaning in life, Isaac Newton’s discovery of gravity.

Meaning in Life and Gravity

In 2010 to commemorate their 350th anniversary, the Royal Society released digital versions of a number of documents online providing public access, for the first time to a veritable treasure trove of the history of science. Among the documents was a biography of Sir Isaac Newton, by William Stukeley (1752). In it, Stukeley described Newton’s experience of the discovery of the law of gravitation (as conveyed to Stukeley by Newton himself), “Why should that apple always descend perpendicularly to the ground, thought he to himself.” These thoughts, wrote Stukeley, “were occasion’d by the fall of an apple as he sat in a contemplative mood.”

Like typical seekers of meaning (e.g., Park, 2010), Newton asked “Why?” Importantly, though Newton’s experience demonstrates that at least sometimes, the answer to this question can be found outside of the confines of the human skull in the lawfulness of the natural world. Newton did not search for, struggle over, or construct gravity. Newton did not invent gravity, he detected it. Put simply, he noticed it.

Consider that, at least on Earth, gravity is the default. Here on Earth, objects have been falling down since the beginning of time. It is difficult to notice those things that are always around; these are the things we take for granted. And so it is not surprising that it took a genius of Newton’s caliber to draw attention to what everyone had always seen but not particularly noticed. Undoubtedly, all of humanity had witnessed objects falling down but it was Newton who attended to the phenomenon, gave it a name, and documented its lawfulness.

What are the lessons of Newton’s experience for the science of meaning in life? I believe that gravity presents an excellent heuristic for understanding the human experience of meaning in life. Although it may not be quite as commonplace as gravity, I argue that the presence of meaning in life is, like gravity, the default. When meaning is absent, that absence is surely noticed. But those vivid times when we do search for or struggle to create meaning ought to be recognized as exceptions to the rules of life (e.g., King & Hicks, 2009). These are exceptional times and certainly scientists can learn from such exceptions. But to understand meaning in life as an adaptive experience we must confront a comforting truth: Very often, life makes sense (King, 2012). Perhaps, to learn about the experience of meaning in life when it is present, we must like Newton, attend to the commonplace, to what perhaps, we all know, see, and experience, but have not particularly noticed. Drawing on the lessons of Newton, we might come to recognize meaning in life as part of our relationship with the natural world, embedded in commonplace processes, not so much as a rare achievement but part and parcel of everyday life. I suggest that the answer to the problem of meaning in life may be partially found in the recognition that this important experience is not always or inherently a problem to be solved. At least sometimes, the answer to the question “Why?” that is, the answer to the question of meaning may be found not in intense introspection but in the world outside of our heads and in our adaptive relationship with it.

What kind of evidence exists for these ideas? To answer this question, I first briefly turn to a discussion of the definition of meaning in life. With definitional issues relatively settled, I then review evidence that meaning in life can be the product of commonplace processes and as such can play an important adaptive functioning. Second, I consider one implication of the connection between relatively mundane processes and meaning in life, namely that meaning in life is not
as rare an experience as we might assume. Finally, I close with some consideration of various additional issues as well as the potentially insatiable quality of the human longing for meaning in life.

**The Meaning of Meaning in Life**

Conceptually defining meaning in life has long been a dilemma. A variety of definitions have been proffered by many outstanding scholars (see Heintzelman & King, in press, for a review). Generally speaking, these definitions of meaning in life share some common features. These features include a cognitive component, the notion that meaning is about connections or coherence, about the presence “sense” in experience; and motivational components, that meaning is about a sense of purpose, goals, and aims, and that meaning concerns a sense of personal significance or mattering. These features are well represented in the definition below, eloquently proposed by Steger:

> Meaning is the web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our experience and formulate plans directing our energies to 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 sum of our seconds, days, and years. (Steger, 2012, p. 165)

Perhaps this definition falls short of some of the more mysterious aspects of the experience of meaning in life, but at least it provides a workable conceptualization of the construct.

Importantly, although there is no consensually agreed upon conceptual definition of meaning in life, there is greater agreement on its operational definition. Essentially, if one wants to measure meaning in life, the literature is replete with questionnaires asking folks to rate the meaningfulness of their lives (McDonald, Wong, & Gingras, 2012). These scales generally ask individuals to rate items like, “My life is meaningful and purposeful” on a scale from 1-7. Though there likely will always be those who argue against the use of such homely measures to study the grand construct of meaning in life, it is important to appreciate that research using such measures is the science that supports the notion that meaning in life is, in fact, important to survival. These ratings are correlated with a litany of very good things, ranging from quality of life, to lower incidence of psychological disorders, and even to decreased mortality (see Steger, 2012, for a thorough review). If we throw out the bathwater of self-report measures of meaning in life as inadequate, we lose as well the baby of all this science.

So, accepting perhaps, begrudgingly that we are limiting ourselves to research that uses such measures, we can begin to answer the remaining issues posed previously. First, I review social cognitive research that embeds meaning in life in everyday processes. Then, I briefly consider evidence for the notion that meaning in life is a commonplace experience.

**The Trivial, the Mundane, and the Meaning of Life**

If meaning in life is indeed common or even, as I have argued, the default, then we must consider that sources of the experience of meaning in life are similarly widely available. This means that meaning in life cannot be limited to those with the capacity to apply sophisticated cognitive arguments to the problem of meaning. It might also imply that oft-recognized sources of meaning, such as religious faith, may well contribute to the experience of meaning in life but they cannot be essential to that experience. Meaning in life must be possible without such faith. Further, it must be possible even in the context of belief that life is not inherently meaningful. *Belief* in oxygen is not required to breathe. If the experience of meaning in life is as essential as oxygen, then it cannot require such belief either. If meaning in life plays a role in survival, it ought not to require very much in terms of the psychological mechanisms within the human organism to experience it. At this point, it might be helpful to consider a quote from William James.

> All Goods are disguised by the vulgarity of their concomitants, in this work-a-day world; but woe to him who can only recognize them when he thinks them in their pure and abstract form! (James, 1890, p. 125)

James’ sentiments are quite relevant to meaning in life. If meaning in life is a Good then, like all Goods, it must be embedded in everyday existence, couched in its own vulgar concomitants. Over the last several years, my collaborators and I have examined one of these vulgar concomitants, positive mood.
Positive Mood and Meaning in Life

Positive mood or positive affect refers to the extent to which a person is experiencing mild pleasant feelings, i.e., the extent to which he or she is happy, pleased, cheerful, or experiencing enjoyment. Many would agree that the experience of meaning in life ought to be pleasant and positive affect is strongly related to meaning in life. Indeed, depending on the specific measure used that correlation can be so high as to suggest redundancy. For example, in a sample of adults, positive affect and scores on the meaning factor of Antonovsky’s Sense of Coherence scale, $r = .71$ (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006, Study 3). In a daily diary study, we found that the strongest predictor of a day being considered meaningful was the amount of positive mood experienced that day, even relative to variables, such as goal directed behavior, thought and goal progress (King et al., 2006, Study 2).

Scholars from the eudaimonic approach to well-being would agree that positive affect is a likely outcome of meaning in life, and so these correlational findings are not especially challenging. However, our research shows that positive affect is not simply an outcome of meaning in life. The causal direction runs the other way, as well: Positive mood leads to higher meaning in life.

Using a variety of mood induction techniques and examining college students (Hicks & King, 2009, 2010; King et al., 2006) and community adults (Hicks, Schlegel, & King, 2010; Hicks, Trent, Davis, & King, 2012), my colleagues and I have found that induced positive mood enhances judgments of life’s meaning. In addition, just priming individuals with words related to positive emotion led to higher meaning in life, even in the absence of effects on explicit mood (King et al., 2006).

Further, our work has shown that when other sources of meaning in life, such as religious faith, and social relationships are threatened or absent, induced or naturally occurring positive affect predicts meaning in life more strongly (Hicks & King, 2007; Hicks, Schlegel, & King, 2010). For instance, individuals who report themselves as high on loneliness, who also happen, nevertheless, to be in a good mood, endorse levels of meaning in life that are on par with those who have plenty of friends (Hicks, Schlegel, & King, 2010).

Perhaps, when answering these meaning in life questionnaires, people just are not paying that much attention. Surely if we instructed them to take this questionnaires seriously, they would not rely on something as trivial as positive mood to judge meaning in life. Jason Trent and I did a study in which participants completed measures of positive mood and then rated their meaning in life according to one of two instructions: Either as quickly as they possibly could, or taking their time and really thinking about it. The relationship between positive mood and meaning in life was higher when people took their time and thought those ratings through carefully (Trent & King, 2010). Apparently, when prompted to think carefully about meaning in life, one’s happiness is considered quite relevant to that thoughtful judgment.

Our findings suggest a central role for the common (even trivial) experience of positive mood in meaning in life. However, and crucially, they do not imply that meaning in life is the same thing as happiness. Without question, our research has shown that there are unhappy people who maintain a high sense of meaning in life, through such resources as religious faith (Hicks & King, 2008) or social connections (Hicks, Schlegel, & King, 2010). Moreover, consider the very fact that we have a word for meaning to describe a subjective state. If meaning in life was synonymous with pleasure, surely, someone would have noticed. When we report our lives as meaningful, then we are signifying something beyond our levels of pleasure.

One thing that meaning in life shares with pleasure is that it is a private state. As defined by Klinger (1977), “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” (p. 10). In its essence, meaning in life is a subjective mental state. Consider for a moment subjective mental states and their potential role in adaptation.

Subjective states and adaptation

States like happiness, sorrow, or meaningfulness occur, we might say, “in our heads.” They can be pleasant or unpleasant. We can prefer some of these feelings to others. We like being happy and dislike being sad, but this liking or disliking does not explain the value of these states to survival. If we wish to impart some survival value or adaptive significance to such states, we must uncover a role for them to play not simply on the inside, but on the outside—in our behaviors, and our interactions with the world.

As we construct an understanding of the potentially adaptive quality of the human experience of meaning in life, we can take some valuable lessons from the science of mood. Consider the case of happiness. Research has shown that happy moods lead people to process information heuristically, relying on gut feelings. Early explanations of such results...
emphasized the motivational quality of moods (e.g., Mackie & Worth, 1989). People want to be happy. So, when they are happy, they are busy staying happy, maintaining their happy moods, and as such would not have the cognitive resources to carefully process incoming information. But this motivational explanation would not explain why or how feeling happy might serve an adaptive purpose. Similarly, our longing for meaning in life cannot explain its adaptive significance.

Scholars of the effects of mood on cognitive processing have moved away from such motivational accounts of the influence of positive mood on thought and behavior. The feelings-as-information (Schwarz & Clore, 2003) focuses not on the motivational significance of moods but on the information they provide to the person. From this perspective, negative moods tell us that there is problem to be solved, and trigger the use of analytical thinking. Positive mood, in contrast, tells us that all is well and that reliance on default information processing system is appropriate (Huntsinger, Isbell, & Clore, 2012). In this sense, the feelings-as-information account links moods to self-regulation. We feel good or bad as a function of how we are doing in important life domains. Our mood provides information about the quality of our interaction with the world.

Meaning in life as information

To apply a feelings-as-information approach to the subjective state of meaning in life, we must answer the question, “What information might the feeling of meaning provide that would play a role in regulating thought and behavior?” A possible answer to this question is provided by the very definition of meaning in life itself, particularly in its cognitive component. Recall that this aspect of meaning in life refers to the sense of the connections among aspects of experience. If meaning in life provides information about the presence of connections, regularities, or patterns in the world, it might have an important role to play in adaptation. Detecting connections, associations, regularities in the environment is an adaptive capacity shared by all creatures (Geary, 2004). If the presence of connections, regularities, or patterns feels like meaning, and influences the experience of meaning in life, we might have landed upon at least one adaptive function for that experience. It tells us when the world is making sense (Heintzelman, Trent, & King, in press).

Recall my earlier analogy to oxygen. With regard to oxygen, our bodies are wired to procure it from an environment filled with it. It is precisely with regard to these two ideas that the cognitive aspect of meaning in life is especially promising. Consider that our visual systems are wired to detect statistical co-variation and such detection occurs in the absence of effortful processing or awareness (Turk-Browne, Scholl, Chun, & Johnson, 2008). Furthermore, the processes of associative learning attest to the existence of automatic detection of reliable connections. Our bodies are wired to procure connections from the environment.

And, it turns out that the environment is indeed filled with such connections, as it must be for these learning processes to be adaptive (Domjan, 2005). Consider that animal learning studies (and the hardware of our perceptual systems) provide an important lesson about the features of objective reality. Certainly, human beings often emphasize the subjectivity of experience, such as “Life is whatever you make of it!” With regard to the experience of meaning, this subjectivity has been especially celebrated, such as “The meaning of anything is all in how you look at it!” We are telling ourselves that the meaning of life events or life itself depends on our attitude. We are meaning-makers! We construct and impose meaning on the world.

Examining closely the behavior of animals without the capacities to construct and impose meaning, animals that lack our propensity for subjective reflection, can teach us something about the properties of the world in which they (and we) live. The behavior of animals, whose “attitude” toward the world is wholly shaped by the singular purpose of surviving in that world, tells us something about the world itself. If one wanted to infer an attitude from such organisms, based on their behavior— it would be a straightforward one. Their behavior reveals a single expectation: On balance, this world will contain reliable connections between stimuli that are important for survival, this world will make sense. Surely, some events might be random, but for the most part, betting on the systematic character of events is a good, survival-relevant bet. So, with regard to the cognitive aspect of meaning in life, at least, not only are we wired for it, the world is filled with it. Yes, we live in a world filled with regularities. We have sunrises and sunsets, and Mondays, and Fridays, and Januaries and Augusts. We have winters and springs. Might these patterns and routines, these blessed regularities, contribute to the feeling that life is meaningful? Does the existence of pattern and reliable associations in the environment influence the experience of meaning in life?

In our research, Samantha Heintzelman, Jason Trent and I have begun to explore this possibility. In a recent series of studies, we examined whether meaning in life ratings were influenced by exposure to objectively coherent or incoherent stimuli (Heintzelman, Trent, & King, in press). For example, in one study, participants viewed a series of pictures of trees. The 16 photos included 4 for each of the 4 seasons. The participants thought their job was to evaluate the contrast in the
pictures. Unbeknownst to them, the order in which the pictures were shown was systematically varied. In one group, the 16 pictures appeared in a random order. In another, they were arranged so that they followed the change in seasons, over 4 cycles, conforming to Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter. After completing the rating task, all participants rated their meaning in life. We found that meaning in life was rated significantly higher in the seasonal pattern group than in the random group (Heintzelman, Trent, & King, Study 1). In subsequent studies, we found that meaning in life was rated higher after exposure to the same pictures presented in a novel pattern (vs. random order; Study 2), and after reading words triads arranged so that they possessed a fourth common associate (vs. the same words not so arranged; Study 4). These findings support the hypothesis that encounters with regularity, pattern, and overlearned associations can influence evaluations of life’s meaning. Quite simply, when the world makes sense, life feels more meaningful.

Given that human life is generally characterized by regularities, one implication of this research is that life might be somewhat meaningful, as a default. We do have the days of the week, regular appointments, morning coffee, a last glass of wine at night. In such a world, on average, shouldn’t life be pretty meaningful for most people? I now turn to evidence suggesting that indeed, it just might be.

Meaning in Life is Not a Rare Accomplishment

Even a casual perusal of the scholarly literature reveals that meaning in life is important and that self-reports of meaning in life relate to consequential outcomes. One thing that might be missed in this casual perusal, however, is the information that is typically included in every scientific article, but is not particularly relevant to testing that meaning in life predicts some outcome. Yes, here we focus on another aspect of meaning in life that is generally the default but is rarely particularly noticed. For almost every study using these scales, researchers report the descriptive statistics (i.e., the means and standard deviations) for the meaning in life measure. Examining these means suggests that, on average, human life does not appear to be profoundly lacking a sense of meaningfulness (Heintzelman & King, in preparation).

For example, in the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) of meaning subscale is a well-designed, psychometrically sound, and well-validated measure of meaning in life. Items, such as “I understand my life’s meaning” are rated by participants in terms of how true they are on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). In the initial validation study of the scale using undergraduates, the reported mean was 4.60, on a 7-point scale (Steger et al., 2006).

Since its introduction, this scale has been used in numerous investigations of meaning in life, and this mean is typical. Just how typical? In samples of undergraduates, Boyraz & Lightsey (2012) with N = 232, reported a mean of 4.9; Triplett, Tedeschi, Cann, Calhoun, and Reeve (2012) with N = 333, reported a mean of 4.56. These “at or above the midpoint” means are not unique to undergraduates. In samples of university employees, Schlegel, Vess, and Arndt (2012) with N = 173, found a mean of 5.05; while Steger, Dik, and Duffy (2012) with N = 370, reported a mean of 4.0. In a study of elderly adults (over 65), McMaham and Estes (2012) with N = 60 reported a mean of 5.7. Such results are not unusual to American samples. Among Indian college students (Dogra, Basu, & Das, 2008), the mean was 5.23, with N = 320. In a study of Australian adults, Cohen and Cairns (2012) with N = 500, reported a mean of 4.88. In a sample of 34 Japanese adults whose grandparents were exposed to the nuclear attack during World War II, the mean was 4.06; among 88 not so exposed, the mean was 4.14 (Palgi et al., 2012). Only a sample of Japanese undergraduates produced a mean lower than 4.0. For this group (Steger, Kawabata, Shimai, & Otake, 2008), the reported mean was 3.94, N = 982. Finally, consider the mean scores from individuals rating meaning in life in actual life contexts that are potentially profoundly troubling. In a study of Spanish college students following a terrorist attack in Madrid (Steger, Frazier, & Zacchaniini, 2008), the mean was 4.23, N = 46. In a study examining the effects of an intervention on meaning in life in women coping with breast cancer, the means were 4.66 and 5.22, N = 18 for each group, prior to the interventions (Hsaio et al., 2012). In a sample of adults diagnosed with serious psychological disorders for at least one year (Schulenberg, Strack, & Buchanan, 2011), the reported mean was 5.63, N = 96. This very brief summary suggests that, on a 1 to 7 scale, life is generally rated at or above the midpoint of meaningfulness. Apparently, for all of our bellyaching about meaning being missing from our lives, when people from a variety of walks of life are asked to rate their life’s meaning, the answer is clear: On average, life is “somewhat” or “moderately” meaningful for most samples, and “quite” meaningful for other samples. These simple means suggest that meaninglessness is not a problem of epidemic proportion.

Where are the abjectly meaningless lives that psychologists have bemoaned for so long? In some of my research, we asked a sample of undergraduates (N = 562) to rate the item, “My life is very purposeful and meaningful” using a 1-7 scale. We found that only 28 participants (about 5% of the sample) gave this item a 1 or 2 (King, Mescher & Hicks, 2009).

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Meaningless lives do exist but they are not as common as meaningful lives. I do not mean to dismiss or belittle the problem of meaninglessness, for those who experience their lives as severely lacking in meaning, it is clearly an important and serious problem. Indeed, I believe that thinking about the meaningful life as the default helps illuminate why meaninglessness is so very troubling.

Implications for Meaninglessness

Consider again, Isaac Newton and the idea that meaning in life might be like gravity, something we routinely experience but perhaps rarely particularly notice. Now, consider just how shocking, how unfathomable, and how viscerally wrong, it would be to wake up in a world where objects started falling up. Imagine a world where objects lacked constancy, where cause and effect did not apply, where outcomes were not, on balance, predictable. That is not the world we are wired for. I believe that this thought experiment captures precisely the vertigo, the nausea, brought on by the senseless. Meaninglessness, when it happens, holds our attention and occupies our energy not only because it often occurs in traumatic contexts, but because it is actually not what we are wired for or what we typically experience. The ways that meaninglessness captures our attention suggest that it is not typical, that it violates the (potentially unnoticed) default of the presence of meaning in life. Indeed, when life does not make sense, we can be meaning-makers and we can construct and impose meaning on the world. But our experience of meaning in life is not primarily a result of such active efforts. Most of the time, we experience meaning in life in the context of, and as a result of our relationship with a world that makes sense.

Some Closing Thoughts

To close, I would like to address a few remaining issues. First, although my own research has focused primarily on the roles of positive mood and the presence of pattern in the environment in the experience of meaning in life, another very crucial variable, perhaps more crucial than these, is social relationships. Ratings of meaningful existence are strongly and consistently influenced by social exclusion (e.g., Williams, 2007). Again, I think such findings help to illuminate the connection between a sense of meaning in life and the necessities of survival.

Second, clearly, simply leading a life characterized by a great deal of routine is not a panacea for meaning in life. Certainly there are individuals who experience very high levels of regularity (e.g., prisoners) whose meaning in life is likely to be lacking. The cognitive aspect of meaning in life is, of course, just one aspect of this important experience. Moreover, even with regard to that aspect, we must consider the importance of novelty and the potential meaninglessness engendered by boredom.

Third, I want to be clear that showing that ratings of meaning in life are influenced by experimental manipulations does not, in my view, trivialize these ratings at all. Anything that plays a role in connecting us to the environment must have the capacity to change: It must retain a responsiveness to events in the environment or it cannot be adaptive. Thus, finding meaning in life ratings to track environmental changes is essential to demonstrating their role in adaptation.

Finally, a rating of 4 on a scale from 1-7 is pretty good but it is not a 7. Life might, on average, be somewhat meaningful, but this does not preclude the human longing for 6’s and 7’s. We do not long for a minimally meaningful life or a somewhat meaningful life, but one that is quite meaningful, extremely meaningful. Perhaps the great mystery of meaning in life is not so much how to find it or create it, but why we seek it so urgently, even when it is, actually, a quiet part of lives most of the time. It may be that beliefs about its rarity or mysterious nature contribute to a sense that it is chronically lacking (Heintzelman & King, in preparation). Then perhaps, the solution to this particular mystery is a simple one: Meaning in life is, indeed, a necessity, just as scholars long have claimed. After all, we will not soon get over our needs for oxygen, water, calcium or sunlight. For these necessities of existence, our appetites are insatiable, our thirst unquenchable. No matter how much I breathe today, I will certainly hope to keep on breathing tomorrow. No amount of oxygen will persuade me away from my energetic dedication to it. Why should meaning in life be any different?
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Chaos and Creativity while Waking and Dreaming
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Abstract
This paper examines the dynamics of creative cognitive activity in the waking and dreaming processes that are often thought of as pathological and counterproductive but may, in fact, be healthy and useful. During waking states, there is evidence suggesting that there are healthy benefits for creativity, even in the context of bipolar spectrum mood disorders, as well as in daily life. Yet creativity is often pathologized and misunderstood because of its assumed links with pathology or “abnormalities.” Creative functioning may be further understood as a metaphorical and perhaps as a psychoneurological descriptor. In view of these data, society might value innovative “divergence” rather than assuming that deviations from what is “normal” are invariably “pathological.” Indeed, creative personality traits may be useful predictors for the enhanced generation of divergent thought.

In dreaming, one may see certain of these phenomena in even bolder relief, where our sensory world and the usual rules of logic are suspended, yet valuable insights may emerge. However, some writers see dreaming as no more than random patterns due to random brain activity, rather than an intentional process holding potential meaning. Although dreaming may have random elements, one can also discover patterns of content for which the meaning has potential social as well as individual significance. These patterns are not only suggestive of immediate value, but also of potential value because they were adaptive. It is likely that further clarification of nonlinear dynamical processes and the balance between divergent and convergent forces can further reveal the healthy potentials of our creative minds, during both waking and dreaming states.

Introduction
Most Asian, African, Native American, and other indigenous traditions used creative imagination to enrich and enhance everyday life. Original contributions were typically seen as gifts from deities or spirits who used humans as their “channels.” These insights would often come in nighttime dreams or daytime visions, and were thought to recreate divine truth. In some of these societies, individuals who produced something unprecedented, such as a mask or weapon, would be hailed as heroes; but in others they would be censured for breaking with tradition. Women’s creativity was undervalued for centuries and they were allowed fewer educational opportunities or life experiences on which creative productivity depends; this situation still characterizes many contemporary countries where innovations are suspect, especially if women are the innovators (Richards, 2007).

The English word “creativity” is a social construct that has been linked with the concept of origin itself (from the Latin creare, to make, and the ecclesiastical Latin creator or Creator). Some researchers and theorists focus on creative products, requiring that they be of social value or have attained some other type of consensual validation if they are to be called “creative.” Others emphasize the process by which the products (artwork, technology, concepts, etc.) come into being or the milieu in which they emerge. Others conceptualize creativity as reflecting the unique achievement, ability, and/or attitude of a person or a consortium. In each of these perspectives, there can be levels of accomplishment, utility, or originality, implying that some persons or groups can be more or less creative than others. The concept of everyday creativity (Richards, 2007) directs attention to creative outcomes in office management, child-rearing, home repairs, food preparation, or community service, as well as the “dark side of creativity,” characterizing the all-too-frequent acts that are innovative but destructive. Thus, from a Western standpoint, “creativity” is a term that can be used to describe the process of bringing something new into being by becoming sensitive to gaps in human knowledge, identifying these deficiencies, searching for their solutions, making guesses as to a potential solution, testing one’s hypotheses, and communicating the final results.
This paper will be written through a Western lens, keeping in mind that dream reports are honored and valued in several contemporary cultures that take different approaches to their cultivation and use (e.g., Korea, many Native American tribes, and various countries in the Middle East).

**Creativity from the Perspective of Chaos Theory**

The creative process is imperfectly understood. It may occur in a planned sequence or spontaneously, and/or may be intentional or largely unconscious. Herein, we take several concepts from non-linear dynamics in an attempt to illuminate certain aspects of the understanding of the creative process, the creative person, the creative product, and the creative environment from the perspective of Western science.

(a) During waking states, there is evidence suggesting that there are healthy benefits for creativity even in the context of bipolar spectrum mood disorders as well as in daily life.

“Everyday creativity,” the originality of everyday life, is defined after Frank Barron (1969) using two criteria: originality and meaningfulness. There needs to be novelty, and the outcome needs to communicate to others. Such creativity must have been adaptive in the course of human evolution, and undoubtedly remain so (Abraham, 2007). The Lifetime Creativity Scales (LCS) of Richards et al. (Richards, Kinney, Lunde, & Benet, 1988) not only look at everyday creative outcomes, but consider originality in the creative process, or in what way an activity is conducted, as part of the assessment. One can do many tasks in innovative vs. conventional ways (e.g., teaching a class, repairing a car, fixing a meal, writing a report at the office).

LCS make norm-referenced assessments of how people manifest *everyday creativity*, or originality across a broad range of activities at work and leisure; the scales show high inter-rater reliability and multiple indications of construct validity (Richards, Kinney, Benet, & Merzel, 1988). LCS allow rough comparisons among people in unselected populations, such that one needs not study creators who are only writers, or artists, or entrepreneurs. One can select individuals on other variables (such as psychopathology) and look at creativity as a broad-based, real-life outcome variable.

(b) Creativity may be pathologized and misunderstood because of its assumed links with pathology or “abnormalities”—even when this creativity serves a healthy purpose. Furthermore, creativity is sometimes pathologized or stereotyped for people without a bipolar diagnosis—for example, the unkempt inventor, the absentminded professor, the antisocial artist—and these stereotypes may include young people whose nonconformity is not always understood or appreciated.

The LCS-approach permitted a new look at the age-old question of whether *everyday creativity* is enhanced in those people with a diagnosis of bipolar spectrum mood disorders or associated conditions (Richards, Kinney, Lunde, & Benet, 1988), whereas much previous research has too often focused only on celebrated people (e.g., Jamison, 1993). The answer was more positive than reported in previous studies. Richards and her associates used a model for compensatory advantage, as in sickle cell anemia, where the homozygous individual can be severely ill, yet the carrier may have a mild anemia at best. The compensatory advantage is also found in such unexpected places as resistance to malaria.

Ruth Richards and her associates speculated if everyday creativity, in turn, might represent a compensatory advantage to familial risk for bipolar disorders. These familial risks may have a strong genetic component (although the genetic model would likely be more complex than that for sickle cell anemia). Despite great pain and human suffering, these mood disorders have remained stable in the population across time and geographic regions (Kinney & Richards, 2007; Richards et al., 1988).

Richards and her associates (Richards, Kinney et al., 1988; Richards & Kinney, 1990) compared severe and moderate bipolar spectrum disorders (bipolar I and cyclothymia) among relatives and controls without the bipolar diagnosis. In addition, they asked people diagnosed with bipolar spectrum disorders for their preferred mental states for creating. In fact, the data supported the hypothesized compensatory advantage related to bipolar family risk. The advantage for creativity appeared to peak during (1) relatively better functioning conditions on the bipolar “spectrum” (e.g., cyclothymia, a trait variable), and especially (2) during mild mood elevation (a state variable). This is a potentially healthy outcome. So why might creativity in this context (or in general) sometimes be considered somewhat unhealthy and even harmful? Can dynamical systems thinking help here?

Krippner (1994) has noted how the ontology of the mind exhibits bifurcations characteristic of nonlinear dynamical systems. Might moments of creative insight, the renowned “Aha” moment of creative process, even involve bifurcation and “edge of chaos” reconfigurations of mental possibilities? (Abraham, 1996; Richards, 1996, 2000-2001; Schuldberg, 1999; Zausner, 1996). Animal models (e.g., Skarda & Freeman, 1987) suggest, for example, with novel odors and the olfactory...
bulb, that far-from-equilibrium mental systems may rapidly generate new attractors related to novel stimuli. An extension of this phenomenon would suggest the generation of new attractors during state and trait variables of people with diagnoses that categorize them as psychopathological. For these individuals, creative functioning may be very valuable indeed, and may be further understood using dynamic models of brain function including “edge of chaos” phenomena, certainly metaphorically (e.g., Moran, 2009) and perhaps even as a psychoneurological descriptor (e.g., Rossi, 2004).

(c) In view of these data, society would do better to value innovative “divergence” rather than assuming that deviations from what is “normal” are invariably “pathological.”

Goertzel (1995a, b) suggested that the psyche can manifest highly patterned strange attractors—we can think of these as dynamic branching figures in phase space—for associative memory, for example. Included can be hierarchies of attractors—where clusters of ideas from further self-similar clusters. Hardy (1998) refers to these as networks of meaning. Gruber and Davis (1988) also use a developmental approach involving multicomponent systems comprising networks, both within the mind and among individuals.

Abraham (1996) noted how the balance of forces of convergence and divergence within one’s psyche may provide necessary conditions for creative cognitive chaos. He suggested, for “creative cognition…that there is a range of optional dimensionality…in the mid-dimensional range. This process is autopoetic, self-organizational” (p. 385). In fact, a balance of divergent and convergent production abilities, as in the work of founding creativity researcher J.P. Guilford (1968), is a well-known balance for creativity (Richards, 2000-2001), may be related to Ernst Kris’ “regression in the service of the ego.” One must generate novelty within the context of sufficient control and executive functioning, to hold thoughts and feelings together, creative work that needs to be adapted to real-world needs (Richards, 1998). It might follow that, with too little or too much exploration of alternative solutions to problems, the balance may be upset between convergent and divergent thinking, and one moves outside the mid-dimensional chaos that is optimal for useful, healthy creativity.

To summarize, some aspects of systems theory that may give at least metaphoric clarity to understanding creativity: Creative systems seem to require mid-dimensional chaotic complexity as a necessary (but perhaps not sufficient condition) for healthy creativity. Such conditions are achieved through a mixture of interactive forces, some toward an attractive surface (or hypersurface) or within it; some divergent, either away from an attractive surface, or within it. The convergent forces must win for an attractor to exist, but must have some balance to achieve mid-dimensional chaos. For bifurcations to occur, there needs to be movement away from stable attractors to the unstable conditions near and at the bifurcation point (“far from equilibrium”), and intentional systems achieve this through self-control (self-organization, autopoiesis) as well as environmental conditions, what we have called “navigation in parameter space.” Bifurcations from non-chaotic attractors to chaotic ones are sometimes called “on the edge of chaos,” but bifurcations from one type of chaotic attractor to another may well be important for a bifurcation sequence to chaotic attractors playing home to healthy creative solutions.

In other words, the peaking of everyday creativity among so-called “better functioning” individuals with a bipolar diagnosis or during milder mood states (e.g., cyclothymia, above average mood elevation) could represent an optimal balance within risk for these disorders where certain advantages (e.g., rich associations, emotional resonance, and higher energy and motivation during mild mood elevation) can peak without loss of the adaptive function needed to utilize them. In Barron’s (1969) terms, these creative products could be both original and meaningful.

This compensatory advantage needs further understanding, and may offer hope for people carrying risk in their families; for example, data from people with bipolar disorders on the Lifetime Creativity Scales (Goleman, 1988). It is possible that higher creativity potential helped those “better functioning” individuals cope resiliently, such that they were healthier than they might have been otherwise. It is interesting that mild mood elevation appears to carry benefits for creativity in the population at large (Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987).

The pathologizing of creativity, whether “every day” or “exceptional” is a popular stereotype. The media is filled with images of creators as odd, absent-minded folk who cannot help bumping into walls. In these stereotypes, the “mad scientist” is too busy, or too unconventional, even to comb his or her hair. The link of creativity to mental disorders may be a factor in stereotyped production, combined with the misunderstanding that, if creativity is associated with mental health problems, it will therefore be a problem itself (rather than a healthy response).

In addition, there is a general social discomfort with “difference.” Beyond that, some people who are uncomfortable with their own unconscious processes and bizarre thoughts, even those that might have creative potential may prefer to attribute them to others (Richards, 1996, 2010). Unfortunately, some teachers see creative youth as
problematic, and more compliant youth as the creative ones. This unfortunate stereotype has damaged the self-concept of some vulnerable and talented young people in the schools (Cramond, 2005; Richards, 2010). Because a response is odd or “abnormal” however, does not mean it is inevitably harmful or “pathological.” Rather, it may be “usefully exceptional.”

These creative moments uniquely characterized by Kristeva (1972, 1977, 1980) were summarized by Sarup (1993) as follows:

“If the semiotic is pre-Oedipal, based on primary processes and is maternally oriented, by contrast the symbolic is an Oedipalized system, regulated by the secondary processes and the Law of the Father. The symbolic is the domain of positions and proposition. The symbolic is an order superimposed on the semiotic. The symbolic control of the various semiotic processes is, however, tenuous and liable to break down or lapse at certain historically, linguistically and psychically significant moments. It results in an upheaval in the norms of the smooth understandable text. The semiotic overflows its boundaries in those privileged 'moments' Kristeva specifies in her triad of subversive forces: madness, holiness and poetry” (p. 124).

(d) Creative personality traits may be useful predictors for the enhanced generation of divergent thought, perhaps because a greater proximity to the “edge of chaos” provides a useful fit with nonlinear dynamic models.

Certain personality traits have been linked with high scores on measures of creativity (e.g., Barron 1969: Barron & Harrington, 1981), including Openness to Experience, Tolerance of Ambiguity, and Preference for Complexity. It has been suggested that certain traits, or cognitive styles, also might be part of the (evidently healthy) compensatory advantage for those at risk for bipolar disorders (e.g., Kinney & Richards, 2007).

A dynamical framework may help explain what mental events might transpire in, such traits as, for example, Openness to Experience, even if they might sometimes “go a little too far,” thus fitting in with some of the previous biases and stereotypes. How then might cognitive style or stylistic features linked to personality, create conditions that enhance novelty? Abraham (1996), discussing Howard Gardner’s (1982) views of creativity, agrees that “certain personality characteristics are necessary” (p. 389) for the bifurcation to more innovative modes. Might a stylistic bent such as Openness to Experience, for example, raise the odds for multiple bifurcations? That is to say, might this orientation open the gates to a stronger stream of ideas, ones which can be picked through later, so the creator can choose some for adaptive creative purposes?

One study (Kaufman, 2009) indicates that people with “faith in intuition” tend to have lower latent inhibition; that is, that they lower a gating mechanism that keeps out irrelevant (or seemingly irrelevant) stimuli. Low latent inhibition is related to types of schizophrenia but—with stronger executive functions, it is also related to creativity! Some of these new associations might be odder than others (Goertzel, 1995a, b). Yet, might a few unusual ideas, when the gates are lowered, lead someone to pathologizing a process that should lead to celebration? For example, a person diagnosed with a mild thought disorder might write something viewed as gibberish in a mental hospital, but the same creative product might be viewed as beautiful poetry in a different context.

Group brainstorming offers a useful example (e.g., Putman & Paulus, 2009). In our own inner, personal brainstorming, perhaps some occasional bizarre ness of ideation may emerge. One would welcome this in a group brainstorming session, following the rule that “anything goes,” but it might be easy to dismiss in a personal reverie even though that “crazy idea” might be exactly what the experiment would find most useful. It makes sense to elicit a broad range of options, sort through them later, and find the one that has the greatest promise. Again, it is important not to pathologize difference just because an idea is different—especially when it may be a sign that one is breaking free of the ordinary, and moving toward new possibilities. With the right balance of divergent and convergent processes, one may be on the route to higher creativity—a goal sought and valued by a great many people.

(e) In dreaming, one may see certain of these phenomena in even bolder relief, where our sensory world and the usual rules of logic are suspended.

The fractals found in Nature can be used as metaphors for the “branching” that characterizes the work of many creative people, even while they are asleep. Switching between attractors can be accomplished by (a) bifurcations, (b) resetting initial conditions, and by (c) jumping boundaries of basins of attraction; this last being facilitated by fractal boundaries between basins (separatrices) (Abraham, 1995). Dreaming could involve all three.

During dreaming, the neural networks that comprise the waking circuitry of the brain seem less constrained by daytime reality and are more open to novel connections (Hartmann, 1999). Krippner and Combs (2002) have noted that the
formal analysis of activity patterns in complex neural networks, such as those found in the dreaming brain, can be carried out in terms of chaotic attractors. They proposed that the dreaming brain (both in rapid eye movement or REM sleep and non-REM sleep) “relaxes” into natural patterns of self-organized activity that often reflect the residual moods, stresses, and concerns of waking life. During dreaming, the brain is immersed in something like a sensory isolation tank, cut off from the influences of external sensory input. In this situation, patterns of brain activity can slip into forms that are primarily dependent upon internal considerations (p. 1454).

In Hobson’s terms (Hobson, Pace-Schott, & Stickgold, 2000), during both waking and dreaming there is an activation of the brain, a source of information that is evoked during the waking or dreaming process, and a biochemical modulation that differs radically from wakefulness to sleep. Dream experiences are, in part, a product of self-organizing tendencies in the brain during which the randomly evoked informational data are creatively patterned into a narrative to which meaning can be attributed (Kahn & Hobson, 1993).

(f) Valuable insights may emerge—including highly “divergent” processes that to be worked through in dreaming, at times, and sometimes upon waking where “convergent” processing can occur.

In the creative process, small changes in cognition or behavior can trigger an avalanche of new insights or novel creative products. Krippner and Combs (2002) have found this “butterfly effect” to characterize many dreams that lead to a creative solution to an ongoing problem. The human brain, with its many chaotic patterns of activity, is subject to the butterfly effect. The introduction of “noise” into such a system can produce a response too small to be ordinarily noticed. However, the presence of this “noise” or “vibration” keeps the system in motion, following the signal, rather than allowing it to become stuck. Termed stochastic resonance, this seemingly paradoxical effect has been demonstrated in electronic signals as well as in nerve cells (Moss & Wiesenfeld, 1995). On the other hand, the dreaming trajectories may be more under autopoetic (divergent and convergent) control than in those systems attempting to follow a repetitive signal as in most stochastic resonance. As in problem solving, they have a problem in mind, and use divergent trajectories and bifurcations to resolve it.

For instance, objects on a vibrating tabletop are sometimes seen to “walk” about, especially if the table is not level. In fact, they are following the line of least resistance down the slope of the surface, ordinarily not available to them because of friction with the top of the table. Here one might imagine that the neurochemical stimulation of the higher brain by the lower brain could cause activity there to “slide” in the direction of least resistance, resulting in dreaming. Hence, the dreaming brain isolated from daytime sensory bombardment and detached by neuromodulatory amnesia from those experiences that immediately precede sleep, produces a brain state especially responsive to subtle influences such as faint residual memories of emotional residues.

Affect regulation is one of several adaptive functions of dreaming; unpleasant dreams are a way to process a discomforting emotional experience from waking life by placing it in novel settings, often with strangers playing a key role, especially during REM dreams (McNamara, McLaren, Smith, Brown, & Stickgold, 2005). This highly creative way of managing affect load seems to depend upon chaotic dynamics; when they are not functioning properly, this self-regulatory creativity has broken down and the result is a nightmare in which the discomforting experience, often traumatic in nature, is repeated over and over in the brain’s unsuccessful attempt to restore its self-regulatory functions.

(g) Some writers see dreaming as no more than random patterns due to random brain activity, rather than an intentional process holding potential meaning.

One of William Shakespeare’s characters, in Romeo and Juliet, derided dreams as “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” In more recent times, Frances Crick and Graeme Mitchison (1986) proposed that dreaming performs a housecleaning function for the brain and that their content is “best off forgotten.” However, Crick and Mitchison described a neural network that underlies dreaming, one that other authors (e.g., Hartmann, 1999) have used to propose a more creative function of the dreaming process. Hobson has taken the position that dream content results from random stimulation of cortically-stored memories, but that the dreaming brain “makes the best of a bad bargain,” creatively weaving a narrative from the images (e.g., Hobson & McCarley, 1977; Hobson et al., 2000).

Krippner and Combs’ (2002) model of dreaming as a chaotic, self-organized process attempted to span the chasm between the neurobiology of dreaming and the study of dream content, a task also performed by G. William Domhoff (2003). However, Domhoff took the position that dreaming was an epiphenomenon of sleep, while Krippner and Combs held that it was adaptive in nature, serving an important role in the evolution of higher vertebrates (also see McNamara, 2004).

For Hobson and McCarley (1977), dream content is so bizarre that dreaming could be described as a “model psychosis” and “delirium.” Crick and Mitchison (1986) also wrote about the “bizarre intrusions” that characterize dreams.
Carol S. Uppercut (1993) took a more creative approach to bizarre elements in dreams, stating that “bizarreness is the means by which the dream represents objects, persons, or experiences that cannot…be isolated from the dreamer’s history in time and space. In the dream state we re-create the diachronic world from the standpoint of its synchronic coherence as established in a unique memory” (p. 25).

Deirdre Barrett (2001) has described a “bizarre” dream reported by the Italian composer, Giuseppe Tartini in which he handed the devil a violin bow. “The Devil played a haunting melody of unearthly beauty. The instant he awoke, Tartini grabbed his violin and tried to reproduce it. All he could remember was the distinctive double-stop trill. Around that marvelous sound, he composed a piece he called “The Devil’s Trill Sonata” (p. 69). Thus, where one person sees delirium, another person may see creativity.

(h) Although dreaming may have random elements, one can also discover patterns of content for which the meaning has potential social as well as individual significance.

Dreams can generate multiple meaningful possibilities. During the process of dreaming, random activation within the cortex (primarily the visual-motor areas) can evoke images and memories that connect with an unsolved issue that can serve as a chaotic attractor. “Branching” can lead to alternative ways of resolving the issue; the resulting dream narrative might favor a particular solution or it might predispose the dreamer to solve the problem upon awakening. Again, Goertzel’s (1995a, b) branching models help to explain this dream process, and if divergent and convergent processes are at work, it is likely that the more convergent occur later, upon waking, to fully understand an insight from dreaming. Many models of the creative process include an “incubation” phase that is followed by “illumination”; Tartini’s dream could serve as an example since he was hard pressed to produce a new composition and had a creative block for which his devilish dream provided a welcome breakthrough.

Hartmann (1999) encourages dreamers to seek a “central image” in their dream, one that contains vivid imagery and intense affect. This image, he maintains, can serve as the key to unlock the latent meaning of the dream narrative. In Krippner and Combs’ model, Hartmann’s central image would be a chaotic attractor, and neural networking would draw associated memories and images toward it to yield a coherent story.

Baylis (2009) has proposed that branching, or bifurcating, can happen more than once, producing a cascade. These bifurcations and cascades are specialized types of associative thinking, in which two associated images have a linking similarity. She used the well-known example of Elias Howe’s invention of the lockstitch sewing machine to make her point. While awake, Howe had worked in vain to design a machine that would sew garments, but nothing would work. One night he dreamed that savages had captured him and prodded him with their spears. As they were about to execute him, he noticed that each spear had a hole in the pointed end. He woke up with a start, realizing that what his machine needed was a needle with a hole in the pointed end. The needle and the spears had a similarity of shape—long, narrow, and pointed. Chaos theory adds an important dimension to the understanding of dreams; information is not simply accumulated, as Hobson maintained. It is also generated, creating connections that were not there before, and the Elias Howe dream is an example because he generated a working model for his sewing machine. This dream had social significance since it initiated an industrial paradigm that required fewer workers. Because many of the skilled sewers were slaves, it could be said that Howe’s dream was an initiator of the death knell to slavery in the United States.

Hence, nighttime dreaming serves as another example of “everyday creativity,” as each dream is unique and novel. Because each brain constantly self-organizes data, whether it is awake or asleep, creativity can be seen as part of the human potential rather than a trait limited to an elite group of individuals. This phenomenon of great social significance because it “democratizes” creativity, demonstrating that the term need not be limited to a few “creative geniuses.”

(i) These patterns are not only suggestive of immediate value, but of potential value because they were adaptive during the course of evolution.

Social psychology rests, in part, on the understanding that evolutionary processes led to the selection of genetic patterns that facilitated social interactions (McNamara, 2004). The outcome of such patterns is seen not only in these social interactions per se, but also in the thoughts, feelings, and dreams of humans. Indeed, there is evidence that social interactions are more likely to be depicted in dream reports than in spontaneously evoked waking reports. Furthermore, aggressive social interactions are more characteristic of REM than either NREM or waking reports. Finally, dream-anticipated friendliness is more characteristic of NREM than of REM reports. Therefore, processing of social interactions is often performed “off-line” during dreaming. This difference may be linked to the proposal that there is a reciprocal interaction of two neuronal groups, acetylcholine in REM, norepinephrine and serotonin in non-REM. These specializations suggest that dreams exert a regulatory impact on waking social interactions (McNamara, McLaren, Smith, Brown, & Stickgold, 2005).
(j) It is likely that further clarification of nonlinear dynamic processes and the balance between divergent and convergent forces can further reveal the healthy potentials of our creative minds, during both waking and dreaming states.

In the dream state, too, there may be misunderstanding and mislabeling of certain dream phenomena that are healthy and adaptive—in this case calling them bizarre and delusional at best, and random and meaningless at worst. Yet dreams may represent another highly adaptive creative process that dare not be overlooked.

Dreaming is a complex neurocognitive process with a neurochemistry, a neuroanatomy, and an electrophysiology as complex as waking processes (Pagel, 2008). The authors of this paper take the position that dreams are not, as some claim, an epiphenomenon; indeed, we suspect that dreaming played an important role in evolution of the nervous system. Dreams are not, as others claim, a spandrel, a decorative piece of architecture that serves no structural function; instead, they are central to the organization and architecture and development of the brain. Dreams are not, as still other insist, a nighttime discard that are best off forgotten; rather, they can lead to affect regulation, memory consolidation, and even creative problem solving. Gould and Lowentin (1979) have proposed an evolutionary significance for ‘spandrels.’

If dreams are simply epiphenomenal images without causal, intentional, or semantic content, then one would not expect to find that dream states exhibit processing specializations. If dreams are nighttime discards, one would not expect the emphasis upon social interactions that has been reported in the literature. If dreams are spandrels that randomly reflect snippets of daytime experience, there would be no reason to expect high levels of aggression in either REM or NREM dreams.

Instead, the available evidence points to creativity as a hallmark of a healthy mind in dreaming as well as waking. The sometimes bizarre appearances of new ideas, or new dream material should be carefully observed and even honored. Here one finds patterns of information that appear meaningful, socially relevant, and of evolutionary importance. One should not assume that dream material is random and meaningless because its special rules aren’t understood, and thereby miss patterns of meaning and creativity. Rather than pathological bizarreness (while awake) or meaningless random activity (while dreaming), our cognitive-affective productions may be showing their own logic, which can open us to deeper parts of the psyche with benefits we would otherwise lack. A study of waking and dreaming creativity from the perspective of chaos theory may help us understand the underlying mechanisms. More broadly, it may even point the way to a synthesis of science and aesthetics.

References


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The Narrative Arc of Tragic Loss: 
Grief and the Reconstruction of Meaning

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Abstract

In the face of a tragic transition associated with significant loss, our normally implicit ability to make sense of life experiences can be profoundly challenged, precipitating a painfully explicit search for meaning. Here I summarize our long and multifaceted research program on this process, organizing findings into those that bear on the narrative arc of meaning reconstruction in bereavement, beginning with shattering of the survivor’s life story, through its restorative retelling, reconstruction and integration. In doing so, I underscore the spiritual as well as secular struggles in meaning-making, the role of sense making and benefit finding in predicting more hopeful outcomes in bereavement, and the prospects for loss to usher in eventual gain in the form of posttraumatic growth.

To live is to suffer; to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering.

--Friedrich Nietzsche

There is not one big cosmic meaning for all, there is only the meaning we each give to our life, an individual meaning, an individual plot, like an individual novel, a book for each person.

--Anaïs Nin

Life and the experience of meaning

With the exception of the occasional existential philosopher or humanistic psychologist, few of us spend much time thinking about issues of “meaning” in the course of daily life. The world, it seems, is always “already there” as phenomenologists have emphasized, and we are “condemned to meaning” simply by dint of living in it (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). But this meaning is of a lived, pre-reflective sort, such that our every bodily sensation, perception, action, word or even silence carries an implicit significance, a “sense” that requires no conscious attention or articulation. Instead, successfully negotiating the patterns and regularities that constitute our everyday existence gives rise simply to a range of positive emotions (McCoy, 1977), which stand in the background of our awareness as a kind of validation of our ability to anticipate and engage the circumstances in which we are immersed. This view of meaning as a tacit ground of sense-making is compatible not only with phenomenological (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and constructivist (Kelly, 1955; Neimeyer, 2009) perspectives in philosophy and psychology, respectively, but also with the recent experimental work of Laura King and her associates, which demonstrates the strong and likely reciprocal link between positive affect and meaning in life (Hicks & King, 2009).

But there are times when the conscious need to find meaning in experience stubbornly or even agonizingly asserts itself. Deeply unwelcome life transitions, such as experiencing the death of a beloved other, especially under tragic circumstances, are among them. At such moments the taken-for-granted coherence of life is disrupted, and the simplest routines of daily living require painful review and revision, as when we no longer need to wake to nurse a baby that has died of SIDS, or in our widowhood go to bed alone. These and a hundred other violations of the “micro-narratives” of our everyday lives can ultimately vitiate our capacity to make sense of the larger “macro-narrative” of the loss and our existence in its wake, launching a search for meaning that may find few simple answers (Neimeyer, 2004; 2011).

This brief chapter summarizes our research program on grief and the quest for meaning, adopting primarily a clinical rather than philosophic or social psychological approach in view of our active concern with the lives of people who have been challenged and changed by tragic transitions. We recognize—and indeed demonstrate—that many mourners negotiate their losses with surprising resilience, such that even in their bereavement, the meaning of life (and death) remains
secure and unproblematic (Bonanno, 2004; Bonanno, Wortman, & Nesse, 2004). When it does not, however, grief can be complicated by a profound struggle to integrate the loss in both secular and spiritual terms, sometimes to a point that professional assistance is warranted. As a heuristic device for organizing this presentation I will describe the narrative arc of tragic loss in such cases, tracing the shattering of life stories through their retelling, reconstruction and integration, without intending to imply any fixed stage-like progression from brokenness to wholeness as one moves forward.

Shattering the story

Viewed through a narrative lens, much of what is distinctive about human beings arises from their capacity to “emplot” events in storied terms by attending to not only the “what” of experience (the “plot structure” of occurrences over time), but also the “why” of the events (the theme that underpins them, and gives them meaning and significance). This penchant to organize life as a tellable tale can be observed at every level from the commonplace stories we tell family and friends about the events of our day, to our attempts to piece together with our therapist how we came to be the people we now are, confronting the challenges we now face (Neimeyer & Levitt, 2000). And this same “effort after meaning” is nowhere more evident than when people are rocked by sudden, premature, or traumatic loss, leaving them struggling with a protracted, complicated grief that undermines their ability to “make sense” of what they have suffered. In narrative terms, it is as if the basic storyline of their lives has been invalidated, and with it, the prospect of their hoped-for future.

The struggles that can attend traumatic loss are painfully apparent in our research on African Americans losing a loved one to homicide. Studying a group of 54 survivors on average less than 2 years from the death, we discovered that over half struggled with intensely complicated grief marked by preoccupation with the death, the sense that a part of themselves had died with their loved ones and an inability to function in the spheres of family, work and the social world. Nearly as many suffered clinically significant depression, and almost 20% met criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder, whether or not they were present when their loved one was killed. Importantly, the majority contended with more than one of these syndromes; nearly all of those with PTSD, for example, also tested positive for depression and complicated grief. However, it is worth noting that even in the wake of this horrific loss, a resilient 37% somehow managed to emerge from the experience with none of these diagnoses (McDevitt-Murphy, Neimeyer, Burke, & Williams, 2012).

What role does the search for meaning play in accommodation to such horrific loss? Evidence suggests that the answer is “a great deal.” For example, one study of over 1,000 bereaved young adults confirmed the significantly greater complication that followed the shattering impact of violent death (by homicide, suicide or fatal accident) than of natural death losses, even when the latter were sudden and unanticipated. Consistent with the present rationale, however, meaning-making emerged as an explanatory mechanism for the difference in outcome following these forms of loss, as an inability to make sense of the loss functioned as a nearly perfect mediator of this relation (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006). Even in the case of the loss of a partner in late life to generally natural causes, an anguished search for meaning that extends 6 months or more into bereavement prospectively predicts exacerbated grief and depression several months or years later (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010).

In many communities, meaning making in the wake of loss naturally involves recourse to religious and spiritual beliefs that provide a sense of divine purpose or consolation for death of a loved one. This was certainly the case in our sample of African American homicide survivors living in an urban area in the South, who typically turned to God and their fellow church members when faced with adversity. Yet for a substantial subset of these mourners, the murder of their loved one ushered in not only depression, PTSD, and complicated grief, but also complicated spiritual grief, understood as an intense form of spiritual struggle or crisis precipitated by the death. Such complications, when they occurred, often suggested a disruption in the mourner’s relationship to God, as illustrated by the comments of one 69-year-old woman grieving her grandson’s murder: “I felt that God had allowed the capriciousness of life to invade our world. I wondered aloud if our entire family and our belief system were merely a cosmic joke. I questioned why God permitted such a painful and horrendous act when he had the power to stop it.” For others, the complication centered on their changed relationship with fellow church members. Another 59-year-old woman spoke of the aftermath of her husband’s homicide, saying, “I thought I could rely on my church community, but they grew tired of trying to console me and took advantage of my vulnerability. They said they would be there for me, but I didn’t know there would be a time limit.” For many survivors, the two forms of struggle were conjoined in a constellation of “negative religious coping” (Koenig, Pargament, & Nielsen, 1998) that compounded the literal loss with a symbolic and social one.

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Tracing the adaptation of the African American homicide survivors across 6 months, we discovered that complicated grief at Time 1 prospectively predicted complicated spiritual grief at Time 2, suggesting that the violent sundering of attachment associated with this horrific loss also undermined a sense of meaning and relationship with God and the spiritual community in the months that followed. Interestingly, the reverse was not the case, as spiritual struggle earlier in bereavement did not portend later complicated grief. Nor, to our surprise, was “positive religious coping” in the form of grounding oneself in one’s beliefs or turning to God or coreligionists for consolation predictive of better outcomes (Burke, Neimeyer, McDevitt-Murphy, Ippolito, & Roberts, 2011). Further study demonstrated that neither Time 1 depression nor PTSD forecast spiritual struggles at Time 2; instead, intense grief uniquely seemed to provide the instigating context for such crisis (Neimeyer & Burke, 2011).

Retelling the story

Adaptive grieving can be understood to involve two forms of narrative processing, centered on the event story of the death itself and on the back story of the relationship with the loved one (Neimeyer & Sands, 2011). Of course, when the death is relatively coherent with the survivor’s assumptive world, little active processing of its meaning may be called for. But when the loss is highly discrepant with the survivor’s self-narrative, then considerable meaning reconstruction may be necessary to integrate its reality, reaffirm attachment security with the deceased through reorganization of the continuing bond, and revise projected chapters in one’s life story.

In such cases, various forms of restorative retelling (Rynearson, 2006) of the narrative of the loss can promote these goals. This can take the form of first establishing sufficient “safety” in the therapeutic relationship to make revisiting the story of the death feasible, and then guiding the client in a “slow motion” replay of the event, typically beginning with when the person first learned of the death, or became aware of the loved one’s imminent dying, and continuing through some natural stopping point, such as the end of the first day of bereavement, the funeral or the burial (Neimeyer, 2012a). In the course of the telling, the therapist gently asks for the details often “edited out” of the client’s account to others, such as difficult images of the deceased on the hospital bed, the look in the eyes of a close family member or a particularly anguishing phone call or conversation to notify another. Alongside this external narrative of the event, the therapist can help the client braid in the internal narrative of her or his emotional or bodily reactions at crucial points, as well as the reflexive narrative of the meaning she or he had made of the events surrounding the death at the time and subsequently (Neimeyer & Levitt, 2001). Interlacing these three narrative lines over a 15-90 minute retelling as the therapist assists with emotion regulation, the client commonly begins to move beyond avoidance coping, feels “heard” and validated, and makes progress in weaving the story of the death into the larger tapestry of his or her life.

The most important research on this procedure has been published by Shear and her colleagues (2005), who conducted a randomized controlled trial of “complicated grief therapy” (CGT) versus interpersonal therapy (IPT) for a large cohort of clients struggling with life-limiting bereavement. As one of three core interventions, which also included processing the back story of the relationship through memory work and revising future goals, revisiting the story of the death promoted mastery of the difficult experience through prolonged exposure, in a way analogous to treatments for trauma. Results demonstrated that CGT was roughly twice as effective as IPT in producing marked improvement for clients struggling with grief complications (Shear, Frank, Houch, & Reynolds, 2005). A detailed discussion and illustration of this procedure, along with cognitive and constructivist variations, has been provided elsewhere (Shear, Boelen, & Neimeyer, 2011).

Reconstructing the story

Whether in the context of formal psychotherapy or simply in the course of living, survivors of losses of many kinds ultimately accommodate the unwelcome transitions introduced by the death of their loved ones (Currier, Neimeyer, & Berman, 2008; Neimeyer & Currier, 2009). Current research from a meaning-based perspective is beginning to illuminate some of the processes by which they may do so. For example, study of bereaved parents demonstrates that the ability to make sense of the loss is a potent predictor of grief symptomatology, accounting for five times the amount of variance in normative grief symptoms (e.g., missing the loved one, crying) and fifteen times the variance in complicated grief responses (e.g., feeling that the future is bleached of purpose, being unable to function in one’s work) as other factors, such as the passage of time or whether the death was violent or natural (Keesee, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2008). Closer inspection of narrative responses of parents suggested patterns of meaning making that were especially associated with better outcomes,
including viewing the death as congruent with God’s will, endorsing the prospect for reunion in an afterlife, and the belief that the child was no longer suffering. Likewise, better accommodation of the loss was reported by parents who found unsought spiritual benefits in the tragedy, who realigned life priorities or who dedicated themselves to needed lifestyle changes (Lichtenthal, Currier, Neimeyer, & Keesee, 2010). Particular patterns of meaning making triggered by different causes of death (e.g., violent vs. natural) also have been reported (Lichtenthal, Neimeyer, Currier, Roberts, & Jordan, 2013). The salutary effect of sense making is further supported in longitudinal research on older widows and widowers, as those who are better able to find significance in the loss by six months report higher levels of positive emotion and wellbeing as much as 4 years in the future (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010).

How might this meaning reconstruction be fostered therapeutically? One answer is through the literal use of narrative in the form of directed journaling (Lichtenthal & Neimeyer, 2012), prompting clients to reflect on the significance of the loss in concentrated periods of writing across the course of a week. Comparing instructional sets that emphasized emotional self-expression, sense making and benefit finding along with a control condition of writing about a neutral topic, one randomized controlled study found that the three former conditions produced sustained reductions in complicated grief symptoms across a period of three months, a pattern that was particularly prominent in the benefit finding condition (Lichtenthal & Cruess, 2010). Further variations of writing protocols therefore seem promising as a supplement to professional therapy in helping clients find sustainable meaning in lives changed by loss (Neimeyer, 2012b).

Integrating the story

The eventual (and ongoing) integration of the event story of the loss into the larger narrative of the survivor’s life holds the prospect of not only surmounting life-vitiating symptomatology, but also setting the stage for posttraumatic growth. To help map this process, Holland and his colleagues (2010) devised and validated the Integration of Stressful Life Experiences Scale or ISLES, which measures the extent to which the survivor succeeds or struggles with finding meaning in the wake of difficult transitions, including bereavement. The instrument contains two interpretable subscales, the first focused on the Comprehensibility of the event (e.g., I have difficulty integrating this event into my understanding of the world), and the second on the survivor’s secure Footing in the World in its aftermath (e.g., I haven’t been able to put the pieces of my life back together since the event). Completion of the scale by large samples of people losing a loved one or suffering other adversity, demonstrates that greater meaning integration over a period of three months is associated with reduced grief symptomatology in the former, and fewer psychiatric symptoms in the latter (Holland, Currier, Coleman, & Neimeyer, 2010). Recent research on religiously inclined mourners further suggests that meaning integration as measured by the ISLES may mediate the impact of religious coping on grief outcomes, with the former ultimately being the more important factor in accounting for positive adjustment (Lichtenthal, Burke, & Neimeyer, 2011).

Ultimately, as a substantial body of research on life stressors documents (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006), many survivors of tragic losses not only grieve but also grow as a result of the experience. Our research on over 600 mourners sustaining a wide variety of losses demonstrates that such positive outcomes are most probable when the bereaved suffer more than little, but less than much complicated grief symptomatology. That is, bereaved persons who report only very limited grief symptoms seem unlikely to revise their life narratives, pursue questions of meaning, or reconstruct their relationships with others, just as those who are overwhelmed with grief may be prevented from doing so. By contrast, those whose distress is significant but not crippling seem prompted to engage in the hard reflective and active work of reviewing and renewing their lives in the wake of loss (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2012). Further large scale research provides evidence that those mourners who draw on spiritual coping strategies, and who suffer violent death bereavement, are most likely to report growth in compassion, strength, a sense of possibility and appreciation of life in the longer term wake of loss (Currier, Malott, Martinez, Sandy, & Neimeyer, 2012).

Conclusion

As existential and humanistic thinkers have long recognized, human beings are characterized by an inveterate tendency to seek and find meaning in the patterns of their lives (Wong & Fry, 1998). The present research program extends this recognition to study how this quest for meaning develops—and sometimes fails to develop—in the context of the loss of a loved one to death. Surveying the results of numerous studies of several thousand mourners grieving a wide range of losses, we have been struck both by the resilience with which many people meet this unwelcome but inevitable life
transition and by the pivotal place of meaning making in adaptive grieving. Whether secular or spiritually inclined, contending with natural, anticipated losses or ones occurring under tragic circumstances, inability to find meaning in loss portends greater complication in bereavement, whereas the ability to integrate the experience into one’s meaning system is associated with less burdensome outcomes. Ultimately, such integration may also pave the way toward a greater sense of well-being and even growth, understood as a deepened compassion and connection to others who suffer adversity, greater existential depth and wisdom, and keener appreciation for the gift of life. As evidence also builds that meaning making is a process that can be facilitated by appropriate interventions, we are optimistic that a meaning reconstruction perspective can offer something of value to both helping professionals and to the clients they serve.

References


Identity and Meaning: Contrasts of Existentialist and Essentialist Perspectives

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Abstract

At first glance, the tasks of establishing a sense of personal identity and finding meaning in life would appear to be quite closely related. Both appear to be ways of addressing some of life’s paramount questions: “Who am I?” and “What should I be doing with my life?” Yet until quite recently, the development of psychological theory and empirical research on the two concepts proceeded largely independently. To understand the parallel but independent histories of identity and meaning, it is helpful to examine not only their respective definitions, but the manner in which they were introduced into the field and the differences in their underlying philosophical foundations. It is my hope that through a better understanding of the nature and histories of the two constructs, a more effective coordination and integration can be achieved.

Erikson and Frankl: Innovators in Understanding Identity and Meaning

The seminal thinkers on identity and meaning, Erik Erikson and Viktor Frankl, were contemporaries. For a period of time they were both living and working in Vienna, though their understandings of psychological functioning were quite different.

Erikson was born in 1902 in Frankfort, Germany of Danish heritage. He was raised in the Jewish religion by his mother and German-Jewish stepfather, a pediatrician. Erikson entered the psychoanalytic milieu of Anna and Sigmund Freud, first as a tutor in the Heizing School, a school run along psychoanalytic principles. He later entered training as a child psychoanalyst, though his previous formal education had ended at the gymnasium level (equivalent to secondary education). In 1933, with the rise of Austrofascism, Erikson and his wife left Vienna, traveling first to Denmark and then the United States where he taught and practiced. His interests turned to normative patterns of development across cultures, as well as to psychological problems in development. His writings on identity, first in Childhood and Society (Erikson, 1950), later in Identity and the Life Cycle (1959), and Identity: Youth and Crisis (1968), as well as subsequent works, reflected his psychoanalytic perspective.

In contrast, Viktor Frankl, born in 1905 in Vienna of Jewish parents, grew up to receive training as a physician. With his interest in psychology, he gravitated to work with patients with mental problems. One of his early medical assignments was responsibility for a ward of women with suicidal concerns. He had expressed an early interest in psychoanalysis, first in the work of Freud, later Adler, but his own theorizing took a different direction. His interests in philosophy, particularly existentialism, as well as with religious and spiritual expression led to developing a focus on the role of meaning in people’s lives. His exposure to the suffering of his patients and his own experiences in concentration camps during World War II, as well as the loss of his wife and other family members in those camps, strongly influenced his psychological theory. Frankl’s classic work on the importance of finding meaning originally appeared as Trotzdem Ja Zum Leben Sagen: Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager [Still Say Yes To Life: A Psychologist Experienced the Concentration Camps] in 1946 and was later republished under the title Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy (Frankl, 1963). It was followed by The Will to Meaning (published in English in 1969) and numerous other writings on the role of meaning in life and how to find it.

These brief biographical sketches make clear both significant similarities and differences in their background. Whereas the similarities likely contributed to their focus on allied psychological concepts, it is the differences in their backgrounds that set the course of their theorizing in different directions. The divergence in their theories has led theorists and researchers who followed their lead to work with either the concept of identity or with meaning in life, not both, and to do so from quite different philosophical perspectives. That long period of separate conceptual development now appears to be ending.
Conceptual Definitions of Identity and Meaning

Identity

Erikson (1963, 1968) located the task of identity formation at the point of transition from adolescence to adulthood, when the developing person faces decisions about who to be, what to stand for, and what to stand against. During childhood, under circumstances conducive to healthy development, children are largely defined by identifications with parents and significant others within their immediate context. At adolescence, there is an expansion of the person’s social world with an accompanying greatly expanded recognition that there are more ways of doing and believing than had been encompassed within those earlier identifications. Simultaneously, there is a recognition of the adolescent’s emerging capacity to choose options different from those currently present and the need to prepare for a future that will eventually involve functioning outside of the immediate family, and often community, outside of the present context. Given the adolescent’s perception of time, this is a gradual process, with independence and individuation seen as a relatively distant eventuality, but gains in urgency as the person moves from adolescence into what Arnett (2000) terms emerging adulthood.

The conceptual definition of identity that I will be using here builds upon the work of Erikson (1968):

Identity refers to a person’s self-definition in terms of those goals, values, and beliefs, whether chosen, developed through identifications, or ascribed, to which there is an unwavering commitment and that therefore provides direction, purpose, and meaning in life (Waterman, 1984).

This definition is composed of three parts. (a) The reference to goals, values, and beliefs pertains to the “what” or types of content included within a person’s identity. Such goals, values, and beliefs are domain specific, for example, pertaining to career choice, or perspectives on religion, spirituality, or gender-role expression. (b) The reference to whether such goals, values, and beliefs are chosen, developed through identification, or ascribed refers to “how” a person’s identity becomes established, that is, the processes by which identity is formed, or alternatively, to the avoidance of making identity decisions. (c) The reference to the role identity plays in providing direction, purpose, and meaning in life pertains to “why” identity contents are important to the person, that is, the functions that identity serves.

It is significant that the content of a person’s identity is almost always discussed in terms of particular domains of identity concern. Erikson (1968) identified the choice of work/career and the development of an ideological worldview, that is, religion and politics, as domains most central to forming a personal sense of identity. In empirical research on identity formation, investigators have greatly expanded the range of domains seen as relevant to identity formation, including gender roles, sexual orientation, sexual expression, race and ethnicity, marriage, parenting, and leisure pursuits, among others.

It is the topic of the processes of identity formation that has received the most theoretical and research attention. Important contrasts are made between the maintenance of childhood identifications into adulthood, a process Erikson (1968) referred to as foreclosure, and a more active, reflective process of choosing among available alternatives, a process that Erikson saw as integral to the identity crisis. Still another approach is to refrain from making identity commitments, preferring to keep one’s options open, not projecting into the future, but rather allowing one’s behavior to be determined by pressures within the immediate context. This process has been referred to as remaining identity diffuse. With respect to these processes of identity formation, it should be recognized that, within Western industrial nations, there are domains of identity concern in which the person has relatively wide freedom of movement, such as with respect to career choice or the role of religion or spirituality in one’s life, and other domains of self-definition, in which freedom of movement is substantially more difficult, such as gender identity and racial/ethnic identity. However, even in domains of the latter type, there is still a range of options as to the attitudes to take toward such ascribed aspects of identity and to their expression. In contrast to industrial nations, traditional and tribal societies may severely curtail the range of options available across all domains of identity concern.

With respect to the functions that identity serves, three were specified in the definition provided above. However, a review of the writings of Erikson and other identity theorists reveals a much broader set of functions, including subjective continuity over time, coherence across domains, social comparisons, interpersonal self-presentation, commonality with others, and individual distinctiveness (Waterman & Archer, 1990). It is the functions pertaining to purpose and meaning-in-life that provide a bridge between identity and meaning in both the theory and research literatures.
Meaning

In comparison to identity, the concept of meaning has frequently been defined in more elliptical terms. Frankl (2000) identified meaning with self-transcendence:

... man is oriented toward the world out there, and within this world, he is interested in meanings to fulfill, and in other human beings. By virtue of what I would call the pre-reflective ontological self-understanding he knows that he is actualizing himself precisely to the extent to which he is forgetting himself, be it through serving a cause higher than himself, or loving a person other than himself. Truly, self-transcendence is the essence of human existence. (Frankl, 2000, p. 138)

Wong (2012) identifies the five most important and enduring questions about the meaning of human existence as: (a) Who am I? (b) Why am I here? (c) Where am I going? (d) What is the meaning of suffering and death? and (e) How can I find significance and happiness? In describing the struggle to find answers to those questions, meaning has been conceptualized in multiple ways with the emphasis placed on purpose (Klinger, 1977; Ryff, 1989), significance or a higher calling (Baumeister, 1991; Yalom, 1980), perceptions of order and coherence in one’s existence (Reker & Wong, 1988), and ultimate concerns (Emmons, 1999).

The particular definition for meaning I will be using here is taken from Steger, Shin, Shim, and Fitch-Martin (2013):

Meaning is the web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our experience and formulate plans directing our energies to 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 sum of our seconds, days, and years.

With respect to the content of meaning, Frankl’s emphasis on self-transcendence, the questions posed by Wong, and the sense of mattering referred to by Steger, involve a range of broad philosophical concerns that are not domain specific. The resolution of such concerns, however, may find expression through one or more of the domains identified as relevant to identity formation such as “living according to the will of God” or “finding a way to make a difference in the lives of others.”

With respect to the functions served by the quest for a meaningful life, Baumeister (1991) identified four main needs that meaning satisfies: (a) the need for purpose, providing a sense of direction connecting the present to the future; (b) the need for values, providing a basis for justifying one’s actions; (c) the need for a sense of efficacy, involving the belief that one can make a difference; and (d) the need for a basis of self-worth.

Similarities and Differences between Identity and Meaning

Despite the differing conceptual origins of the concepts of identity and meaning, they are strongly inter-related. Most importantly, they provide answers to the same set of existential questions. In doing so, these constructs serve a substantial number of functions in common, including providing a sense of continuity between past, present, and anticipated future; establishing a basis for coherence across domains of life considered personally salient; and serving as a guide to decision-making about what to do and how to do it. Arguably, the most important of these is the sense of direction identity and meaning jointly provide, as this allows one to project into the future, to know both who one is and who one seeks to become.

Another area of parallels between the constructs concerns the processes by which identity and meaning are formed. For both constructs, personally salient commitments may be present or they may be absent. The presence of commitments with respect to each is seen as predictive of successful functioning and well-being; their absence is predictive of a range of problems in living. Further, the manner in which commitments are established can be viewed as parallel, that is, they emerge after a period of active exploration and search for answers, or they may become established through identification with parents or other authority figures in a person’s life.

One of the most important differences between constructs of identity and meaning concerns the level of conceptualization on which they operate. There is a level of concrete pragmatism involved in making identity decisions. When choosing a career, the questions that must be considered include what one would like to do, what one is capable of...
doing well, and what opportunities are likely to be available for the pursuit of a given career. Similarly, with respect to choosing what to believe and practice with respect to religion, the elements weighed when making a decision are likely to include not only matters of theology and doctrine, but also the likely reactions of family and friends, the social climate of the community of worship, and even the convenience of the religious practices. Such pragmatic considerations can be identified within every domain of identity concern. In contrast, with respect to finding meaning in one’s life, considerations of self-transcendence, mattering, and the broad philosophical nature of meaning concerns are not domain specific. Meaning is experienced as an overarching part of one’s life with influence that cuts across domains of identity concern, and influences the choices made in most, if not all, such domains. Finding meaning in life refers to what one sees as a higher calling and, therefore, pragmatic considerations are not viewed as determinative of what is meaningful.

Three Questions Concerning Making Identity Decisions and Finding Meaning-in-Life

Whereas most theoretical and empirical research attention on the subject of identity has been focused on the processes of identity formation, a focal concern in my work has been on the quality of the identity decisions being made, by whatever process. When the focus is placed on the quality of identity decisions, there are three questions that call for attention. First, are some identity choices we can make “better” than others that are equally available to us? I submit that the answer to that question is unequivocally “yes.” If you grant me that premise, then the second question becomes: What constitutes the nature of “better” choices, that is, what serves as the criteria for considering them to be better? And the third question is: How is someone who is trying to form a sense of personal identity to identify which, among the alternatives available, are the better ones to choose? My efforts to answer those questions have led to the development of what I now term eudaimonic identity theory and to a body of empirical research investigating the premises and hypotheses embodied in that theory (Waterman, 1984, 1990, 1992, 2007, 2011). Given the interrelations between the concepts of identity and meaning, I believe these three questions have comparable applicability to finding meaning in life and that the answers to the questions are mutually supportive for the two constructs.

Philosophical Perspectives Underlying the Concepts of Identity and Meaning

The first two questions posed above concern whether “better” identity and meaning alternatives exist and the criteria for determining what constitutes a better choice. These are matters in the realm of philosophy and I will now turn to an examination of the philosophical perspectives underlying concepts of identity and meaning.

To begin, I will describe two alternative metaphors for conceptualizing the tasks of identity formation and finding meaning in life, both rooted in philosophy. These metaphors portray establishing identity and meaning as acts of creation (or construction) or as acts of discovery.

The process of creation/construction involves bringing into existence something that has never before existed. It entails selecting from among virtually unlimited possibilities and constructing, from the elements chosen, something deemed to be a value. Creation is the way of artists, architects, and engineers. This metaphor is allied with an existential philosophical perspective.

To say that we have made a discovery means that we have come to recognize something about the nature of the world or ourselves. That which is found is something that already exists. Now it is recognized and understood. Discovery is the process of making the unknown, known. Discovery is the way of explorers and scientists. This metaphor is rooted in essentialist philosophy.

Identity and Meaning as Existential Concepts

With respect to identity and meaning, two quotes from Erich Fromm sum up both the creation metaphor and its existential underpinnings in the human situation:

Man is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem which he has to solve and from which he cannot escape (Fromm, 1950, p. 23).

If [man] faces the truth without panic, he will recognize that there is no meaning in life except the meaning man gives his life by the unfolding of his powers by living productively (Fromm, 1947, p. 53)
A central theme running through existentialist thought is human freedom to choose who we are to become and therefore our personal responsibility for the choices we make. However, while we are responsible for the identity and meaning decisions that we make, the existentialists tell us that there are no absolute standards or criteria that we can use when making those decisions. There is no essential human nature that determines what destiny we are to fulfill. We are, and we must decide who and what we will become. We should not turn to external authorities, or to loved ones, to tell us what we should do. To do so is, to use Sartre’s term, to live in bad faith, or in Heidegger’s reference to inauthenticity, to become lost in the they; this idea is also central to Fromm’s concept of escape from freedom. If this perspective has merit, then identity decisions are ultimately arbitrary. This led some existentialists, such as Kierkegaard and Camus, to emphasize the absurd position life places us in. We must make crucial life decisions, to create our lives, without criteria for what we should do and without seeking outside guidance in the process.

For the existentialists, being arises from nothingness. We have an obligation to choose who we are to become in terms of our goals, our values, and our beliefs. The constraints on our choices are minimal. We cannot do that which is impossible for us to do. Beyond that, we have a virtually limitless array of possibilities. We become defined by the choices that we make.

Existential philosophy provides a basis for concluding that there are better identity and meaning choices to be made. The criteria for determining the nature of better choices involve freedom, responsibility, and authenticity. Better choices are ones we make for ourselves because of the being we wish to become. Better choices are ones that most successfully fulfill the functions served by a sense of identity and personal meaning. However, I do not believe the existential perspective is particularly helpful in identifying how a person is to recognize the nature of the better choices that might be made. When the criterion to be used is authenticity, how is one to tell which among an array of alternatives is more authentic than another? What is it that makes one alternative more authentic? The existentialist philosophers appear to be silent on this point. It is here that I believe an essentialist perspective can be most helpful.

Identity and Meaning as Essentialist Concepts

Essentialism is a perspective that has been used in the fields of philosophy, biology, and psychology. Essences are the properties or attributes of an object that make it what it is and without which it would be a different thing. Within essentialism, existence and form arise simultaneously; there can be no existence without some form. For a person, that form exists as what one’s being is at the present point in time and the potentials for what the person may become in the future. Within psychology, essentialism is associated with the concept of organismic development (Goldstein, 1939/1995) and is a central aspect of Erikson’s epigenetic eight-stage theory of psychosocial development. Development unfolds as it does because, at each stage, the person is optimally ready, on the basis of generic human nature, to benefit from certain types of experiences provided by the social environment. Such potentials, as the essence of a person, are key elements determining the course of development and predict what is most likely to occur across the life-span (Kanovsky, 2007).

While it is often assumed that essences are fixed, unalterable aspects of an object, such is not necessarily the case. Certainly, many of our potentials are rooted in our genetic make-up and physiology. As our physiology changes, whether breaking down due to age or accident, or improved through physical training or medical interventions, so too do our potentials change. Our potentials are also a function of the experiences that have been afforded to us, for without experiences we would not have knowledge of what might be possible. If we do not know of it, it is not an option available for us to choose to become. Within the epigenetic theory of development, the appropriate experiences at the appropriate time are as necessary for healthy development as is the physical potential to benefit from those experiences.

Within philosophy, an essentialist perspective is embodied within eudaimonism (Aristotle, 4th century B.C.E./1985; Norton, 1976). The term eudaimonia traces back to classic Hellenic philosophy, where it received its most notable treatment in Aristotle’s Nichomachean Ethics. It is traditionally translated as happiness but there are many philosophers and psychologists who believe a more accurate translation is flourishing. For Aristotle, eudaimonia was something very different from hedonic pleasure.

The many, the most vulgar, seemingly conceive the good and happiness as pleasure, and hence they also like the life of gratification. Here they appear completely slavish, since the life they decide on is a life fit for grazing animals. (Aristotle, 4th Century B.C.E./1985, p. 7)

Eudaimonia was considered to be the proper goal in life, an objective state of being, a way of living. Aristotle meant it to convey activity expressing virtue or excellence, acting upon the very best within us. He did not view eudaimonia as a
subjective experience or way of feeling.

However, a brief etymological analysis of the word eudaimonia, in English, suggests that both an objective and a subjective meaning are plausible. The word is composed of three parts:

(a) eu- meaning good or desirable, as in (e)utopia, an ideally desirable society.
(b) –daimon- Originally this meant a guiding spirit or tutelary god provided at birth to help set a person on the right path. The idea of the daimon was later internalized, as reflected in the view of Heraclitus that “man’s character is his daimon.” The daimon can thus be thought of as a “true self” representing the person’s best potentials, latent talents, resonating values, and ways of living that he or she is capable of expressing. It is the concept of the daimon that makes eudaimonism an essentialist philosophy.
(c) -ia. This syllable typically refers to ways of feeling, as in euphoria (feeling happy), melancholia (feeling sad), or anhedonia (the inability to feel happy). The implication here is that there are particular feelings associated with experiences of the good, true self.

This etymological analysis suggests that the term eudaimonia conveys two meanings: One objective, centering on the concept of the daimon, the other subjective, centering on the feelings present when acting in a manner consistent with the daimon.

As I use the term here, the daimon refers to those potentialities of each person, the realization of which represents the greatest fulfillment in living of which each is capable. These include both the potentials that are shared by all humans by virtue of our common specieshood, that is, our generic human nature, and those unique potentials that distinguish each individual from all others. The latter can be termed our individual, essential nature. As David Norton (1976) described the daimon, it is an ideal in the sense of being an excellence, a perfection toward which one strives, and, hence, it can give meaning and direction to life. Note how the functions of the daimon and the functions of identity coincide and that striving to live in accord with one’s true self provides the basis for a meaningful life.

According to the ethics of eudaimonism, each individual “is obliged to know and live in truth to his daimon, thereby progressively actualizing an excellence that is his innately and potentially” (Norton, 1976, p. ix). This spirit underlies two famous classical Hellenic injunctions: “Know thyself” and “Become what you are.” Norton phrased it as “freely living the life that is one’s own.” This is an affirmation of personal responsibility and a statement of personal integrity. It requires a commitment be made both to the principles by which one chooses to live and the goals toward which one’s life is to be directed. This commitment involves a conscious recognition and acknowledgement of personal truths already known intuitively. This is the objective meaning of eudaimonia as it refers to a way of living and is consistent with the translation of the term as flourishing.

However, the etymological analysis also suggests that the term eudaimonia has a legitimate subjective meaning as well. When we are aware that we are striving to live in accordance with the daimon, to realize our best potentials, there is a characteristic subjective, cognitive-affective state that accompanies that recognition. This constellation of subjective experiences includes feelings of rightness about one’s actions, centeredness in what one is doing, strength of purpose, competence, fulfillment, being who one really is, and doing what one was meant to do. I have referred to such experiences as feelings of personal expressiveness (Waterman, 1990). We feel good about ourselves when we experience such feelings, and it renders the translation of eudaimonia as happiness, as well as flourishing, fully appropriate.

A eudaimonic, essentialist perspective on identity and meaning thus provides not only a set of criteria for what constitutes better identity and meaning choices in one’s life, that is, choices in accord with one’s best potentials, but also identifies the basis for identifying which among an array of choices available, represent those better alternatives, that is, subjective eudaimonia (feelings of personal expressiveness).

The two meanings for the term eudaimonia discussed here, the objective and the subjective, are not in competition with each other. They are inherently interrelated. The latter, the subjective definition, follows from the former, the objective definition, and cannot exist without it. Since subjective eudaimonia results from acting in ways consistent with one’s personal potentials, it is necessary, objectively, to be striving to live in accord with one’s true self (essence) in order to experience eudaimonia. As positive as the subjective experiences of eudaimonia are, they are not the goal in life to be pursued; they are not meaningful in themselves. Their value is in the function that they serve. That function is what they say about who we are and what we have the capacity to become. It is the development and expression of our potentials, living authentically, that is the hallmark of a meaningful life, well-lived. Subjective experiences of eudaimonia serve as an indicator that we are having some success in that regard.
Although Erikson was not inclined to examine the philosophical roots of his theory, there are reasons to believe that its foundations are primarily essentialist. His eight-stage epigenetic theory of psychosocial development can be considered to fall within the organismic perspective, since the stage sequencing is viewed as culturally universal and unfolds as a function of coordinated biological and social demands. This indicates the presence of innate potentials of a developing system, the essential form of a generic human nature. When making identity choices, he discusses the need to integrate elements of soma (biology), psyche (mind/personal ways of thinking), and ethos (community). Such combinations result in highly individual identity decision-making, making it plausible that the theory would accommodate a unique individual essential nature as well as a generic human nature.

Identity and Meaning: Integrating Existential and Essential Philosophical Concepts

Given that existentialism and essentialism are generally considered to be dialectical polar perspectives, the attempt to generate an integrative synthesis when contemplating the tasks of identity formation and meaning-making would appear to be a daunting task. Nevertheless I believe it possible to advance a theoretical perspective that preserves the existential values of freedom, responsibility, and authenticity; while simultaneously utilizing essentialist values associated with the presence of both a generic and an individually unique human nature, with eudaimonia as the means by which such a nature is identified and developed. What follows is the brief outline of what such an integrative theory may entail.

Sartre’s famous dictum that “existence precedes essence” is meant to convey the notion that there is no inevitability about who we are to become; rather, it is something that we have the freedom to choose, and therefore personal responsibility for the choices made. However, Sartre and other existentialists also recognize that there is a generic human nature. That is, we cannot become something outside the range of possible human functioning. What the essentialist, eudaimonic perspective adds to this is a unique individual nature as well. In other words, we cannot become something that is outside of individual nature. This has less to do with what we might attempt to do, and more with what we are inclined to do and have the capacity to do well, or at least better than other things we might do. Our individual nature includes our physical make-up, for example, making it more likely that some of us can become successful musicians while others cannot. Such difference will exist across the range of human endeavors for which temperament, aptitude, intuition, inclination, cognitive and emotional intelligence, among other factors are contributing factors.

Existential psychologists did not necessarily reject an essentialist perspective in its entirety. Viktor Frankl (1963) explicitly employed the metaphor of the discovery of meaning, rather than its construction. Erich Fromm (1947-1950) in the passage quoted above, spoke of meaning emerging from the unfolding of a person’s powers, whether those powers were exclusively aspects of a generic human nature or an individual nature is unclear. In considering the religious essence of being human, Paul Tillich, as quoted by Rollo May, believed that existentialism was not possible without essentialism:

Man’s particular nature is his power to create himself. And if the further question is raised of how such a power is possible and how it must be structured, we need a fully developed essentialist doctrine in order to answer; we must know about his body and his mind, and, in short, about those questions which for millennia have been discussed in essentialist terms. (Rollo May, 1960, p. 13)

Rollo May (1960) also wrote: “. . . ‘being’ is to be defined as the individual’s unique pattern of potentialities. These potentialities will be partly shared with other individuals but will in every case form a unique pattern for this particular person” (p. 19). Thus, the adoption of both a generic human nature and a unique individual nature is explicit here.

Consistent with an existential perspective, both a generic human nature and individual human nature place limits on our range of freedom of choice, but do not eliminate it. With specific reference to our individual nature, while we may not be able to do very well those things outside the range of our better potentials, we can choose to strive to become the best we are capable of at given type of endeavor. And if we value an activity, we may well choose to become mediocre at it rather than doing it poorly. However, the concern of Aristotle and contemporary philosophical eudaimonists is not with individual human limitations, but with a person’s best potentials --those things a person could potentially do more successfully than other things that the person might choose to do. Human freedom comes into play in that we must actively choose to pursue our talents, even if we do not choose what those talents are. Further, it is error to believe that there is only some singular latent potential that represents the one route to personal meaning and fulfillment. As I discuss below, we have a multitude of possibilities in varying domains that are among the better alternatives we could make of our life. This means that there will always need to choose which potentials to pursue and which to leave dormant and undeveloped.
Having chosen which of our potentials to pursue, we also have the freedom to choose the goals toward which our talents are to be directed. And with that freedom comes responsibility. We have the capacity to make ethical or unethical choices, or choices that may be morally ambiguous. For example, a talent for plotting a clever crime may be developed in the service of a successful criminal career, a career as a consultant in crime prevention, or a career as a crime novelist and screenwriter.

Research on the Interrelationships of Identity and Meaning

There have been a substantial number of studies demonstrating an empirical linkage between various measures of identity functioning and indices of meaning-in-life. In samples of high school and college students, the findings are consistent in indicating significant associations between the presence of identity commitments and high scores on meaning and purpose-in-life (Beaumont, 2009; Beaumont & Scammell, 2012; Burrow, O’Dell, & Hill, 2010; Côté & Levine, 1983; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Wang, & Olthuis, 2009; Schwartz et al., 2011; Simmons, 1983; Waterman, 2007). The associations found are mostly in the modest to moderately strong range. As expected, measures of identity diffusion and identity distress are negatively related to the presence of purpose and meaning in life (Beaumont, 2009; Burrow, O’Dell, & Hill, 2010; Côté & Levine, 1983; Schwartz et al., 2011; Waterman, 2007).

The findings regarding the relationship of identity variables with the search for meaning are less clear. A significant positive association between identity exploration and the search for meaning was found by Burrow, O’Dell, and Hill (2010) but was not replicated by Hill and Burrow (2012). Beaumont (2009; Beaumont & Scammell, 2012) reported that the search for meaning was associated with identity diffusion and distress. There were, however, inconsistent findings with respect to a negative association with the presence of identity commitments.

Overall, while the expected relationships between identity and meaning in life constructs were mostly confirmed, yet the strength of these associations based on the measures employed in this research suggests that they are, indeed, assessing different constructs.

A Eudaimonic Perspective on the Development of Identity and Meaning

Having described what constitutes the desired outcome for identity and meaning from a eudaimonic perspective, the next question to consider concerns how such an outcome can be achieved. How does one go about the process of identity formation such that one can find meaning and live with authenticity? How can we come to discover our better identity choices and act upon them? I describe four steps to the process:

The first step is the identification of those potentials for what we can do in our lives, better than other alternatives equally available. We are not born with knowledge of what constitutes our better potentials. Those potentials must be discovered. Recall that I described a distinctive subjective state as associated with acting on the basis of our potentials, that is, feelings of personal expressiveness. When one engages in an activity for the very first time and thinks: “Where has this been all my life? Why didn’t I know about this sooner? This is fun!” that is one type of such experiences. Consider what is implied when such an experience occurs on the first exposure to an activity. It cannot be the specific activity in and of itself that is generating that reaction, since the same activity that is experienced so positively by one person, will be experienced with only mild interest or indifference by others, and some may actually experience it as aversive. So feelings of personal expressiveness are telling us something important about ourselves in relationship to a given activity. They are an indication as to where one’s potentials may lie and what activities are worth pursuing further. I make no claim that such first reactions to activities are always indicators of our better potentials, and subjective eudaimonia is far more complex than what occurs on first exposures to activities. Still, such reactions are a very good place to start the process of self-discovery. To maximize the likelihood of encountering experiences that may generate such feelings of connection, parents should expose their children to a very wide array of varying activities, with the full recognition that most will be greeted with only mild interest or indifference. But it only takes making one intense connection with an activity to perhaps ignite a life-long passion.

The identification of one’s potentials is only the start of the process; those potentials need to be developed. No matter the type of activity for which one has a natural talent, when one begins, one is a novice. One does not as yet know what one is doing, cannot do it particularly well, and may do not even know what needs to be done to develop that talent. What is known is the desire to develop that latent possibility into actual skills.
The second step involves investing hard work and dedicated effort to the development of those skills. Anders Ericsson (Ericsson & Charness, 1994) suggests it takes 10,000 hours of dedicated training and practice to become a master for any talent. A lot of that practice is not fun in the sense of hedonic pleasure. What helps sustain a person through those years of developing talents is eudaimonia, the perception that one is becoming the person one most wishes to be. Feelings of personal expressiveness, now far more complex than those first reactions mentioned above, help to reinforce and sustain behavior through the inevitable stalls and even setbacks that are part of talent development.

Not everyone who embarks on the development of a particular skill will continue with its development. A lot of people discontinue their pursuits long before they get anywhere near investing 10,000 hours in it. If one’s potential is relatively modest with respect to a particular skill, the more complex elements of personal expressiveness will not emerge. The activity stops being fun and the person moves on to try other things. Sometimes the actual potential may be quite strong, but the person’s connection to it does not match the intensity of the latent talent. When a teenager says to a parent: “I know I am good at math, I just don’t care about it,” it is a strong indicator that feelings of personal expressiveness are not present. There is more to potentialities than just latent talent; there are associated values as to what is, and is not, personally important and worth pursuing in life.

It is not a matter of whether something is easy or difficult for a person to do. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) points out we often feel best about what we do when there is a balance of challenges posed by an activity and the skills we bring to it. Too much challenge and we feel anxious. Too little and the result is boredom. With the two in balance, we are in the subjective state of flow. By learning to meet the challenges we encounter, our skills improve. Flow is still another element in what is termed eudaimonia, feelings of personal expressiveness. Note again that flow is selective. The balance of challenges and skills for some activities (those that are valued) yields experiences of flow; the corresponding balance for activities not valued, are merely tasks to get through and be done.

Once a talent has been developed to a certain degree of proficiency, the question we must consider is toward what end or goal is that talent to be directed. Dealing with this question constitutes the third step in the process and it typically occurs in overlap with the development of skills. From a eudaimonic perspective, just as a person resonates with some activities more than others based upon that person’s potentials, so too the person is likely to resonate with some goals and values more than others, based upon temperamental and other essential aspects of personality. However, it is also plausible that early learning experiences, with regard to goal setting, play an important role. Some people seem inclined to be more adventurous and greater risk-takers than others, whether for essential or experiential reasons. In addition, rational considerations regarding the likelihood of goal attainment may also play an important role, with respect to which identity-defining goals are selected.

The process of establishing a sense of personal identity and finding meaning in life is still not finished with the selection of those life goals considered worth pursuing. It remains necessary to find opportunities within one’s social context to implement one’s identity choices. This is the fourth step in the process I have outlined. Depending on the talents being developed and the goals one has chosen to pursue, one’s social circumstance may afford many or few opportunities to act upon the choices made. For some, one’s life course may be relatively smooth because the opportunities for the expression of one’s identity are readily available. For others, there may be many roadblocks. Finding oneself blocked on one’s chosen path can be a source of considerable frustration. Some who have chosen a difficult path may overcome the existing blocks directly, for example, by trying harder than others pursuing the same limited opportunities. Others may strive to find inventive ways to make their own opportunities, not by way of competition, but rather through creating a market for their talents that did not previously exist. Some may choose to leave their existing constraining social context, trying to find a more promising environment with greater opportunities for the expression of their talents and their values.

There can be no guarantee that one will ultimately find successful outlets for one’s talents in pursuit of one’s chosen goals. The recognition of this is distressing and reflects a need for courage in pursuit of a meaningful life, just as is required under existentialist assumptions. There are, however mitigating conditions that exist with respect to the existentialist pursuit of meaning. It is important that these be recognized. When I write of individual human nature and our best potentials, it should not be assumed that we have but one potential for excellence and one course of action that we would find personally expressive and fulfilling. Everyone has multiple potentials, multiple latent talents that we could, and would, find meaningful in our lives.

When terms like potentials, aptitudes, and talents are employed, it is easy to assume that the intended focus is on making career decisions. However, those terms apply to a wide range of human endeavors, from romantic attachments, to parenting, to religious and/or spiritual expression, to prosocial community action, to the pursuit of various avocational activities. In all of these domains, as in many others, there are wide individual differences. The nature vs. nurture debate
concerning individual differences, with respect to any aspect of behavior, has long-since been resolved that both are involved. If we take seriously the idea that an individual’s unique personal nature does indeed play a significant role across the broad spectrum of human behavior, then the essentialist, eudaimonist thesis follows that experiences of authenticity and achieving personal fulfillment will be derived from doing those things that one is both inclined to do and to do well. On the nurture side, striving for improvement in the quality of performance in domains in which we are not naturally talented will, in all likelihood, lead to improvements in the quality of performance, but if neither natural inclination nor aptitude are strong, those domains are not likely to become ones that provide major sources of meaning or satisfaction in our lives.

In sum, everyone has the potential to live a full, meaningful life in multiple ways, if efforts are directed at identity formation toward knowing who we are, that is, (a) identifying those many potential directions for our life for which we have natural inclinations and capacities, (b) investing diligent effort to develop those potentials, (c) choosing goals that allow for the full utilization of those talents in personally meaningful ways, and (d) finding or generating opportunities within our social context for the pursuit of those objectives, or find a different, more promising social context for their expression.

An Agenda for Future Empirical Concurrent Research on Identity and Meaning

As indicated at the opening of this article, research on identity and meaning in life has proceeded largely independently. Given the theoretical linkages between the concepts, it would be valuable to expand their study concurrently. As the literature review of research, provided above, indicates, it has been established that respondents who have established a strong sense of personal identity are also more likely to have found purpose and meaning in life. However, these studies have been almost all one-time correlational assessments. What are needed are longitudinal studies to determine if there are typical sequences to the development of such commitments, and if so, in which direction. Cross-lagged panel studies will move us a step closer to determining whether there may be a causal relationship between identity and meaning.

Research on the possible linkage of identity exploration and the search for meaning has been less extensive and has yielded less consistent findings. One problem here is that existing instruments, assessing the search for meaning, do so with items that solely measures ongoing or current search, whereas many identity instruments distinguish current search from past search activities. Instruments should be created for the assessment of three categories of search: (a) current search, (b) past search that was successfully resolved with the establishment of meaning, and (c) past search that was not successfully resolved, but rather ended without the establishment of meaning.

Another line of research that should be conducted would involve qualitative studies of the processes involved in establishing a personal sense of identity and meaning-in-life. At present there are numerous studies using narrative and discursive methodologies in which the information generated is interpreted in terms of either, or both, identity and meaning constructs, without systematically considering the possible differences between them. A focus on the contrasts of the ways in which each is successfully established would be particularly valuable. It would also help to learn more about what approaches to identity and meaning formation do not work in this regard.

Although the development of identity and meaning through the four-step process outlined above appears logical, it remains to be determined whether the process actually unfolds as hypothesized. Are there characteristic ages at which transitions between steps are most likely to occur? What is the typical length of time individuals remain in each step? What contextual variables help to promote such development and what variables thwart the process? Are there moderating or mediating variables that affect the development process?

Finally, it has been established that both successful identity formation and successful development of purpose and meaning-in-life are associated with well-being, whether defined as subjective or psychological well-being. It remains to be determined whether identity and meaning make the greater contribution to well-being in combination or separately.

Concluding Comments

I began this article with the observation that the concepts of identity and meaning in life had their origins in theoretical systems grounded in different philosophical perspectives. The result was that subsequent work on these concepts, both theoretical and empirical, proceeded very largely independently. However, it can be argued that concepts, in themselves, are atheoretical, and that this is particularly true with respect to their operational definitions. Despite apparent overlap in the conceptual definitions of identity and meaning, there have been only a few research studies conducted to examine empirically their interconnections, most of those appearing within the past five years. The findings from those
studies provide grounds to believe that these constructs are part of a common nomological web associated with the nature of well-being. While progress has been made with respect to empirical research, similar progress toward understanding their inter-relationships has not been made at the level of theory, due in no small part to the different philosophical grounding for their theories of origin. Placing these differing philosophical assumptions side by side, as I have done here, points to both the difficulties and the opportunities for integrating work on identity and meaning. I have endeavored here to outline what I see as required within an integrative theory. I have also advanced here an agenda for future research investigations directed toward identifying their interconnections. Achieving a more comprehensive appreciation of how individuals come to define themselves with respect to identity and meaning, and the implications that such self-definitions have for well-being, will require continuing advances with respect to both theory and research regarding how these constructs are integrally connected.

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Finding Meaning Through Transpersonal Approaches in Clinical Psychology: Assessments and Psychotherapies

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Abstract

Meaning is not a given, but constructed. Transpersonal psychology focuses on the interconnectedness of the person to that which can give meaning, such as relatedness to others, the world as encountered, and the cosmos as a whole. Clinical approaches to transpersonal psychology involve assessments and psychotherapies. Transpersonal assessments provide a basis for grounding meaning in some consensual realms, while transpersonal psychotherapies provide ways to further develop meaning, either to address psychopathology or encourage growth toward greater holism. Categories of transpersonal psychotherapies are identified, including attentional, biochemical, depth psychological, existential, and somatic, and some of their common features are explored in regard to creating and enhancing meaning.

Meaning is not an ontological given, but rather appears more as a socio-psychological and cultural construction. It serves the external adaptive purpose of unifying actions and the internal adaptive purpose of unifying cognition and affect. Meaning also appears always positioned in a relational framework that involves grounding persons as interconnected with something other than the individual self, namely others, the world as encountered, and the cosmos as a whole. One way to conceptualize a basis for meaning is from the perspective of transpersonal psychology, which provides a way to understand meaning in consensual ways through transpersonal assessments and to enhance meaning through transpersonal psychotherapies.

What is Transpersonal Psychology?

Hartelius, Caplan, and Rardin (2007) studied numerous definitions of transpersonal psychology, and divided these, through using content analysis, into three themes. The first involves understanding persons as extending beyond ordinary conceptions of separateness by recognizing them as profoundly interconnected (including with other humans, the world of all living beings and non-living things, and ultimately the cosmos as a whole). The second involves employing a holistic integrative approach emphasizing that persons have transcendent capacities that defy materialistic limitations and can be seen as spiritual. The third involves psychological transformations in which the first two perspectives are applied to fostering individual and systems growth toward greater wholeness. Historically, transpersonal psychology evolved during the turbulent 1960s within the US from three social movements: multiculturalism (from increased exposure to non-Western spiritual traditions), psychedelic exploration (from expanding perceptions of reality), and rapid social change (from questioning authority). Initially, transpersonal psychology emphasized altered states of consciousness (gained from psychodelic and spiritual practices) and increased sense of empowerment (gained from social activism), and later sought to transform lives and the world.

The founding of the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology marked the beginning of the discipline of transpersonal psychology, and its first issue included Maslow’s (1969) attempt to define it. As one of the founders of humanistic psychology, Maslow later became dissatisfied with its human orientation, refocusing his interests in a cosmic-centered psychology in which interconnectedness became more important than the isolated human. My own transpersonal work similarly focused on an expanded sense of self-concept as a type of interconnectedness (Friedman, 1983), a central theme reflected by the work of many others (e.g., Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). My approach to self-expansiveness includes the study of individuals identifying with all possibilities existing within space-time, as well as that which might transcend space-time (e.g., Friedman, in press).

Transpersonal psychology was and remains, however, somewhat of a pariah in modern academic circles, despite that mainstream psychology has accepted much of what transpersonal psychology first introduced. The area of
consciousness studies, for example, is now legitimate, but it was taboo when transpersonal psychology was among the first areas to take its study seriously. Transpersonal psychology also respectfully explored spiritual claims from various non-Western (e.g., Eastern and indigenous) cultures, which until recently mainstream psychology tended to denigrate as so-called “exotic” cultural beliefs, yet now multiculturalism is commonplace within mainstream psychology. Transpersonal psychology also challenged many limitations of the scientific method, and helped pioneer important methodological shifts, such as when qualitative approaches became more accepted, alongside quantitative approaches, within psychology. In many other areas, transpersonal psychology has led the mainstream into positive directions.

However some approaches of transpersonal psychology have not yet been integrated into the mainstream. For example, transpersonal psychology proposed state-specific sciences (Tart, 1975), in which research can be legitimately gathered while researchers are in alternate consciousness states, a stance yet too radical for widespread acceptance. This approach, although seemingly out of bounds to many, may be more valid for studies in some contexts, such as involving exceptional experiences incomprehensible within Western cultural frameworks. Many traditional meditation systems use intense practices to alter consciousness, and have made cumulative internal observations that have consensually been refined and tested across millennia. Within these cultural contexts, these observations constitute empirically valid data, but derived from radically different types of science than customarily used within the West. Western meditation studies typically involve only beginners taught to meditate in short-term training of a few weeks or so, which contrasts with studies of those who have been practicing authentic spiritual traditions over most of their lifetimes. Consequently, state-specific methods that allow entrance into the worldview of those experiencing phenomena such as obtained via long-term meditation may actually be more scientifically appropriate than using conventional scientific approaches in these types of applications. In this regard, transpersonal psychology pioneered many human science methods involving alternative epistemological and ontological assumptions about knowing, as well as about the self as knower, but yet has a long way to go for wider acceptance (see Braud & Anderson, 1999).

In addition, transpersonal psychology takes data from all spiritual, not just Western, traditions. This differentiates it from psychology of religion, which has primarily been focused on the Judeo-Christian tradition, and which tends to study demographics and other externals, rather than experience. The psychology of religion, even when studying non-Western traditions, still also tends to retain the cultural baggage of Western monotheistic assumptions, while transpersonal psychology provides ways to escape these cultural traps. However, transpersonal psychology can get into its own unique cultural traps by becoming overly enthusiastic about exotic traditions, such as by “going native” (Friedman, 2009; 2010). In this regard, it is crucial for transpersonal psychology to learn from various traditions, but in creative scientific ways that do not abandon science (see Friedman, 2002).

Clinical Approaches to Transpersonal Psychology

As can be seen from this discussion, constructing meaning involves relating to that which is larger than the individual, and transpersonal psychology provides an excellent way to frame meaning. The remainder of this paper focuses on clinical applications of transpersonal psychology toward enhancing understanding and change through assessments and psychotherapies.

Transpersonal Assessments

One area of clinical application in transpersonal psychology involves using assessment strategies, including measures. I have been involved in reviewing over 100 measures that have promise in this area (e.g., Friedman & MacDonald, 1997; MacDonald & Friedman, 2002), as well as have constructed my own measures (e.g., Friedman, 1983; Pappas & Friedman, 2012). It should be noted that some humanistic and transpersonal psychologists object to all assessment, especially when involving tests, dismissing them as useless or worse (e.g., seeing them as inherently reductionary and harmful); in contrast, I have written about their appropriate use in transpersonal contexts (Friedman & MacDonald, 2006). Relating explicitly to the area of meaning, one measure with which I have reviewed and worked is the Purpose of Life Test’ (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). However, insofar as transpersonal measures imply some type of an interconnection of individuals with something beyond themselves, I consider all to be relevant to meaning.

It should also be noted that all responsible intervention rests on a theoretical model and has to involve assessment to guide and evaluate it. Transpersonal psychology involves negotiating special difficulties in which proper assessment is crucial. For example, both the initial manifestation of higher consciousness and spiritual experience often share similarities

1 As an aside, I worked with Maholick in the early 1970s in pioneering the use of this measure.

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with many types of mental illness, and it is difficult to differentiate psychoses from such emergences (see Johnson & Friedman, 2008). To treat individuals as if they were psychotic when they might only be in a temporarily unbalanced transition toward a more evolved spiritual life could be potentially iatrogenic, but this unfortunately is all too common in mainstream practice. And such grievous practices are avoidable by being knowledgeable about transpersonal issues. For example, near death experiences can be initially quite disruptive, but often result in long-term positive psychological growth, yet few psychologists recognize these dynamics (Fracasso, Friedman, & Young, 2010).

**Transpersonal Psychotherapies**

There are many transpersonal psychotherapies that can enhance meaning (Rodrigues & Friedman, in press). These provide a way for psychotherapists treating not only psychopathology but also facilitating the optimum development of human potential, including toward developing higher states of consciousness and possible spiritual experiences. In fact, the impact of transpersonal psychotherapies of the field of psychotherapy has been greater than most might imagine. For example, many psychotherapies now applied widely within the mainstream first were studied and introduced to the West via transpersonal psychology, such as the burgeoning area of mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness approaches to psychotherapy are seldom labeled explicitly as transpersonal approaches, despite that they were introduced to the West in early transpersonal writings (e.g., Goleman, 1981). Transpersonal psychotherapy is also likely to become more important through the resurgence of psychedelic clinical applications (Friedman, 2006), as well as through anticipated advances in the neurobiology of altering consciousness (Krippner & Friedman, 2010). Finally, transpersonal psychology is forging a role in social change and other larger systems applications (e.g., involving peace; Machinga & Friedman, in-press). Transpersonal perspectives thus provide an inclusive, as well as increasingly coherent, framework for these and many other applied efforts.

Some psychotherapies explicitly embrace being called transpersonal (e.g., psychosynthesis; Assagioli, 1993). However, many more psychotherapies might be seen as transpersonal due to containing some transpersonal elements, such as by using underlying transpersonal models or employing transpersonal techniques, but the term transpersonal may not explicitly be used when describing them. In fact, there is a plethora of nomenclature used to describe these many transpersonal approaches, such as the numerous variants of mindfulness incorporated into extant psychotherapies (e.g., dialectical behavior therapy; Linehan, 1993). It is also important to note that, although many of these variants of mindfulness psychotherapies attribute their origin to Buddhist or other Eastern spiritual traditions, mindfulness also has a long history within Western psychotherapeutic traditions (Friedman, 2010). It should also be mentioned that there are techniques stemming from spiritual traditions that are neither Eastern nor Western, such as shamanism, which are used by many psychotherapists and also are not often explicitly labeled as being transpersonal (e.g., exorcism approaches for healing dissociated states; Ferracati, Sacco, & Lazzari, 1996). The following lists five general categories of transpersonal psychotherapies, based on techniques emphasized, along with examples of these psychotherapies (from Friedman & MacDonald, 2012):

**Attentional:** Using various attention-altering strategies, individuals can enter transpersonal states of consciousness. This can be achieved through approaches such as guided imagery, hypnosis, meditation, neurofeedback, and prayer.

**Biochemical.** Using various substances, such as psychedelic (or entheogens), individuals can also enter transpersonal states of consciousness. Psychedelics were a major part of the early transpersonal movement and, after being banned for decades, are again now becoming legitimate (Friedman, 2006). Research studies are showing that psychedelics can be useful for a variety of problems, and these substances might work simply at a biochemical level (as in affecting neurotransmitters), or they might work through transpersonal means by altering consciousness.

**Depth psychological.** Using various verbal (or in some cases, art or other expressive) approaches to psychotherapy, depth psychological approaches derived from psychoanalysis can result in transpersonal states of consciousness being entered. Jung (1970) first used the term transpersonal (in writings translated into English in the 1940s), and analytic therapy involves deep layers of both conscious, unconscious, and even collective unconscious material, the latter of which is seen as transpersonal (Levy, 1983). Assagioli (1993) contemporaneously with, but independently, of Jung developed psychosynthesis, a psychotherapy that proceeds from a conventional deficit-oriented analysis to a transpersonal synthesis.

**Existential.** Using verbal approaches for an exploration of meaning (e.g., logotherapy; Frankl, 1959), existential approaches can focus not merely on a human-centered, but also include transpersonal, perspectives. These would include exploring the unavoidability of death and deeper implications of embodiment, which align well with transpersonal approaches.
Somatic. Using somatic approaches, transpersonal states of consciousness can be entered. One such explicitly transpersonal somatic therapy is holotropic breathwork (Grof, Grof, & Kornfield, 2010), which was developed as an alternate to using psychedelics when their use was banned. This type of breathwork can facilitate deep regressive experiences, including into transpersonal realms. Working with the body is used in many psychotherapeutic approaches (e.g., bioenergetics; Glazer & Friedman, 2009), as well as across cultures for transpersonal purposes, such as yogic pranayama for spiritual healing. Besides breath work, other somatic approaches to transpersonal therapy are common, such as drumming, photic stimulation, and repetitive movements used to alter consciousness.

In addition to categorizing various transpersonal psychotherapies according to their aims and approaches, there are other commonalities that can lead them to being viewed as transpersonal. These include an emphasis on immediate experience, in contrast to merely conceptualizing about experience, in an expanded way. These foster expansion of self-concept toward it becoming more complex, integrated, interconnected, and whole, and possible even felt as sacred. In addition, they are not limited to treating dysfunction, but also are growth oriented. And the nature of the psychotherapeutic relationship is crucial to transpersonal psychotherapies, such as acknowledging the profound interconnectedness of psychotherapist and client, allowing for the possibility of exchange of information across many potential channels (as in possible subtle energies), accompanied by openness about the sacredness of both psychotherapist and client. Thus, despite whatever technique a transpersonal psychotherapist might be using, it can still be from a transpersonal perspective. Even using simple operant conditioning can be done with mindfulness such that the client is seen not just a rat being conditioned, but a sacred being as a biopsychosocial-spiritual whole being treated.

Conclusion

Insofar as transpersonal psychotherapies can lead to clients experiencing and forming stable understandings of interconnectivity with aspects of the cosmos that go beyond their being isolated as individuals, this can foster a greater sense of meaning. The utilization of transpersonal models for developing such holistic, in the sense of incorporating the entire cosmos into an expansive self-concept (Friedman, 1983; in press), perspectives could lead in many fruitful directions relevant to making meaning. Programs with criminal offenders could develop transpersonal self-expansiveness resulting in increased empathy toward potential victims. Corporate leaders could develop transpersonal self-expansiveness focusing on the need for greater environmental and social justice. Politicians could develop transpersonal self-expansiveness leading toward more concern for all of their constituents, and their goals could not be limited by material achievements but focus, instead, toward graver issues, such as achieving world peace. A transpersonal perspective can also largely avoid metaphysical language and be scientifically accessible, and is consequently likelier to be received positively in a wider way than parochial religious approaches based on traditions that could be divisive. Transpersonal clinical psychologists, using assessments and psychotherapies, could thus operate from the largest, and most inclusive, perspectives within science to heal (as in making whole) individuals and systems through approaches that are simultaneously scientific and sacred, building a solid basis for achieving a sense of meaning in a world that appears increasingly devoid of meaning.

References


Authenticity as a Core Virtue in the Normative Framework of a Positive-Humanistic Psychology

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the meaning of authenticity in relation to the theory of character strengths and virtues, and to demonstrate how it serves as an integrative moral ideal within the normative framework of positive psychology. The paper clarifies the meaning of authenticity, as defined within the existential-humanistic tradition, as a multi-dimensional construct. Thus understood, authenticity assumes a much larger place in the catalogue of virtues and related character strengths than is typically allocated within positive psychology. It not only interfaces with many of the strengths identified by Peterson and Seligman, but also accounts for how individuals integrate their distinctive value orientations into their core sense of self and personal identity.

In all these respects, authenticity emerges as a central element of the normative framework of positive psychology, and thus highlights the essential continuity between the traditions of existential-humanistic and positive psychology. The paper explores some of the advantages of regarding authenticity as a virtue in the Aristotelian sense of being a form of know-how or skill in living well. As such, it becomes possible to discuss how it can be cultivated, taught, and integrated into the individual’s fundamental character and way of being. It considers the hypothesis that the yearning for authenticity represents a fundamental human need, complementary to the need for autonomy as articulated in self-determination theory. It also addresses the lack within positive psychology of a constructivist theory of the self to account for how character strengths are incorporated into the fundamental value-orientation and self-structure of the individual. The paper concludes with a discussion of how positive psychology has brought attention to matters of virtue and ethics as they relate to our understanding of personal authenticity; at the same time, the paper demonstrates the importance of the existential-humanistic tradition to our understanding of the nature of human flourishing as a psychological and ethical ideal.

"The road up and the road down is one and the same." – Heraclitus

"The struggle ought not to be over authenticity, for or against, but about defining its proper meaning. We ought to be about trying to lift the culture back up, closer to its motivating ideal." – Charles Taylor

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the meaning of authenticity in relation to the theory of character strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and to demonstrate how it serves as an integrative moral ideal within the normative framework of positive psychology.

At the very outset, it may appear to be problematic to even refer to authenticity in relation to moral ideals or virtues. If we understand morality as a system of obligations and constraints on personal self-interest, then it might appear to be fundamentally at odds with the quest for authenticity. Authenticity is about expressing our true selves, often in opposition to conventional mores and standards for acceptable or sanctioned moral conduct. This point was made by Nietzsche and Freud about the fundamental conflict between culture and the life-affirming drive toward self-affirmation (Freud, 1962; Nietzsche, 1969). It was also one of the founding themes of humanistic psychology, focusing on the expression of our more spontaneous, childlike feelings and desires rather than being governed by the moral prescriptions of an overbearing superego (Berne, 1964; Perls, 1976).

Things look a little more promising if we consider ethics in the Aristotelian context as the art of living well, or the art of living a good life (Aristotle, 1962; Veatch, 1966). In this context, virtues are conceived of as strengths or...
competencies that a person can cultivate in order to live a more fulfilling life. This association of virtue and happiness is what makes Aristotelian ethics attractive as a model for the normative framework of positive psychology. Peterson and Seligman’s *Character Strengths and Virtues* (2004) provides a contemporary expression of the classical Aristotelian idea that virtues are in fact character strengths that enable us not only to live morally good lives, but also to find our deepest sense of fulfillment and personal happiness in doing so. Happiness or well-being and living morally go hand in hand in this framework.

Viewed in this way, it becomes easy to see how authenticity might be seen as a moral virtue or character strength. Peterson and Seligman (2004) in fact include it in their list of character strengths, as aspects of the moral virtue of courage. Likewise, existential thinkers emphasize the courage to be oneself in the face of anxiety or pressures to conform to external pressures or societal norms (Tillich, 1966).

Understanding authenticity as a form of courage makes good sense. As we explore the various dimensions of authenticity, we shall also see that they relate to many of the character strengths identified in Peterson and Seligman’s strengths model (2004), including

- wisdom – especially creativity, openness to experience, open-mindedness, love of learning, and perspective;
- courage – especially bravery, authenticity, and vitality;
- humanity and justice – especially love, compassion, responsibility, and fairness;
- temperance – including prudence and self-regulation; and
- transcendence – including the experiences of awe, wonder, and elevation, hope and future-orientation, playfulness, and spirituality, faith, and life purpose.

This list of virtues and character strengths is drawn from across the major world religions and ethical systems (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and is presented as a framework to enable individuals to identify the specific character strengths that they can affirm as representing their core, authentic selves (p. 18) – thereby enabling them to integrate a concern with higher values into their personal pursuit of well-being.

What I am proposing here is that the principles of authenticity provide another way of looking at the process by which individuals orient toward broader meaning contexts and value orientations, such as those described in Peterson and Seligman’s catalogue of virtues and related character strengths. This account focuses on a specific theory of human action and self-emergence that originates within existential-humanistic psychology, and reflects a fundamental human need for autonomy and authenticity, as described within self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002). It focuses on the process by which individuals integrate specific value orientations as aspects of their core, authentic selves.

The process of authentic action and self-emergence is what is considered central in this account, not the specific character traits which an individual may exhibit. These character strengths are better understood, I believe, as potential value-orientations that individuals naturally consider when making self-defining life choices.

This approach differs from Peterson and Seligman’s approach in at least two important ways. First, I am not considering authenticity as a virtue that necessarily applies across all cultures. It is a virtue specifically in democratic cultures that value personal freedom, autonomy, and diversity as fundamental aspects of societal and community life (Cook, 1997; Etzioni, 1996). Cultures that do not hold these values and which do not foster the development of individuality, critical thinking, and personal autonomy, will not hold authenticity as a core virtue. Authenticity as a basic value orientation is distinctive to modern, democratic cultures (Taylor, 1989).

Secondly, this account does not focus on character strengths as specific traits that individuals can be said to possess. Rather, the dimensions of authenticity are defined as principles of authentic action and self-emergence that carry with them an implicit ethical orientation that is similar in many respects to the framework presented by Peterson and Seligman (Medlock, 2012). As principles, they represent standards toward which individuals can orient as they make choices about what is important in life and how they establish a sense of meaning and purpose (Covey, 1990; Wright & Medlock, 1995). They differ from strengths in that they are not traits that individuals possess, but rather are aspects of an overarching value orientation focused on authentic living (Taylor, 1989). This value orientation includes a concern with human flourishing and the pursuit of morally and spiritually uplifting values – similar in many respects to the virtues outlined in the strengths model.

This is what makes the dialogue between existential-humanistic and positive psychology particularly interesting. My focus here is not on creating a universal value framework that is potentially valid across all cultures, but rather on the process by which individuals develop aesthetic, moral, and spiritual value-orientations as part of their process of becoming
authentic individuals. I happen to believe that this emphasis on the process of authentic action and self-emergence is actually strongly suggested in Peterson and Seligman’s strengths framework, though I will leave it to others to confirm or deny that judgment.

The Meaning of Authenticity

One of the major challenges of defining authenticity as a virtue is that it is a multi-dimensional construct, similar in some respects to Seligman’s construct of well-being (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Seligman, 2011). In a previous article (Medlock, 2012), I identified several key dimensions of authenticity, focusing on the individual’s value-orientation toward an ideal higher self and the existential choices and dialogical relationships that lead to a coherent sense of self. The current paper includes these dimensions, but with a different focus. The current focus is on the process of authentic self-emergence as it arises from the experience of engaged presence in the here-and-now. This is the central dimension of authenticity, in the sense that all the other dimensions flow from this primary experience of engaged presence.

This focus is also central to Seligman’s theory of well-being (2011), with the difference that engagement is associated with specific character strengths rather than with the experience of presence per se. This paper explores the similarities and differences between these two traditions of existential-humanistic and positive psychology, showing how each contributes to a fuller understanding of the nature of human flourishing.

The key dimensions of authenticity include the following: (a) congruence of internal emotional states, actual conduct, stated intentions, commitments, and self-representations; (b) open, non-defensive awareness of the richness and depth of experience; (c) presence and full engagement in the here and now flow of experience; (d) conscious, autonomous choice; (e) a growth mindset with an orientation toward developing potential and expanding possibilities; (f) responsibility and resolute commitment; and (g) a sense of coherence of meaning and purpose.

The argument to substantiate that these dimensions make up the core or essence of authenticity is grounded in an existential-humanistic theory of human action and the nature of the self (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Frankl, 1973; Glasser, 1998; Habermas, 1987, 1990; Heidegger, 1963, 1966; Kegan, 1982; Mahler, 1989; Natanson, 1970, 1974; Rogers, 2004; Sartre, 1963; Taylor, 1989; Wright, 2005; Zimmerman, 1986). The full development of that theory is beyond the scope of this paper, though the account provided below relates the various dimensions to elements of this theory of authentic action and self-emergence. Suffice it to say here that authentic action is action that proceeds from being fully present in the moment and making conscious choices about what truly matters in life. Authentic selfhood emerges from authentic action, and includes a self-representation or personal narrative that accurately reflects those existential choices and serves to orient the individual toward an integrated sense of meaning and life purpose.

Thus understood, the theory of authentic action and selfhood assumes a much larger place in the theory of character strengths and well-being than is typically acknowledged within positive psychology. The related dimensions of authenticity not only reflect many of the value-orientations identified by Peterson and Seligman, but also account for how individuals integrate these value orientations into their core sense of self and personal identity.

Authenticity, Virtues, & Character Strengths

To help build the bridge between the existential-humanistic account of authenticity and positive psychology’s theory of virtues and character strengths, let us consider what it means to refer to the various dimensions of authenticity as principles that help to orient individuals toward lives of higher meaning and purpose.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) define ten criteria for what constitutes a character strength. I will consider four of them in this account of the principles of authenticity. The first criterion is that it “contributes to various fulfillments that constitute the good life, for oneself and for others” (p. 17). The authors leave open the question of just what is meant by “the good life,” but clearly it is meant to be a life that is both personally fulfilling and one that contributes to the well-being of others.

It is significant that in discussing this quality of fulfillment, the first characteristic mentioned for a character strength is “a sense of ownership and authenticity (‘this is the real me’) vis-à-vis the strength” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 18). Owning a specific character strength is a way of describing what it means to own a specific value-orientation as representative of one’s core sense of self.

Secondly, a character strength is “morally valued in its own right, even in the absence of obvious beneficial consequences” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 19). This is to say that it is an intrinsic value, something that one chooses for
itself because of its inherent goodness. This characterization suggests that a character strength can be considered not only as a personality trait that someone, in a sense, possesses, as Peterson and Seligman characterize it, but also as a value that one chooses to affirm. Given the existential perspective that emphasizes the notion of choice in the construction of the self, this re-orientation to character strengths as value-orientations will prove to be helpful.

Thirdly, the authors emphasize that “the display of a strength by one person does not diminish other people in the vicinity” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 21). This, in effect, underscores the first point, that strengths have a moral import in that they concern our relationships with others. The notions of mutual respect and openness to other points of view are implied in this account of character strengths, and are also fundamental to the principles of authentic action (Medlock, 2012).

Fourthly, character strengths are defined, in part, by their relationship to negative opposites (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 22). This approach is similar to the way in which Aristotle defines virtues in relationship to the vices or excesses to which they are related. In Aristotelian ethics, a virtue or character strength is viewed as the mean between two extremes, as temperance would be considered the mean between the extremes of personal excess and being overly self-controlled. In the “manual of the sanities” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, pp. 3-32), a character strength is defined in contrast to the negative qualities that can be considered opposites or contraries. In this case, the negative opposite to congruence would be incongruence; the negative opposite to being open would be being closed, etc.

The dimensions of authenticity – congruence; open, non-defensive awareness of experience; presence and engagement; autonomous, conscious choice; a growth mindset; responsibility and commitment; and coherence of meaning and purpose – are principles of authentic action that naturally lead to living morally uplifting and fulfilling lives. The notion of the good life that the individual defines for him- or herself typically includes considerations of such values as wisdom, courage, humanity and love, justice, temperance, and transcendence. But the important point is not the definition of a schema for explaining how strengths are related to these values or virtues, but rather the definition of a process by which individuals draw on their cultural traditions as sources for their sense of identity and meaning (Taylor, 1989). In other words, the process of authentic self-emergence is our central concern as individuals, and the catalogue of virtues or values serves as a context for the choices we make in defining our authentic selves.

The Dimensions of Authentic Action & Self-Emergence

The first dimension of authenticity is the congruence of internal emotional states, actual conduct, and stated intentions, commitments, and self-representations. This is the dimension highlighted in Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) definition of the strengths of authenticity, honesty, and integrity as examples of personal courage (p. 249). It is also one of the fundamental qualities that Carl Rogers (2004) associates with effective therapeutic relationships and becoming a fully functioning person. Individuals who are authentic in this respect demonstrate the courage of their convictions, expressing what they really feel and think, both in their actual conduct and in their communications and representations of their intentions and actions.

This principle of congruence involves the courage to experience and express the truth of one’s experience in one’s communicative actions. This requires courage when the truth that is being expressed may not be welcomed by others, or when it may challenge a person’s cherished ways of seeing him or herself. There is risk in being honest and straightforward, while, at the same time, there is the reward of a genuine, honest, and intimate connection with others.

Congruence means being truthful at all levels of communicative action – experiential, behavioral and espoused intentions, commitments, and ways of representing oneself. All these levels of human experience and action are in alignment, and the person is experienced by others as being genuine, straightforward, and honest.

Conversely, a lack of congruence reflects an unwillingness or inability to define and represent oneself accurately. It often represents a lack of consciousness of one’s inner emotional states and disconnections between actual conduct and one’s stated intentions, commitments, and self-representations. Most typically it involves a lack of courage in exploring one’s own inner states – particularly those that are at variance with the way one likes to think of oneself or likes to be seen by others.

This lack of courage results in the indirect expression of aspects of oneself that one denies and thus projects onto others (Sartre, 1960) – what Jung referred to as the shadow aspects of the self (Jung, 1966; Moore & Gillette, 1990). These are often qualities that one perceives as negative and thus as “not-me,” and then projects onto others. In some cases they may be positive qualities, as when individuals with poor self-esteem project power and positive qualities onto others that they cannot accept within themselves.
The second dimension of authenticity relates to open, non-defensive awareness of the richness and depth of one’s experience (Hodgkins & Knee, 2002; Kernis & Goldman, 2006). It includes a curiosity and willingness to explore one’s inner life of emotions, fantasies, dreams, imaginings, and intentions, to determine which are “core” to one’s sense of self. It also includes a sense of being open to the richness of our perceptions and sensations and ways of engaging with the perceptual world and the world of nature. And finally, it includes being open to the feedback and communications from others regarding one’s own actions and intentions. These dimensions of inwardness, perceptual awareness, and relationships with others are fundamental building blocks or our sense of authentic selfhood, reflecting the three fundamental modes of being-in-the-world described in existential philosophy and psychology (Keen, 1970).

These qualities of openness and non-defensive awareness are key to the development of wisdom, as Seligman and Peterson point out. The character strengths associated with wisdom include flexibility, being open-minded, thinking critically, creativity, curiosity, a lifelong love of learning, and the interest in exploring alternative perspectives (2004). This list of character strengths could as easily be used to describe the process of transformational learning associated with authentic self emergence – which is exactly the point. The re-evaluation of established frames of reference and established ways of being is one of the key aspects of authentic action that leads to the emergence of a new core sense of self (Mezirow, 2000).

The opposite of open, non-defensive awareness of experience is of course being closed and defensive. It involves attempts to defend established self-representations and ways of acting that are challenged by experiences that are at odds with these established patterns or constructs. This type of closed, defensive behavior often reflects value-orientations that are based on external sources or authorities, rather than on internally affirmed value-orientations (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Hodgkins & Knee, 2002). They also reflect what Buddhist’s and Taoists refer to as an over-attachment to various positions and self-representations, with an unwillingness to see the continuous process of change that is inherent in the flow of experience (Epstein, 2008).

The third dimension of authenticity involves presence and full engagement in the here and now flow of experience. The principle of presence is extremely important to the notion of authenticity. It relates to the question of the meaning of being, which is the distinctive philosophical/theological question that underlies much of existential-humanistic philosophy and psychology (Heidegger, 1962; Zimmerman, 1986). It is also a primary focus of the virtue of transcendence referenced by Peterson and Seligman. They define transcendence in terms of such strengths as the appreciation of beauty and excellence; the experiences of awe, wonder, and elevation; gratitude; hope and future-mindedness; playfulness; and spirituality, faith, and purpose (2004). This orientation toward transcendence is the experience of noumenal reality beyond our capacity for knowing or understanding or reasoning about our life. It is the experience of being and faith that relates to our deepest yearnings for a sense of purpose and meaning in life, and ultimately is at the core or our spiritual identity (Barrett, 1962; Jaspers, 1957; Kierkegaard, 1954).

The experience of transcendence is in fact a defining characteristic of the existential-humanistic tradition, drawing on existential philosophy and Eastern spiritual traditions (Watts, 1961; Parkes, 1987; Zimmerman, 1986). It includes being open to the mystery of life with an attitude of “not knowing” and “letting things be.” It is about letting reality emerge rather than attempting to force and control results – including especially the emergence of ours and others’ authentic selves.

The question of the meaning of being is translated in various ways within existential and humanistic psychology to the question of what it means to be a unique, individual, human being in touch with the temporal flow of experiencing (Rogers, 2004). Being is defined as presence – oriented toward the future, retaining a sense of the past, and ultimately grounded in the here and now. Individuals who are present exist fully in the present moment. They are connected to the flow of life of their embodied, organic existence. They experience a sense of flow as guiding their actions, proceeding less from a sense of striving than from a sense of being in touch with the flow of life.

Experiences of flow and engagement are also emphasized in positive psychology, originating in the work of Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and later in Seligman’s theory of well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, 2011).

The account of positive psychology, however, does not adequately acknowledge the connection between flow and the quality of being as presence. There is a tendency to describe flow in terms of the control of inner life, goal-directed activity, and the expression of strengths or talents, rather than as a manifestation of the person’s connection with the flow of experience at the core of their sense of self (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

According to this existential-humanistic account of flow, the defining characteristic is the individual’s being fully present in the moment, not the fact that the individual is expressing a specific character strength or exercising a form of
inner control. This capacity is present at every moment, no matter what quality of emotion or type of activity the individual is engaged in.

Presence also involves a back-and-forth interplay of full emersion in the flow of experience with a peripheral self-awareness or mindfulness of the present moment. This is what accounts for the ability to make conscious choices in the moments of flow, rather than operating completely unconsciously or unintentionally. In my current study of the creative process of artists, I’m finding that experienced artists become immersed in the creative process without reflecting on what they are doing. But even in this experience of flow, there are moments of conscious choice in which the artists are mindful of their creating as they are creating. In these moments they observe their work and make adjustments to enhance the underlying intention of the work. This quality of being present-to-experience is also what is emphasized in Eastern meditative traditions of mindfulness – an awareness of one’s acting in the moment of action (Hahn, 1991).

This quality of being as presence also reflects the distinctive features of the existential-humanistic account of the self and the nature of authentic action. There are two aspects of being as presence that are fundamental to authentic action: receptive, responsive presence and pro-actively engaged presence. The first relates to the more spiritual aspects of being associated with meditative consciousness and the release from the will to power and from instrumental thinking (Habermas, 1987; Zimmerman, 1986). It is an orientation that focuses on allowing actions to emerge from experience without will and striving, but simply from a sense of being. It is similar to the Taoist notion of integrity and acting from a space of “no-action” – action without specific will or intention, but allowing what is right to emerge from the flow of experience (Lao Tzu, 1990).

The authentic self that emerges from this mode of receptive, responsive action is simply a capacity to observe experience as it unfolds. It is an observing self that is conscious of acting without willing any specific action or result. It is, in a sense, a complete trusting of the flow of experience and the emergence of right action, without any attachment to the ego or sense of identity of the individual actor (Epstein, 2008).

The pro-active, engaged mode of presence-in-action is focused on the fulfillment of specific purposes and meanings that have personal significance to the individual. Engagement is a reflection of what matters to the individual actor – what he or she cares about and is emotionally invested in.

Engaged, purposeful action has two related modalities: instrumental action, oriented toward the achievement of defined interests, purposes, and goals; and communicative action, oriented toward understanding and being understood by others (Habermas, 1990). Instrumental action is oriented toward the effective achievement of defined ends, and focuses on the capacity for effective accomplishment of goals. It is the foundation of the economic, political, and social systems that define the social world, as well as the specific goals and achievement orientation of individuals. Communicative action is characterized by the interest in finding common ground with others, seeking to understand and be understood by others in the pursuit of shared interests and values. It is the foundation for the domains of intimacy, relationship, and the process of personal and public dialogue, regarding the values and principles that govern the “lifeworld” of individual and public life (Habermas, 1987).

Both of these modes of pro-active, engaged action are expressions of care (Heidegger, 1962). Individuals, by their very nature care about specific objects, people, events, beliefs, etc. Things, people, and ideas matter to individuals, from the child who is enthralled with a new toy to the politician who cares about world peace. The world of meanings and meaning contexts becomes significant to the individual by virtue of what she cares about or what matters to her. This process of caring-about-something is what invests an object, person, activity, or tradition with personal, emotionally significant value. It is also what directs the process of engagement in life, as individuals engage most fully in activities and relationships that personally matter to them.

Care is also a reflection of the inherent interpersonal and social nature of human beings. We cannot not care about our relationships with others – or at least not those significant others in relation to whom we define who we are. The process of identity formation is primarily a matter of interpersonal relationships, of defining who we are vis-à-vis how others view us and how we come to view ourselves through them. The whole gamut of processes identified by psychoanalysis, interpersonal psychology, and social psychology about identification, internalization, development of the generalized other, adoptions of social roles, the evolution of multiple self-identities, etc. are all testaments to the inherent interpersonal nature of self-development. Rogers’ account of the relationship factors that facilitate personal growth and authenticity – unconditional positive regard, accurate empathy, and therapist transparency and congruence – continue to be recognized as among the most important therapeutic factors in all psychotherapeutic work (Carkhuff, 2009; Rogers, 1980).

To return to our discussion of presence as a principle, the moral opposite of presence is not absence, but rather semblance. Seeming to be someone that one is not involves withholding a part of one’s self – either consciously or
unconsciously. The inauthentic individual in this respect chooses to present a persona or false self to the world, and even to themselves, as the self they want to appear to be. This involves a focus on managing impressions and controlling others, rather than on letting things emerge from a position of trust and mutuality. This tendency is inherent in the very nature of social existence that focuses on role conformity and fitting the individual into pre-defined patterns of social life (Goffman, 1959; Natanson, 1974). It is, in fact, an inevitable characteristic of the lifeworld, and sets the context for the individual’s challenge in defining a unique, authentic identity (Natanson, 1974).

The motivations for this type of behavior are of course as varied as the cultural practices that encourage the development of personas and conventional role behavior. From an experiential perspective, acts of semblance and managed self-presentation involve a disconnection from the flow of experience, either holding on to a cherished view of the self from the past or projecting a desired representation of the self toward the future. Persons who are invested in semblance are thus not fully present to their own experience, and are usually disconnected from their own inner emotional states.

The fourth dimension of authenticity is autonomous, conscious choice. Being fully present and congruent in the here-and-now flow of experience, the authentic individual can consciously choose a course of action, within a given existential situation, as his/her authentic choice. The moment of conscious choice is the paradigm of human action, where the action proceeds from a sense of being the author of the action rather than a reactor to external circumstances. One is of course always reacting to external factors, but the conscious act of choosing a specific possibility to respond to from among the field of possible influences is the distinctly human existential act of conscious choice.

Conscious choice can be either autonomous or externally conditioned, proceeding from an internal versus an external locus of control. Deci and Ryan (2002) have distinguished a continuum of actions from those that are intrinsically motivated and truly autonomous and authentic, to those that are extrinsically motivated and represent varying degrees of personal integration or “ownership” (pp. 14-22). They then distinguish autonomy-oriented actions that represent the intrinsically or well-integrated motivations, from actions that are control-oriented based on social directives regarding how individuals should act or are supposed to act.

Recent writings about autonomy emphasize the point that autonomous action can conform to conventional roles and behavior patterns, so long as the individual reflects on the action and wholeheartedly affirms the action as an expression of their core sense of self (Dworkin, 1997; Ekstrom, 2005; Taylor, 2005). These processes of self-reflection and wholehearted affirmation define the action as autonomous, on this view (Frankfurt, 1988).

It is also interesting that autonomous action on this account is also equivalent to authentic action, in that it is based on the individual’s sense of affirming a choice as an expression of his or her core sense of self.

This account suggests that how individuals appropriate particular roles or conventions or value-orientations and make them their own is what is important in defining them as authentic. If they do it consciously, and, upon critical reflection, affirm it for themselves, then to that extent their conduct is autonomous and authentic.

This account is consistent with the existential-humanistic account I’m presenting here, so long as it gives priority to the importance of consciousness over wholeheartedness. People can be wholehearted in their pursuits of addictions, fanaticism, and conformity to social practices, without necessarily being conscious of how they are avoiding the underlying anxieties and ambiguities that make up their existential situations. The reality of bad faith and self-deception needs to be considered in evaluating whether an action is truly autonomous and authentic, versus a wholehearted avoidance of uncomfortable and possibly threatening aspects of their experience and sense of self.

The moral opposite of autonomous, conscious choice is reactive behavior triggered either by defensive reactions to perceived threats or an excessive attachment to forms of pleasure. Addictions represent the clearest example of the latter type of reactivity, and prejudice an example of the former. What reactive actions have in common is that they are not conscious choices, but rather fixed, defensive or compulsive responses that are not in tune with the changing nuances of experience and interactions. They characterize behavior patterns that are impulsive, non-reflective, and fight-flight-freeze reactions to perceived threats.

The principle of autonomous, conscious choice reflects an important aspect of the existential-humanistic account of authentic selfhood and action. The authentic self is the product of the autonomous, conscious choices of the individual. This is the point of the famous maxim “existence precedes essence” (Sartre, 1965). The essence of the individual – the core sense of self – is the result of the choices made in specific existential situations in the course of life.

This sense of self is also defined by the individual’s communicative interactions with self and others, whereby one clarifies the meaning of one’s choices. Defining our authentic selves is not a solipsistic process. It is rather a dialogical process in which our choices and actions are observed not only by us but by others interacting with us, with whom we communicate our intentions, values, and interpretations. Through this dialogical process we arrive at a sense of who we are.
and what we truly care about (Taylor, 1999). This process is validated ultimately by our internal sense of what matters to us as we experience it, but that experience includes the input and observations of others with whom we engage to be understood.

The sense of core self is thus grounded not only in our wholehearted affirmation of a specific meaning or value, but also in others’ recognition and affirmation of that truth as they experience it. The authentic self is a process of dialogical communication, in which the individual’s being-for-self and being-for-others converge into a unified sense of personal identity. As I’ve argued elsewhere (Medlock, 2012; De Beauvoir, 1967), authentic action more often proceeds from a sense of the inherent complexity and ambiguity of life, than from wholehearted affirmation of a specific preference or value-orientation (Medlock, 2012; De Beauvoir, 1967).

Other dimensions of authenticity could be further elaborated here, but in the interest of time I will make only a brief summary statement of these related character strengths. They include: a growth mindset with an orientation toward developing potentialities and expanding possibilities; responsibility and resolute commitment; and a sense of coherence of meaning and purpose.

The growth mindset recognizes that experience is an emerging field of potentialities, oriented toward evolving meaning contexts. The growth-oriented individual views the self as process rather than a fixed entity, and considers each personally significant choice as an opportunity to learn and grow. It involves the personal qualities of flexibility and openness discussed above, as well as the intellectual attitudes of being open minded and willing to re-examine one’s current assumptions and ways of thinking in light of new possibilities. The growth mindset is oriented toward transformational learning, defined as a willingness to re-examine and alter one’s fundamental assumptions about self and world in the interest of expanding one’s capabilities for achievement, intimacy, and the discovery of and expanded sense of meaning and purpose in life (Mezirow, 2000).

The moral opposite of a growth mindset is a fixed mindset that defines the self as a fixed entity with unchanging beliefs, values, and patterns of acting and being in the world. It is reflected either in arrogance and overpowering self-assurance, or in a sense of victimhood and despair at not being worthwhile. In both cases the individual with a fixed mindset sees himself as unchanging – either because he knows he’s right and others are wrong, or because he feels hopeless about ever changing and feeling better. The roles of know-it-all and victim are the familiar personas of the fixed mindset.

It is an interesting question to what extent the strengths model can unwittingly result in defining oneself in terms of fixed traits – desirable as those traits may be. From an existential perspective, it is important to consider strengths as preferences that lead to further growth and learning, rather than as traits that are used to define a fixed mindset and sense of personal identity.

The dimensions of responsibility and commitment reflect key aspects of the process of conscious choice and the orientation toward self-defining value-orientations. The principle of responsibility involves the recognition that we are ultimately responsible for the choices we make and the selves that we define, based on those choices. It includes the ability to look at long term consequences of one’s actions and to take into account the impact of one’s behavior on others. It also includes being responsive to these consequences and responses and to flexibly adjust one’s actions based on the data of current experience.

The moral opposite to the principle of responsibility is self-deception or bad faith (Sartre, 1956). It involves denying that one is the author of one’s actions and that one is ultimately responsible for the reality that one creates – including responsibility for the self that one becomes through one’s choices. It is an escape from freedom and the responsibility for one’s actions as a moral agent. The motivation for this escape has been described by existential philosophers and psychologists as an avoidance of the existential anxiety of being fully free and responsible for one’s life, and seeking comfort in externally defined truths or norms (May, 1967).

Resolute commitment involves the promises and agreements that one makes to oneself and others to pursue a specific course of action, to follow through on promises, or to take stands in support of cherished values or principles. Commitments are choices that are self-defining, as Kierkegaard recognized in his account of authentic selfhood (Barrett, 1962). They represent the stands that we take in life and what we are willing to fight for. They are the expression of what truly matters to us.

The opposite of commitment is, in a sense, the avoidance of becoming a true self (Kierkegaard, 1954). It can be described as living in a state of alienation, where one really doesn’t know who one is, what truly matters in life, and what one is willing to fight for. It is characterized by ennui or despair, and not being trustworthy.

Commitment defines the existential context for understanding the meaning of specific choices and actions. For example, the preference to experience positive emotions which Seligman identifies as a key element of well-being, means
very different things within the context of different life commitments. For a person who pursues pleasure for its own sake and avoids any commitments, that so-called life of pleasure can lead to the experience of despair. The pursuit of joy in the context of a committed relationship with a friend or intimate partner is experienced quite differently, and often leads to much deeper and lasting satisfactions. The defining issue is not the experience of positive emotion per se, but rather the nature of the overarching commitments that define the self who is experiencing the positive emotion. In other words, positive emotion per se may not be essential to well-being, but rather authentic emotion expressed in the context of a positive commitment.

Finally, authenticity appears to include the dimension of coherence of meaning and purpose. As we review the existential choices that ultimately define who we are and what we stand for, we tend to see some sort of coherence emerge regarding the nature of the self. Our life stories tend to have a kind of coherence, where each of the choices makes sense in the context of all the other choices and commitments the individual has made (McAdams, 1990).

That coherence is not defined simply in terms of consistency or predictability, but rather as an evolving narrative in which earlier choices are re-interpreted in the light of later and hopefully more mature or evolved choices. The coherence of meaning and purpose that evolves over the course of a life is in effect the individual’s statement of his or her authentic self. It is ultimately like a work of art, exhibiting an emotional coherence that is typically not reducible to a set of analytic categories, principles, or values. Yet it does express a meaning which presumably has been sustaining for the individual, and which others can hopefully appreciate as a life worth living.

In contrast, the opposite of a life of coherence is one characterized by fragmentation. Various aspects of the self appear to have no connection to one another. One’s work life is completely separate from one’s family life. One’s public life is split off from one’s private life. In the most extreme form, incoherence leads to states of dissociation and a sense of having multiple selves with no connection to one another. There is no common core around which the individual can create an integrative sense of self and a coherent sense of meaning and purpose (Siegel, 2010).

Reframing the Normative Framework of Positive Psychology

This brings us to the implications of this interpretation of authenticity for the normative framework of positive psychology. There are three important implications I’d like to emphasize here. The first relates to the reframing of the virtues and character strengths framework as developed in Character Strengths and Virtues as a framework for guiding authentic self development. The second relates to how the virtues/strengths framework can serve as a valuable framework for structuring educational and clinical interventions to heighten an individual’s sense of higher meaning and purpose. As a clinical tool, it can provide a structure for assessing to what degree a client’s individual choices and goals are in alignment with their authentically held values. And as an educational tool, it can help lifelong learners appreciate and appropriate aspects of the world’s spiritual, religious, ethical, and aesthetic perspectives into their experience of what ultimately matters and the value choices they make in life. Thirdly, I want to underscore the ways in which the existential-humanistic account of authentic action and selfhood contributes to the theory of well-being and suggests areas for further inquiry and research.

Character Strengths and Virtues is a landmark work in the psychological study of personal well-being and its relationship to lives of higher meaning and purpose. It is unquestionably an important contribution to have identified a set of virtues that are shared across all the major world traditions, and to identify related character strengths or traits which can be clearly defined, assessed, and developed. It is also useful to appreciate what strengths a person is drawn to, as a way of encouraging the development of those strengths as part of the process of authentic self development.

I have been presenting another way to look at this framework that I believe is ultimately more useful – an authenticity model rather than a strengths model that focuses on the process by which individuals appropriate and integrate “virtues” or values into their core sense of self. Peterson and Seligman suggest alternative ways of viewing their work which are consistent with the approach I’ve developed here (2004). They suggest two alternative ways of considering their work besides the traits model: (1) as it relates to a specific process – in this case, the process of authentic self emergence, or (2) a social constructionist view, which would consider these traits as social constructions which societies and individuals create in order to provide focus and meaning to their lives. The existential-humanistic theory of authentic action and self emergence provides these alternative perspectives. It provides a way to view the various virtues and related strengths as value-contexts created by societies and appropriated by individuals as they define their authentic value-orientations. In this context the term virtue can be understood to be an inspiring and uplifting meaning-context defined by established traditions across the world cultures, and the term character strength can be understood as a specific value-orientation within a given
meaning context. Thus the strengths model becomes less of a classification system for assessing traits and more of an educational tool for inspiring individuals to consider the moral, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions of their own life projects.

The process that I want to emphasize in this re-reading of the strengths model is how individuals appropriate – and thus own— a given value orientation in the process of making existentially significant conscious choices. The rubber hits the road, if you will, in the moment of conscious choice. And to the extent that the individual has been exposed to these value-orientations, they become part of the world of what matters to the individual as he or she makes current choices. If questions of justice and fairness, for example, have become important to the individual as principles that matter, then they will serve to orient the individual as existentially important choices are made.

These value orientations may in fact become habits or traits of the individual, as Peterson and Seligman characterize the process. This is in fact what Aristotle considered to be an important aspect of moral virtues, that they become habits that almost automatically guide individual conduct. But the point that gives these strengths moral import for Aristotle is not that they are unconscious habits or natural traits, but rather that they lead us to act rationality, and ultimately to fulfill our highest human purpose. Likewise here, what’s important is not that these value orientations become well developed habits or deeply engrained traits, but rather that they facilitate more enlightened, conscious choices about what constitutes a good or right action in specific circumstances.

Viewed in this way, it is still useful to identify the value orientations or character strengths which the individual experiences as most authentically theirs – the ones they are most drawn to based on temperament and their most deeply held desires and preferences. For example, it would be a useful clinical intervention to have individuals identify the values/virtues that they consider to be most central to their sense of self, and then to review their current choices, actions, and goals in light of those values. Levels of alignment would presumably contribute to increased personal meaning and well-being (Kashdan, 2012).

It would be equally useful as a clinical or educational intervention to identify and explore the traits/values that may be more challenging and less comfortable for the individual, as potential areas for increasing a sense of higher meaning and purpose. Thus the individual who is naturally drawn to the exploration of wisdom traditions and perspectives, and who may be more contemplative, can benefit from exploring the challenges of personal courage and taking action, as important areas that they may be neglecting by over-investing in a more comfortable strength. The ideal would be to gain an appreciation of all these meaning contexts, as ways to deepen and broaden one’s individual, authentic life project.

The character strengths framework can thus be considered as a guide for structuring educational or clinical interventions, rather than primarily a method of trait classification used to support psychological research and evidence-based interventions – useful as these may be. I believe the more powerful application of this model is as an educational and clinical tool to help individuals reflect upon and align their authentic choices and actions with these important value-orientations and meaning contexts.

This framework provides a way of integrating the disparate educational worlds of the academic study of the humanities and personal growth work. Too often these worlds have almost nothing to do with one another, making the humanities overly academic in the negative sense of that word, and personal growth work overly narrow in its scope. A truly positive-humanistic education would focus on how individuals engage with the subjects of history, literature, philosophy, religion, and the arts in ways that stimulate personal reflection on how one chooses to live and what ultimately matters in life. To some extent this is already happening – otherwise what would be the point of a liberal education. But to engage in this process in a more integrative and reflective way is one of the potential contributions of a positive-humanistic framework.

This reframing of the strengths framework also suggests a few changes in the model. The virtue of temperance is not only dated, as Peterson and Seligman (2004) themselves acknowledge (p. 431), but also reflects a very different notion of selfhood and psychology than the one provided from an existential-humanistic tradition. Temperance is defined historically, in classical Greek philosophy and in many religious traditions, in terms of an outdated psychology that focuses on the rational control of the emotions, rather than a psychology based on the insights of contemporary humanistic psychology and neuroscience research that view emotion as a source of integration and value-orientation in its own right (Siegel, 1999). The principles of conscious, autonomous choice and the related principles of responsibility and commitment would appear to be more relevant to account for the strengths of effective self-regulation and prudent action than the references to the outdated virtue of temperance.

The areas relating to our relationship with others (humanity and justice) could also be revised to reflect the fundamental ethical issue of how we transcend and ultimately integrate our self-interest with the interests and concerns of others. This issue is better framed in terms of the theory of communicative action discussed above, which focuses on how
individuals and groups seek to understand each other’s interests and values in order to enter into mutually supportive relationships and communities (Habermas, 1990; Etzioni, 1996). Theories of justice, love, and care certainly play an important part in that process, as does the ability to transcend one’s egocentric interests by establishing empathic connections with others as aspects of authentic interaction. There is an implicit ethic in authentically relating to others, that includes openness toward others, respect for other persons and points of view, and the willingness to re-examine and potentially change one’s course of action based on emerging new perspectives (Medlock, 2012).

My interest, however, is not to provide a critique of how all the virtues and strengths are categorized—useful as that may be. It is ultimately more useful, I believe, to consider these categories in the virtues/strengths model as value-orientations which individuals need to consider when making existential choices and exploring what ultimately matters to them in their lives. The fact that individuals may have preferences to explore certain values rather than others is useful to know as an educator, life coach, parent, friend, or therapist. These preferences, however, should not be considered as defining specific traits, but rather as points of entry to helping individuals broaden and deepen their awareness and appreciation of these value-contexts as part of the choice-making process. A fully developed positive-humanistic education can serve to integrate the study of the world’s cultural traditions with the individual learner’s process of existential choice and authentic self emergence.

Finally, this analysis of the dimensions of authenticity and the related theory of human action and self emergence serves to underscore the contributions of existential-humanistic psychology to positive psychology’s study of personal well-being. Seligman (2011) points out that one of the defining characteristics of the new theory of well-being is that the character strengths “underpin all five elements [of well-being], not just engagement: deploying your highest strengths leads to more positive emotion, to more meaning, to more accomplishment, and to better relationships” (p.24). This account attributes too much importance to the idea of strengths as the foundation of personal well-being, rather than recognizing the principles of authentic action as the foundation of engagement, meaningful relationships, accomplishment, and a sense of meaning and purpose. All authentic action is oriented by its very nature toward achievement of desired ends and/or the realization of effective connection and mutual understanding between persons. The importance of character strengths is that they provide a framework for helping individuals engage in life in ways that connect their “sense of ownership and authenticity (‘This is the real me’)” to broader cultural virtues and value contexts (p.38).

Areas for Further Inquiry and Research

This account of authentic action and self emergence suggests a number of directions for future inquiry and research. One important challenge is the need to operationally define the construct of being as presence and relatedness. This notion has not been sufficiently clearly defined to support empirical research on measures of presence as they relate to personal well-being and ethical conduct. This is especially important given how central this construct is to the notion of a positive-humanistic account of well-being. In this formulation of an authenticity model, the notion of presence becomes the positive component in positive psychology, rather than positive emotion or subjective measures of happiness. I understand that there is already a movement in the direction of exploring this question within positive psychology, centered on the notion of “halcyonic well-being” (Gruman & Bors, 2012).

Secondly, there is a need to more clearly compare the theory of authentic action and self emergence as presented here with the theory of autonomous action and self-integration as presented in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002). There is considerable overlap between the two approaches, with the shared focus on autonomy, self-reflection, affirmation of choices as reflective of one’s core values and sense of self, and the integration of choices and values into a coherent sense of self. The additional variables that are suggested by the authenticity model include the importance of presence and the expression of individuality as key factors in personal well-being. These factors are in fact what differentiate authenticity as a construct from autonomy. And while both approaches share a common focus on an integrative sense of meaning and purpose, the authenticity model raises questions about including a meaning-orientation as a fundamental need—something which is not called out as a separate variable in the autonomy model.

The existential-humanistic focus on self-defining choices and their importance to a sense of personal well-being is also an important area for further inquiry and research (Mruck, 2006; Wethington, 2007), particularly as these choices relate to the discovery of a more authentic sense of self and related sense of meaning and purpose.

Another area of research interest concerns the quality of personal narratives about life meaning and purpose as they relate to the dimensions of well-being—levels of engagement, relationship, achievement, and meaning. The level of narrative integration and coherence in parents’ accounts of their own childhoods has been shown to be a predictor of the
quality of their children’s attachment experiences and related sense of core self (Siegel, 1999). Similar studies of narrative coherence of one’s life-stories and key existential choices may offer insights and educational strategies for elevating a person’s level of experienced meaning and well-being.

References


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Clarifying Personal Meaning: Reflections on the 2012 International Meaning Conference of the INPM

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Abstract

This article was inspired by the questions and themes at the Meaning Conference organized by the International Network on Personal Meaning (INPM) in 2012. It identifies an emerging consensus regarding the meaning of personal meaning as a motivational construct, and demonstrates its connection to other closely related motivational theories, including self-determination theory, positive psychology, humanistic psychology, interpersonal neurobiology, and narrative approaches to self-integration. Specifically it explores the definition of personal meaning as involving a sense of purpose and coherence in orienting individuals to future possibilities and providing a basis for hope in the fulfillment of their aspirations. It identifies a cognitive-behavioral bias in the field, focusing on goal-focused behavior and neglecting the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of personal meaning. The article demonstrates how the relationship factor, specifically self-defining dialogue with significant others, needs to be considered as an essential component of personal meaning. This includes experiences of communicative interaction with others, through which individuals construct personal meaning and come to a clearer understanding of who they are and what they believe and value. The article goes on to demonstrate how a meaning-oriented approach can clarify basic concepts in self-determination theory and positive psychology, particularly the constructs of autonomy, authenticity, relationship, and the actualizing tendency of the human psyche. It concludes with an analysis of the concept of higher purpose as it relates to the ideal of self-actualization, including Frankl’s interpretation of the tension between those two principles.

The 7th Biennial International Meaning Conference in 2012, organized by the International Network of Personal Meaning (INPM), brought together scholars and clinicians from a variety of fields within psychology to explore the nature of personal meaning. Representatives from positive psychology, self-determination theory, existential-humanistic psychology, transpersonal psychology, and other meaning-oriented perspectives convened to share ideas about the nature, role, and importance of personal meaning in our understanding of human motivation and well-being.

The conference was in part an homage to the work and life of Viktor Frankl, who first identified personal meaning as an explicit focus for therapeutic practice and research. A film of Frankl’s life, produced by his grandson Alexander Vesely, a distinguished film producer, was shown at the conference as a tribute to the man behind the work (Vesely, 2012). The conference was also an expression of Paul Wong’s dedication to expand upon and refine Frankl’s work by bringing together diverse voices to explore the importance and implications of meaning-oriented therapies and research for the field of psychology (Wong, 2012c).

Coinciding with the conference was the publication of Wong’s 2nd edition of The Human Quest for Meaning: Theories, Research, and Applications (Wong, 2012a). This work represents the current state of research on the topic of personal meaning, and helps to clarify the central themes and findings that were at the heart of the discussions at the conference.

Both the conference and the book raised numerous questions about the nature of personal meaning, two of which I shall address in this paper: (1) Can we agree on a precise definition of “personal meaning” that could serve as a foundation for coordinated research and practice in this field? (2) Can we establish the usefulness of this construct in explaining important aspects of human motivation, development, and human flourishing, particularly as it relates to motivational constructs from other theoretical orientations, such as self-determination, self-actualization, well-being, narrative coherence, and interpersonal neurobiology?

To anticipate answers to these questions, a strong case has been made for distinguishing a distinct need for personal meaning from other motivational constructs. The emerging consensus is that the defining characteristics of personal meaning include: (a) a sense of purpose that orients individuals toward a hopeful future, and (b) a sense of self-coherence.
and integration that ties together aspects of one’s experience into a unified whole (McAdams, 1990; Steger, 2012). This construct of personal meaning is limited, however, in an important respect, by not adequately including (c) an account of the emotional and relational aspects of personal meaning. Several presenters at the conference presented the case for the importance of emotional and relational factors in providing a complete account of personal meaning (King, 2012; King & Hicks, 2012; Medlock, 2012a; van Deurzen, 2012a, 2012b; Wong, 2012c). One of the main purposes of this paper is to build on those insights and to demonstrate the central role of relationship and dialogue as essential elements of the construct of personal meaning.

Regarding the second question, the construct of personal meaning is integrally related to a number of other related motivational constructs, including autonomy, authenticity, relationship, self-integration and self-actualization. By focusing on the meaning component in these related needs, we deepen our understanding of the various ways that the search for meaning play out in our lives, while also deepening our understanding of these related motivational constructs. This paper reflects the intent of the conference in identifying points of intersection among meaning-oriented approaches and other related approaches to the study of human motivation and well-being.

The Search for Meaning

It was clear from the conference panel discussion on “What Makes Life Worth Living,” that there was no clear agreement regarding how to frame the question of what makes life worth living or how it might be answered. Speakers approached the question from their own theoretical or personal understandings of what the question meant, without necessarily attempting to arrive at a shared understanding of the field of personal meaning itself.

Serving as panel moderator, Todd Kashdan pointed out that we don’t appear to be making any progress in establishing a shared understanding of the meaning of our basic terms that could provide a basis for a collaborative research agenda in this important area of human motivation and well-being.

The question of what makes life worth living is of course inherently open-ended and invites a multiplicity of responses. The notion of personal meaning is inherently vague and subject to multiple interpretations from multiple perspectives. Theological, spiritual, and philosophical perspectives consider the nature and source of meaning and explore how questions of ultimate meaning and purpose relate to psychological motivations and therapeutic approaches (Bellin, 2012; Friedman, 2012; Kashdan, 2012). The notion of life purpose is considered by many to be a central component of a meaning-oriented framework (Klinger, 2012; Steger, 2012; Wong, 2012b, 2012c; Wright, 1997). The notion that we are all embedded in everyday meaning contexts, by virtue of being language users immersed in socially defined language games, provides broader philosophical and sociological contexts for approaching questions of meaning (Peterson, 2012; Habermas, 1984, 1987; Klinger, 2012; Wittgenstein, 2009). How are we to find an agreed upon foundation within the field of psychology for a shared understanding of what we want to study and facilitate?

It is helpful to take Frankl’s advice in approaching this question regarding the meaning of life. He observes that the question cannot be usefully considered in the abstract, but needs to be viewed in the context of a unique person facing a unique existential situation. In his words:

I doubt whether a doctor can answer this question in general terms. For the meaning of life differs from man to man (sic.) from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general, but rather the specific meaning of a person’s life at a given moment . . . Everyone has his (sic.) own specific vocation or mission in life; everyone must carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus everyone’s task is as unique as his specific opportunity to implement it. (Frankl, 1970, pp. 171-172)

Frankl’s suggestion enables us to avoid going down the rabbit hole of philosophical and theological speculation about the ultimate meaning of life – satisfying as such speculations may be. His advice is to explore questions of meaning in connection with the specific life choices that people make in concrete situations – a suggestion which has resonated with other researchers and practitioners (Glasser, 1998; Maddi, 2012).

His suggestion also raises a more radical question, which I believe needs to be asked in the context of the current confusion about the meaning of personal meaning as a psychological construct. Given that discussions of meaning in the abstract are generally not fruitful for psychological inquiry, and that the construct of personal meaning is inherently abstract and tends toward vagueness and ambiguity, do we even need the construct of personal meaning at all to explain human
motivation and the needs and yearnings that drive our specific choices in unique situations? Or to frame the question more specifically: Is a drive toward meaning already implied in other current theories of human motivation, so that there is no real need to call it out as a separate area for research and practice?

Certainly the existence of the conference itself and the broad representation of schools of thought suggest that a meaning-oriented theory of human motivation offers something over and above other approaches and theories. But just what that something is, in the light of current research and practice, is worthy of further reflection if we are to create a broadly shared understanding of the importance of personal meaning as a unique and useful factor in explaining human motivation.

**Personal Meaning as a Motivational Construct**

The emerging consensus within the tradition of meaning-oriented research appears to be that we do in fact have a distinct need for a sense of purpose and coherence in our lives. Michael Steger (2012) summarizes four decades of research on the nature of personal meaning as he provides “an overview and a conceptual framework for viewing what the field has learned about the well-being, psychopathology, and spirituality correlates of meaning in life” (p. 165). He acknowledges that this body of research is “often accumulated in the absence of a unifying theoretical framework” (p. 176), but his work makes a significant contribution toward providing that framework.

Steger (2012) identifies two factors that are central to our understanding of personal meaning, a cognitive component and a motivational component. He recognizes that an orientation toward meaning is inherent in the very nature of our experience, and that it includes “a web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our experiences and formulate plans directing our energies to the achievement of our desired future” (p. 165). He recognizes that we have a natural tendency to seek coherence in our experiences and in our accounts of our lives, making sense of apparently disparate moments and choices, and attempting to create a unifying sense of meaning and purpose to our lives.

The motivational factor of personal meaning relates to this notion of having a unifying sense of purpose and mission in life. Steger (2012) observes that when people talk about meaning in their lives, they typically are raising questions about what life is for or what they hope to accomplish in life. He views the concept of purpose as relating to the notions of intention and goal setting, and cites a variety of researchers who have identified this goal-oriented, purpose-oriented way of living as fundamental to personal well-being and authenticity. He concludes that “together the cognitive (comprehension) and motivational (purpose) aspects of meaning in life distinguish meaning from other psychological constructs” (p.166).

The focus on a sense of purpose that instills hope and a reason for living—especially in situations of adversity or suffering—was explored in several of the conference presentations, and appears to be generally recognized in the field as a fundamental theme (Bonanno, 2012; Frankl, 1970; Neimeyer, 2012a, 2012b; van Deurzen, 2012b; Wong, 2012c, 2012d). Conference presentations focused not only on the broader context of meaning that characterizes all human activity, but particularly on the discovery of a sense of purpose in the midst of suffering and adversity. Wong (2012b) emphasizes a sense of Purpose and the capacity for Understanding as fundamental to his account of personal meaning. His PURE model also emphasizes personal Responsibility, further developing the insights of Frankl on the importance of being responsive to one’s unique calling in specific circumstances, to realize a sense of personal meaning and ultimately deeper emotional fulfillment.

Frankl’s (1970, 1973) seminal works in logotherapy postulated a need for personal meaning as a fundamental human need, and centered on the quest to discover the unique tasks which life calls us to take on in specific situations. Frankl’s logotherapy guides individuals to discover the tasks that life situations call them to perform – tasks that meet a fundamental human need in the world and also fulfill the individual’s need for personal meaning. He recognized that this task would often be related to a need to connect with and care for significant others – including specific loved ones and broader human communities (Frankl, 1970, pp. 176-177). But in his writings he tended to focus on the cognitive dimension of logos or meaning, rather than on the emotional and relational components that appear to be equally important to the construct of personal meaning.

Seligman’s (2006) work in positive psychology and well-being theory also includes a focus on personal meaning that is consistent with Frankl’s account. Seligman’s early research originated with the study in depression and analysis of the cognitive factors that undermined a sense of optimism and hope. He noted that the meaning frameworks we use to make sense of our lives have a profound effect on whether we will flourish or fall into depression. His insights about the
cognitive orientation of learned helplessness and the corrective meaning-orientation of optimistic thinking, led to the emergence of positive psychology and his theories of well-being (Seligman, 2006). He includes meaning as a distinct dimension of well-being – irreducible to the dimensions of relationship, positive emotion, engagement, accomplishment, and positive relationships (Seligman, 2011). He defines meaning in terms reminiscent of Frankl – with no apparent acknowledgement of that source – as “belonging to and serving something you believe is bigger than the self” (Seligman, 2011, p.17). The sense of serving a cause or finding a purpose to which one can commit is central to the need for meaning, as both Seligman and Frankl view it. This basic need for meaning also relates to the needs for authenticity, self-integration, and self-actualization – needs which are not addressed in Seligman’s framework but which are deserving of further analysis (Medlock, 2012b).

Peterson (2012) expressed a concern in his presentation at the conference about the lack of emphasis on personal meaning in positive psychology, and the importance of giving it a more prominent role in the theory of well-being. His seminal work with Seligman (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) on the theory of character strengths gives considerable attention to the importance of the world’s religions and spiritual and ethical traditions in defining contexts of meaning for understanding specific character strengths. It also has important implications for our understanding of personal authenticity and the choices individuals make about self-defining values (Medlock, 2012a).

What is missing in this emerging consensus regarding the meaning of personal meaning, however, is an adequate appreciation of the role and the importance of relationship as a constitutive dimension of personal meaning. We witnessed this emphasis on relationship throughout the INPM conference. Paul Wong brought together diverse points of view for the explicit purpose of facilitating dialogue between various traditions to enhance our understanding and appreciation of the meaning perspective in psychology. His desire to connect with others and to bring them into constructive dialogue with one another was apparent throughout the conference. I was personally struck by the experience of warmth and caring conveyed by his presence – as I believe all the participants would acknowledge. What stands out above all else in the specific situation of the conference, was the drive to share points of view, to understand and to be understood across differences, in the pursuit of greater clarity and coherence within the profession regarding meaning research and applications.

The film Viktor & I (Vesley, 2012) about Frankl’s life, presented at the conference by Alexander Vesely, likewise, emphasized the quality of caring relationships as foundational to Frankl’s personal and professional life. The film illustrated what was not explicitly expressed in Frankl’s writings: How important his experience of interconnectedness with others was to defining and fulfilling his life purpose. We are reminded that his decision to not flee Austria prior to the German occupation was motivated by his desire to remain close to his family where he hoped to be of help. As a teacher, speaker, and therapist, he was continually engaged in helping others discover meaning and purpose in their lives. As a husband, the deep healing connection with his second wife, who was also the nurse who cared for him during his recovery from the concentration camps, speaks to a level of mattering to another that was undoubtedly foundational to the meaning he experienced in life. Frankl implicitly acknowledges the importance of relationships in his theory of logotherapy as he emphasizes the need to orient to a cause or purpose beyond oneself, but the defining role of relationships in establishing a sense that life matters, is not fully developed in his work.

Steger (2012) acknowledges the important connection between personal meaning and relationships in his account of the emerging consensus regarding personal meaning as a motivational construct. He indicates that the sense that life matters may help people see their connections with others in ever expanding circles, to include “romantic partners, family and friends, neighborhood, social causes, religious movements, humanity...life...[and] a sense of spiritual connectedness” (p.168). That is to say, he recognizes that the experience that life matters is grounded in our experiences of mattering to one another as persons. But he stops short of including this dimension of connectedness to others as part of the core concept of personal meaning. He restricts that core meaning to the cognitive-behavioral components of purpose and comprehension, and considers relatedness as a variable that can be directly correlated with meaning but not a defining factor. In his words, “…we can account for the positive relationship of meaning in life with relatedness (Ryff, 1989; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008) by arguing that having high quality relationships indicates an effective ability to understand how one fits with the world around one” (Steger, 2012, p.177). While this view acknowledges the close connection between personal meaning and relatedness, it fails to recognize that relatedness is an essential component of personal meaning and is actually an indispensable foundation of the ability to understand how one fits with the world in the first place.

This cognitive-behavioral bias found within the meaning-oriented tradition, including existential and positive psychology, fails to appreciate the importance of emotion and connectedness with others as part of the definition of a meaning orientation. The bias that needs to be addressed here is one which begins with a view of the self as an individual consciousness or “meaning-maker” who discovers specific life purposes and tasks, sets goals, and pursues a life course,
without any inherent reference to the relational context within which those purposes and goals emerge. This bias was fundamental to the original frameworks of existential and humanistic psychologies, but has been superseded over the past 30 years by a new conceptual paradigm in philosophy, sociology, and psychology that focuses on the social/dialogical character of the self as foundational to the emergence of the individual self (Gergen, 1985; Habermas, 1984, 1987; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2005; Kegan, 1982; Natanson, 1970, 1974; Raskin, 2002; Taylor, 1989, 1999).

To fully appreciate the meaning-orientation in life, we need to understand in what way it is inherently interactional, as a process existing between persons experienced as meaningful to one another. Questions of personal meaning arise fundamentally in our communications with others, as we explain what we mean, why we act, what matters to us, and what gives our life meaning. These are essentially acts of interpersonal communication, wherein we clarify our unique sense of purpose and meaning through engagement with others who take an active interest in understanding our inner worlds (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2005).

This dialogical framework reflects what was already understood in psychoanalytic and humanistic psychology, that our unique individual identities are defined by the quality of our relationships with significant others. These insights are now being further substantiated by work in interpersonal neurobiology, which is deepening our understanding of attachment schemas in early childhood, the processes of differentiation and individuation, the integrative role of emotion in processing of information, and the integrative qualities of emotion and personal narratives in clarifying personal identity and memory (Neimeyer, 1999, 2012a; Siegel, 1999, 2010). Our first experiences of personal meaning are defined by our interactions with caregivers and the recognition that we are seen and affirmed – or not – in those early communicative interactions. Experiences of secure attachment, empathic connection, positive regard, and congruent communications all contribute to a core sense of self and facilitate the capacity for health differentiation and individuation. These relationship factors have also been shown to facilitate ongoing inner exploration of inner potentials of the organism and the emergence of the authentic self (Carkhuff, 2009; Rogers, 1961/2004).

This experience of personal meaning is integrally infused with the experience of mattering to others and the development of the capacity to allow others and one’s own inner self to matter (Frankfurt, 1988; Peterson, 2012). Disruptions in this process inhibit the capacity for empathy, altruism, and genuine concern for the well-being of others – the very attitudes that are essential to the quality of personal responsibility emphasized by Frankl and Wong (2012c). Unfortunately, the personal responsibility dimension is often not emphasized in the commonly acknowledged definitions of meaning in life.

All this is to say that an appreciation of the dialogical nature of the self and the fact that meaning is created through communicative interactions with others – and ultimately with oneself through the process of inner dialogue, speaking, and writing – is essential to deepening and expanding our understanding of the core construct of personal meaning. The experience of mattering to one other, expressed through a deep interest in understanding and being understood, is a constitutive factor in the nature of personal meaning. It is an essential element of the construct of personal meaning, along with the more generally recognized elements of life purpose and coherence in our understanding of ourselves and our worlds. By expanding our research and practice agendas to include this dimension of dialogical relationships with others and the experiences of mattering to one another, we not only enrich our understanding of personal meaning as a motivational construct, but also enhance its relevance to related research in the fields of interpersonal neuroscience, positive psychology, self-determination, and self-actualization.

**Personal Meaning and Autonomy**

What about the relevance of a need for personal meaning to self-determination theory? We have seen that it does have a significant place within the theory of well-being and in our understanding of relationship, but how does a need for personal meaning relate to the need for autonomy, competence, and the actualizing tendency observed in the human organism?

I posed the question to Richard Ryan at the conference as to whether he needed to include a drive toward meaning as part of self-determination theory, in addition to the drives toward autonomy, competence, and relationship. I noted that Daniel Pink, a well-known interpreter of his work, chose to include the drive toward meaning as part of his account of self-determination theory (Pink, 2009). Ryan’s response was that he felt that meaning was already implicit in the other needs, most specifically the need for autonomy, and that it wasn’t needed as an additional construct to account for human motivation.
Reviewing self-determination theory, we find that autonomy refers to actions that are either pursued strictly for their own sake, as in free play, or those where the individual internalizes and integrates an externally defined value orientation as their own (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 15). In either case, autonomous action is experienced as self-chosen rather than dictated by others, precisely because it is experienced as personally meaningful. It is distinguished from externally motivated behavior by the fact that the individual reflects upon the meaning of the behavior and wholeheartedly endorses it as an expression of his or her core sense of self (Ryan & Deci, 2006, pp. 1560 – 1568; Taylor, 2005, pp. 4-5).

Ryan’s point is certainly well taken with regard to his interpretation of personal autonomy. But his theory of autonomy implies some notion of how we come to understand our true selves – that is to say, some theory about the nature of authenticity. The concepts of autonomy and authenticity are closely related in self-determination theory, but they are not identical (Ekstrom, 2005; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Medlock, 2012b). Autonomy relates to the locus of motivation – intrinsically versus extrinsically motivated action. Authenticity relates to questions of identity – who one is as this unique individual. Questions of identity concern our relationships with others, and how we attach to and differentiate ourselves from significant others.

Self-determination theory references how autonomous action rests on an understanding of our authentic selves – insofar as it is grounded in values and preferences that we wholeheartedly affirm as expressive of our core sense of self. But it stops short of exploring how we come to define our core values and preferences through our communicative interactions with others. The processes of internalization and integration of experience are not only intra-personal processes, but also interpersonal processes – a fact with which I am sure Ryan would agree. We internalize and internally integrate a belief or value by articulating it in communication with others and clarifying it in relation to other perspectives, beliefs, and values. We reflect upon it and make it our own through an interactive process of meaning-making with others. This interactive process includes the dialectic of attachment and individuation, through which we define ourselves in terms of our connectedness to others as well as through our difference from others. But it includes more than what is typically understood as a relationship dynamic. It is also a meaning-making dynamic that involves dialogical interaction among significant others, each involved in a process of self-definition.

This dynamic of interpersonal interaction and dialogue regarding matters of personal meaning is what gives rise to our sense of authentic selfhood, which in turn gives rise to the possibility of autonomous action. This need for personal meaning is thus as fundamental to self-determination theory as is the need for autonomy and relationship. The meaning-orientation serves to deepen our understanding not only of the purposes, beliefs, and values to which we ultimately commit ourselves, but also of the interactive process by which we define those purposes and commitments as expressions of shared meaning contexts as well as expressions of our unique selves.

Self-determination theory does of course recognize relationship as a fundamental human need; so Ryan can claim that this need to share our life stories and reasons for acting is already addressed under the heading of the need for relationship. But the analysis of relationship within self-determination theory is not nearly as robust as is the theory of autonomy. In most cases relationship is considered primarily in connection with autonomy, exploring the ways that relationship and autonomy needs are inter-dependent (Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2006). What is missing in that account is the specific need to articulate one’s feelings, beliefs, and values in dialogue with others, for the purposes of clarifying who one is and what gives one’s life the unique meaning that it has. The need for intimate dialogue that facilitates the emergence of personal meaning is more than a relationship need – though it certainly is a key element in marriage and in other intimate relationships (Berger & Kellner, 1964). It is closely associated with the search for narrative coherence and integration as we create our personal narratives about why we act and how we make sense of challenging or traumatic events (Drewery & Winslade, 1997; Neimeyer, 1999; Siegel, 2010). The need to share one’s personal narrative, and to co-create stories with significant others that enable us to make sense of our lives, is a dimension of experience that goes beyond what is generally understood by relationship needs in the field of psychology. It represents the dialogical aspect of personal meaning.

All this is to say that there is a specific need for personal meaning, expressed in our dialogue with others and our internal dialogue with ourselves, that enables us to arrive at a clear understanding of who we are and what constitutes our core, authentic self. This need for personal meaning is distinct from the need for autonomy, in that it involves clarification of who we are vis-à-vis our relationships with others, rather than the internal vs. external locus of action. It is also distinct from the need for relationship as generally understood, in that it involves a process of creating shared meanings that occur within the context of relationship but which also transcend that context. The needs to be affirmed, to securely attach to others, to experience a sense of wholeness and okayness, are all important relationship needs. But beyond that, the need to collaborate with significant others in defining who one is, what one believes, what one ultimately cares about, and what
ultimately matters, is a distinct need over and above what is generally included under the rubrics of relationship needs or autonomy needs.

This is also to say that personal meaning involves not only the affirmation of value orientations that are wholeheartedly affirmed upon reflection – as the notion of autonomy requires – but also involves the authenticity of our ways of relating to others. Certainly part of that process of emerging authenticity comes from understanding what actions and purposes and goals can be wholeheartedly affirmed by the individual. But an equally important part of the story is the process of interaction with significant others through which one comes to define those purposes and goals as integral to one’s sense of self.

I would like to suggest that once meaning-oriented approaches recognize this relational/dialogical aspect of meaning making as a defining characteristic of personal meaning, then self-determination theorists might also recognize the role which personal meaning plays in explaining human motivation – over and above the needs for autonomy, competence, and relationship.

Personal Meaning and Self Actualization

Self-determination theory also postulates a self-actualizing tendency in the human organism, drawing on the insights of Rogers and Maslow and humanistic psychology (Hodgins & Knee, 2002; Maslow, 1968/1999; Rogers, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2002). This actualizing tendency is associated with the notion of autonomous action, in that it originates from within the organism rather than from external sources. Researchers in the tradition of self-determination theory distinguish defensive behavior that is associated with rigid adherence to external standards and values, from autonomous action that is characterized by openness to experience and the flexibility to modify fixed habits, beliefs, self-concept in light of changing circumstance and experiences, and an interest in learning and growth (Hodgins & Knee, 2002).

It is interesting that self-determination theory does not include self-actualization as a fundamental human need. It describes the actualizing tendency of the human organism as a propensity of the human organism when fundamental needs are being met, specifically the needs to autonomy, competence, and relationship. But it considers self-actualization as a desired outcome of need gratification, rather than a distinct need unto itself. In the words of Ryan and Deci:

SDT begins by embracing the assumption that all individuals have natural, innate, and constructive tendencies to develop an even more elaborated and unified sense of self. That is, we assume people have a primary propensity to forge interconnections among aspects of their own psyches as well as with other individuals and groups in their social worlds . . . Social environments can, according to this perspective, either facilitate and enable the growth and integration of propensities with which the human psyche is endowed, or they can disrupt, forestall, and fragment these processes resulting in behaviors and inner experiences that represent the darker side of humanity. (Ryan & Deci, 2002, pp. 5-6)

They refer to this framework as a “dialectical view which concerns the interactions between an active, integrating human nature and social contexts that either nurture or impede the organism’s active nature” (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 6). This way of thinking about self-actualization is highly consistent with the construct of personal meaning as described in this paper. It assumes a natural tendency to integrate meaning contexts, including specifically social meaning contexts, as part of the natural process of self integration and actualization.

A meaning-oriented perspective strongly suggests that self-determination theory includes this actualizing tendency in the human psyche as a fundamental human need. It implies as much as when it indicates that the stifling of this basic human tendency toward self-actualization results in “inner experiences that represent the darker side of humanity.” Certainly, the human costs of not addressing this need for growth and self-integration are considerable, in the rigidities that lead to human intolerance and violence toward others who represent competing and threatening perspectives. The need to create more inclusive contexts of meaning through constructive dialogues with others is more than simply an outcome of the needs for autonomy, competence, and relationship – as important as these are. It can certainly be regarded as a distinct and indispensable human need, without which the conditions for human flourishing could not be met.

A fundamental need for meaning as a human motivation in its own right includes the discovery of a sense of purpose for oneself and an appreciation of the interconnections and interpretations of experience that bring a sense of coherence to one’s life, as we referenced earlier. This sense of purpose and coherence emerges through the narratives individuals co-construct with significant others. These key components of purpose, coherence, and dialogue help to orient
the individual to the specific potentialities to be actualized in a given situation. By focusing on this inherent actualizing tendency in our cognitive, emotional, and motivational frameworks, we can more clearly see how the needs for meaning and self-actualization are integrally related.

Cognitive-developmental psychology and theories of transformational learning have made similar points about the evolution of cognitive and normative frames of reference from childhood egocentricism to more mature and inclusive meaning contexts (Habermas, 1990; Kegan, 1982; Mezirow, 2000). Broader socio-historical developmental frameworks also describe stages in the evolution of society and culture, demonstrating how more complex and inclusive structures can evolve from earlier social forms (Beck & Cowan, 2006; Habermas, 1987; Hegel, 1910/1967). These developmental frameworks complement and enhance the research agenda of meaning-oriented research, identifying stages in the evolution of our meaning frameworks as aspects of the natural actualizing tendency of the human psyche and culture.

This need for personal meaning is also expressed in the study of personal narrative as a vehicle for integrating memories, current experiences and projected futures into a unified life story (Drewery & Winslade, 1997; McAdams, 1990; Neimeyer, 1999). Recent studies in the field of interpersonal neurobiology also emphasize the importance of personal narratives in integrating our sense of self and defining the fundamental attachment schemas which characterize our relationships with others and with ourselves (Siegel, 2010). This integrative tendency is grounded in the nature of our emotional lives, which establish patterns of self-regulation and ways of relating with others and with ourselves. These emotionally grounded narratives serve to define who we are as individuals in relationship with significant others, enabling us to both differentiate from and attach to significant others as we define our authentic sense of self.

The research agenda of meaning-oriented approaches to human motivation becomes more focused and ultimately more fruitful by collaborating with these other traditions in developmental psychology, transformation learning theory, self-determination theory, humanistic psychology, and interpersonal neurobiology – all of which are endeavoring to discover the key elements of the integrative and actualizing tendencies of the human psyche.

**Higher Purpose and Self Actualization**

This integral relationship between personal meaning and self-actualization has not always been clearly understood. There has been a tendency in Frankl’s work to define meaning as an essentially ethical construct and to distinguish it from self-actualization, which was perceived as self-focused and therefore incompatible with higher meaning. This potential interpretation of higher purpose as incompatible with self-actualization can lead to misunderstandings of both constructs, and deserves some attention in concluding these reflections. The notion of higher purpose is also important in clarifying the construct of personal meaning, as it is clearly a central component of what is usually meant by living a meaning-oriented life.

Frankl suggests at various points that a meaning-oriented approach to psychotherapy (e.g., logotherapy) is fundamentally incompatible with an approach focused on self-actualization. In Frankl’s words:

> . . . the real aim of human existence cannot be found in what is called self-actualization. Human existence is essentially self-transcendence rather than self-actualization. Self-actualization is not a possible aim at all, for the simple reason that the more a man would strive for it, the more he would miss it. For only to the extent to which man commits himself to the fulfillment of his life’s meaning, to this extent he also actualizes himself. In other words, self-actualization cannot be attained if it is made an end in itself, but only as a side effect of self-transcendence. (Frankl, 1970, p. 175)

He appears to be rejecting a drive toward self-actualization as a legitimate psychological construct, much as one might reject a fundamental drive toward happiness. Both have the ironic and paradoxical quality that by pursuing them directly, we are less likely to achieve them.

Frankl focuses on the notion of responsibility as the key to accessing and fulfilling one’s will to higher meaning. For him responsibility is primarily a spiritual and ethical response to the demands of a given situation and what it asks of us (Frankl, 1973, pp. xv – xvi; Schweiker, 1999; Wong, 2012c). But it is also a response to the potentials and yearnings which arise within us – “what the patient [or individual] actually longs for in the depth of his being” (Frankl, 1970, p. 164). The issue here is one of discernment – how one recognizes one’s deepest yearnings for self-expression and fulfillment, coupled with a responsiveness to how others and our situation present opportunities for the expression and fulfillment of those
yearnings in service to others. The motivation begins from within, and finds opportunities for expression in the external needs and demands of the situation. As the educator Parker Palmer puts it:

True vocation joins self and service, as Frederick Buechner asserts when he defines vocation as “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.” Buechner’s definition starts with the self and moves toward the needs of the world: it begins wisely where vocation begins – not in what the world needs (which is everything) but in the nature of the human self, in what brings joy, the deep joy of knowing that we are here on earth to be the gifts that God created. (Palmer, 2000, pp. 16-17)

Palmer is clearly expressing his views from a spiritual perspective, which Frankl does as well in a more secular language. Both are addressing the spiritual need of the individual to serve others and some higher purpose, through the expression of one’s talents, yearnings, and sense of vocation.

What I believe Frankl is advocating is not a rejection of the notion of self-actualization, but rather a fuller interpretation of what that involves. If the self is equated with the ego and self-actualization is simply the fulfillment of ego-interests and desires, then this is indeed not true self-actualization. But if the self is understood as being-in-relationship with one’s world and specifically with other persons, then self-actualization is both the fulfillment of one’s unique individuality and the realization of the potentials for meaning and fulfillment inherent in the relationships and social contexts that define one’s specific situation. This notion of vocation and service is what Frankl calls out as the ethical/spiritual motivation toward meaning. It is oriented toward service and contribution, rather than ego-gratification. At the same time it is an aspect of the actualizing tendency of the human being to realize this notion of a higher self beyond instinct gratification and the pursuit of pleasure. This potential is inherent in situations where we are called upon to respond to the needs of those who matter to us.

A more inclusive and integrative view of higher meaning and purpose needs to acknowledge the integral connection between the need for personal meaning and the actualizing tendency in human life. This actualizing tendency, as we observed above in the discussion of developmental frameworks of meaning-making, includes a natural progression from more egocentric to more inclusive and universal perspectives of meaning and purpose. This represents a natural progression toward a sense of higher purpose and meaning, considered as part of the process of self-actualization.

This ethic of responsibility is also grounded in our interpersonal and social connectedness with one another. The tasks which life requires of us are communicated to us primarily through the voice of the other – either in the person of a loved one, a community, a group, a company, or a nation. The other in this sense is not an entity that is external to us or unrelated to our sense of self; it is actually through our connection with the other that we discover who we are at the core of our being (Friedman, 1955/2002; Kierkegaard, 2008; Lacan, 1998; Levinas, 1996). This point has been made among existentially-oriented philosophers and theologians who see a spiritual/ethical dimension in our relationship to the Transcendent Other and the basic integrity of life (Klemm & Schweiker, 2008). These reflections demonstrate the inherent sense of higher purpose and coherence in life that are implicit in our self-defining relationships with others.

This experience of intimate, engaged dialogue has been described throughout these reflections as a fundamental human need – one of the key components of this ethical dimension of personal meaning. It is an experience that is both other-oriented and inwardly oriented at the same time, putting us in touch with our deeper spiritual yearnings that lead us to desire connectedness with others and with the sense of unity in life. At this spiritual level all the dimensions of personal meaning come together – the search for purpose, coherence, and connectedness – in a unified sense that life has a sustaining meaning that enables us to endure even the most extreme challenges and inexplicable suffering.

Conclusion

This article has been an extended reflection on themes that were raised at the 7th Biennial International Meaning Conference, which have also been articulated in recent publications summarizing the research in this area. The reflections for the most part avoid philosophical and theological speculations about ultimate meaning and purpose, except to indicate briefly how notions of higher purpose and meaning may be grounded in our everyday experiences of personal meaning. They focused instead on personal meaning as a fundamental human need, and the role and importance of this need in motivating choices and actions in specified situations.

The article identified an emerging consensus regarding the definition of personal meaning as involving a sense of purpose and coherence in orienting individuals to future possibilities for hope and fulfillment. The argument was made that
this consensus reflected a cognitive-behavioral bias in the field, focusing on cognitive and goal-focused experiences and behaviors and neglecting the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of personal meaning. The main thrust of the article has been to show how relationship factors, and specifically self-defining dialogues with significant others, need to be included as essential components of personal meaning. It showed how this interpersonal dimension of personal meaning included more than is traditionally associated with a need for relationship per se – i.e., experiences of being affirmed, accurately seen and heard, and valued – and thus warranted being considered as a separate factor associated with the need for personal meaning. The experiences of communicative interactions with others were shown to be essential to the construction of personal meaning, as the vehicle through which individuals come to a clearer understanding of who they are and what they believe and value.

The article then explored the interconnections between the need for personal meaning and other closely associated needs defined in self-determination theory, positive psychology, humanistic psychology, interpersonal neurobiology, and narrative approaches to self integration. It showed how a meaning-oriented approach pointed toward a deeper understanding of personal authenticity and its relationship to autonomy, and also demonstrated directions for fuller analysis of relationship needs within the traditions of self-determination theory and positive psychology. It then explored the claim that self-actualization needs to be considered as a distinct need, including a fuller understanding of self-actualization as an aspect of personal meaning. Finally, it examined the notion of higher purpose and meaning as it relates to the ideal of self-actualization, including a reconsideration of Frankl’s views on the subject. My hope is that this paper serves to further that work by demonstrating the integrative possibilities of meaning-oriented research in relation to other prominent approaches to the study of human motivation and well-being.

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The Art of Play
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Abstract

In this address, I will defend a version of an *aesthetic hypothesis*, which is an idea associated with many philosophers and prominent thinkers. The aesthetic hypothesis is that the way to live a good life, a happy life, is to consider that life as a work of art, and to see that the aesthetic dimension of one’s consciousness, where pleasure is taken from beauty and harmony, is the primary one. I want to argue that those aesthetic values, properly conceived, are at the very heart of being human. I then explain the ‘art of play’ as a doubled phrase in what follows. There is the art of play that is learning how to play or thinking about what it is to play; but there is also the kind of play that is particular to art—not just visual art but aesthetic values in general. I’m going to talk about these ideas along five dimensions. (1) Time - Play at its best takes place within, and allows, that temporal shift. It is the entry into a non-secular time. When we come to talk about finite games we will see how time is both *kept* and *not kept* in games. (2) Play - There are many different ways we can conceive of play, and its relation to temporal shifts. Play can be analyzed as a form of socialization, communication, creative imagination, relationship building, and transcendental play. (3) Finite Games - Games and play are not identical categories. Games are organized forms of play. *Finite* games are games that come to some kind of conclusion. In philosophical terms this outcome would be the *telos* or final cause of the game—the purpose of the game. (4) Outcomes – What are the outcomes that we derive from finite games beyond winning and losing? At least since Plato and Aristotle, people have believed that the importance of games was that they created a kind of competitive wisdom: *agon*, the competition-born wisdom of play. (5) Infinite Games – What can we say in conclusion about infinite games and the art of play? We play infinite games in a manner that extends right back to the earliest forms of pretending: We do it, because it is *fun*. But an *infinite* game is more than just fun—or perhaps I should say that fun is more philosophically significant than we sometimes think.

Introduction

When I got the invitation from Dr. Wong to participate in the Meaning Conference, it was the first time I had heard of the International Network on Personal Meaning (INPM). When that happens, as it sometimes does, my curiosity about the history and mission—as philosophers would say the telos, or final cause – of any organization is piqued. So I’ve been spending lots of time looking at INPM’s online trace. Online trace is such, now, that it’s creating a kind of extended personality or consciousness of both organizations and persons. We all know this, but the implications of it are not entirely clear to us yet. In an older model of extended consciousness, my consciousness might extend physically: Beyond the limits of my body, say, by means of things such as a cane that helps me see, or with communications media that allow my voice to traverse large distances, and so on. These are spatial extensions of consciousness.

But now we also have temporal extension of consciousness; that is to say, earlier versions of ourselves trail after us in this online trace and in lots of cases they can be very hard to eradicate, supposing you wanted to do that. I am interested in a question of what these traces say about the very idea of consciousness, and of the individual. I think we’re in transition concerning the very nature of individuality, and that is partly the focus of my discussion. This large question of changing consciousness may not be an obvious focus of the paper, given its title, but I hope the contours of this question will emerge as a property of our time together.

To that end, in what follows I will defend a version of an *aesthetic hypothesis*, which is an idea associated with many philosophers and prominent thinkers such as Nietzsche and even, in his own fashion, Plato. The aesthetic hypothesis is that the way to live a good life, a happy life, is to consider that life as a work of art, and to see that the aesthetic dimension of one’s consciousness, where pleasure is taken from beauty and harmony, is the primary one. This position might seem strange, because we tend to think of aesthetic values as secondary or even tertiary to other kinds of values: perhaps ethical ones, political ones, family-based or kinship values, and so on. But I want to suggest to you in the course of this argument that those aesthetic values, properly conceived, are at the very heart of being human, and being conscious; and moreover that they are the locus of the most important and lasting meanings of which human consciousness is capable.
The ‘art of play’ is a doubled phrase. That is, the ‘of’ here is a grammatical double generative: there is the art of play that is learning how to play or thinking about what it is to play; but there is also the kind of play that is particular to art—not just visual art but aesthetic values in general. I am, in turn, playing with that doubleness—the art of play, the play of art—in what follows. I’m going to talk about these ideas along five dimensions.

The first of these is Time, about which more in a moment. The second is Play itself: I want to investigate this mostly philosophically, but I hope you’ll see that there are enough points of contact with psychological discourses to make sense to people in this field. Philosophers and psychologists don’t talk to each other nearly enough, but we’re starting. Third, Finite Games, I will talk about what they are and both what they can and cannot do. Fourth, I will address the Outcomes of finite games and the risks associated with those outcomes. And finally, I will investigate Infinite Games. Influential background ideas here include the work of James P. Carse on finite and infinite games, and the work of Bernard Suits in his book The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia (1978), both of which address what is sometimes called ludics, or the philosophy of play.

1. Time

So let us consider time first of all. It may seem strange to talk about time as the first point with respect to play, but what I want to suggest first of all is that play is a form of shifting time—temporal shifting—and the most obvious way in which that is true, is that playing is time out of time.

The idea of the temporal shift has a long and cluttered history, in philosophy and in other traditions, particularly religious ones: the concept of the Sabbath, or sacred day, the time that is different, time that is not secular. I want to use these religious ideas without any particular religious connotation. That is, I want to use them diacritically. We can talk about the sacred without committing ourselves, or needing to commit ourselves, to a religious position. On this diacritical view, the sacred can be understood simply as that which is not the secular. That which is not the secular, a phrase that means of the age, is therefore whatever is not the everyday or the workaday. The sacred’s power of difference, what we might call its diacritical leverage, is what makes the move from secular to sacred a temporal shift.

Play at its best takes place within, and allows, that temporal shift. It is the entry into a non-secular time. When we come to talk about finite games we will see how time is both kept and not kept in games. In everyday life, the most common experience of time, shown among other things in the persistence of memory, is of a kind of dominance. That is, we are burdened by time. We have to spend time, we have to waste time, we have to save time. These common notions of saving and spending in themselves show that there is an economy of workaday time, secular time, which is already transactional. We save it or we spend it, and often we are criticized for how we spend it or whether we save it. Everywhere in the secular realm, we are expected to be on time, sometimes we have to make time, or make up time, and so on.

Salvador Dali’s (1931) painting, titled The Persistence of Memory, gives a graphic (if surreal) expression to a specific experience of time and memory, in particular the uncanny texture of having one’s personhood constituted, or overwritten, by the variable faculty of memory across temporal ranges: having to, among other things, reconstitute one’s personal identity each morning by recalling the night before and the constructed continuity of all the previous nights, mornings, and days in between. But this image also conveys the larger sense that measured time, the time of the melting, creepy clock, is everywhere in our lives; and how we must structure our lives relentlessly according to that secular time. This is the time of, let us say, appointment, of always having to be somewhere, and to be there on time. Now it is obviously true that some things are simply impossible, things such as efficiency but also higher-order human goods such as cooperation and shared projects, without such appointed time. We cannot get together and do things unless we have an appointed time at which that will happen. We would not be here in this room at 3 pm, more or less, without that kind of time. But the idea of play as a diacresis on that time, something that shifts away from it, is very powerful and important to our deeper sense of ourselves. Not surprisingly, play and its associated playtime—the time out of time—has existed in every culture and tradition that we know of.

This famous painting by Pieter Bruegel, Children’s Games (1560), is a depiction of play, but it is not just a social document. Social historians have examined this famous painting and found something like thirty-five or thirty-seven games actually being played. It is a beautiful example of a kind of social history, but the most important thing about this scene as depicted is that these people are not working. They are outside of the workaday; they are in a different time. It happens that they are here in this public space, which is another aspect of the sacred, at least potentially, since such space, owned by everyone and no one, is never subject to transaction and the use values of the secular. This dream of the non-secular, playful time has been, as I said, part of every cultural tradition we know. Another, earlier example of its physical manifestation is Babylon, the idea of Babylon as a pleasure garden: a place where that time of play is instantiated concretely. You may
object that this is a dream, a mad utopian vision. Perhaps. The interesting thing to me is the persistence of this dream, our ongoing willingness to entertain new versions of it.

This is a sketch by the Situationist architect Constant Nieuwenhuys and his project the New Babylon. The Situationists were post-Second World War intellectuals and activists who wanted to reintroduce playful, disruptive elements into what they saw as the grided regularity of late capitalist life. So, famously, Guy Debord, the leading thinker among the Situationists, invited us to participate in what he called the derive, the drift: to go in unexpected ways rather than along the standard directions. The idea here is to reclaim the streets and places of the city by not using them the way they are ordained to be used, by breaking the bonds of use. Nieuwenhuys, influenced by these ideas, designs an ideal city he self-consciously called the New Babylon, to forge a link with that earlier concrete vision. This is the sort of thing that no architect today could even try to get past his or her supervisor: a total re-imagination of human civilization and all forms of dwelling. Constant reasoned this way: If we create a city that is like the old Babylon, a concrete instantiation of the temporal shift of play, then we will be finally liberated from all the forms of pressure that have ever been institutionalized. His design is thus one of those great moments where political theory meets concrete building practice.

Now, in fact, this project was never built! But it has all kinds of great manifesto elements around it. There should be multiple levels and people should be able to drop or rise levels at will, so that they have all kinds of unexpected encounters with fellow citizens. Every moment is a moment of spontaneous engagement with the other. Wall-to-wall play, in other words. For some people, of course, this might sound like hell. As in, “Wait a second, a couple spontaneous interactions a day is plenty, thank you very much.” In a sense this vision is, really, a total annihilation of the idea of the private. The private, which has been historically aligned with property and the retreat into the domestic, is obliterated by this new urban scene. Our status as fellow citizens is foregrounded constantly.

I said it has never been built, but some models have been built, and this image is just for your interest. You can see the different levels. If you ever played with building toys as a child, you can see some of the modernist forms that were popular in the decades after the Second World War. Not the Lego style, but the space-age, futuristic toys that some of us had in the 1960s and ‘70s. Of course, no 20th-century utopian architecture is complete without gyrocopters in the helipad at the top of the building.

2. Play

There are many different ways we can conceive of play, and its relation to temporal shifts. Let us consider some of the most central conceptions.

In the natural world, which includes us of course, but looking at the world as a deployment of species and their existence within an environment, play can be analyzed as a form of socialization. Socialization is not as simple as it sounds, however, because the playful bite that is not a real bite is not just a matter of socializing. It is also a matter of communicating: it communicates the kind of irony of which non-human animals are capable. That is, the wolf is able to send the message, “This is play. I am biting you without really biting you.” The bite is “just a nip,” as people would say, a playful bite; that message goes along with the bite itself. Furthermore, of course, in pack animals this kind of play can establish position. So when the play results in the performance of submission, then the dominant play-fighter establishes position without actually having to fight the submissive. And this is important to the survival of packs, to the order and flourishing of the species. Play takes on this kind of role in a natural environment through this kind of natural display.

Humans do it too. I have two brothers, and I have the scars to show it. The cuts, the bruises, the broken arm. I won’t tell the story of the broken arm here, as it still kind of pains me to think about my brother breaking my arm; but he did. Was it playful? Yes, I can say that now. And as with animals at play—the non-human animals—when human animals are at play they are doing the same kinds of things: socializing, communicating, and sometimes establishing position. We humans are doing a lot of other things when we relate to each other, because we have higher-order consciousness and are always learning how to create skills that will be transferrable to other parts of life. There has been a lot of interest recently in sibling studies, in how siblings’ behaviour creates skills and competencies for relationships, for work, and so on. One of the many ways we acquire those skills is through play.

A third way, or concept, of play is the idea of play as a kind of thinking: free-ranging creative imagining. We sometimes call this process ‘brainstorming’, or ‘idea-floating’, or (one of my favourites) ‘blueskying.’ The idea is that by playing around with things, by having a non-directed encounter with each other, we can actually do better and achieve more than if we were constrained by an actual direction. Some people don’t think it works. This image might be a little self-indulgent but what is play for if not that? This mind-map is probably the ultimate mind-map; for me, it puts a line under the very idea of mind-mapping.

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And, finally, in this preparatory vein, note that humans engage, as do other animals, in sexual foreplay. Sexual foreplay can include, in my conception here, flirting and other forms of behaviour which are allowing us to act in ways that may or may lead to further acts of procreation that sustain our position in the natural environment. From a strictly biological point of view, foreplay is unnecessary and, indeed, there are many people who go along with that theory if they can find partners who are willing to tolerate them. In one strict sense, foreplay has no utility. It’s not biologically necessary to procreation that there shall be flirty and foreplay, but typically we take pleasure from these behaviours and, moreover, they allow us to establish relationships and ongoing intimacy as well as to procreate. In this larger sense, foreplay does have social utility, just not one directly related to biological procreation. I nsofar as the creation of relationships and intimacy is important to us, it is literally unimaginable to have a full life without this third form of play.

What I am going to suggest now is that all of these ways of thinking about play, however correct they are within their own areas, fail to see the big picture. They do not see what I am going to call the transcendental aspect of play. To see what I mean, let us look briefly at some analysis of what goes on in certain kinds of play, crucially in the play of pretending. This follows, in outline, the work of Donald Winnicott and other Freudian-influenced child psychologists. On this psychoanalytical view, what is important about play is not just its ability to socialize, or to instrumentally serve other desired ends, whether in the services of ideas, procreation, or intimacy; what is important is to pretend on purpose but without purpose.

I said earlier that the animals are enacting their own, limited form of irony with the bite that is not a real bite. Humans are capable of much more complex forms and layers of pretending, ironizing means. Consider the little girl with her teddy bear. What is she doing? She is feeding the teddy bear. There are at least two levels of meaning here: her play may seem simple but is actually quite complex. The bear is not a real bear, and she is not really feeding it because, in being not a real bear, it cannot ingest the morsel of food. If you asked the girl what she is doing, she would say, “I’m feeding my bear.” The pretended deflections from the real state of affairs allows us to create levels of consciousness, and the ability to make this kind of distinction, between real and pretend, even as we decide to ignore it in the service of play. This strange contract of consciousness with itself—to create something unreal, and then treat it precisely as real—is at the heart of our appreciation of higher-order forms of pretending such as literature. We observe here the layered “as if” consciousness, or the suspension of disbelief.

This form of play brings us closer to the transcendental. How so? Notice that feeding the bear doesn’t have a purpose, indeed can have no purpose, since it is not a real bear and it is not eating. The bear will be just as nourished, or non-nourished, before and after the feeding session. What, then, is the point of doing it? It is precisely to enact this simultaneous is/is-not consciousness of pretending. If you were to ask why she is making these motions, given that the bear is not a bear and cannot eat—the questions only a psychologist or a spoilsport would imagine asking—she might respond, perhaps impatiently, “Because the bear is hungry.” It is not the place of the non-pretender to end the double consciousness; only the pretender has that privilege, and responsibility.

Consider some similar examples. A pointed finger becomes the gun. But notice that there is, once again, more than one level in play. With a pretend gun, I can shoot real enemies. To be sure, this is not recommended! If you were to go down the street going BANG! BANG! BANG! with a pretend gun, ‘shooting’ people you really don’t like, even strangers, that is considered assault under the Common Law of this country. Yes, it’s true: you can be arrested on the charge of assault for pretend-shooting someone, and a defence hinging on the fact that the gun was only a pretend gun may or may not help you. Of course, you can also be arrested for really shooting someone, but I feel compelled to issue this fair warning against pretend shooting: the play of pretending takes you out of the mundane realities of the everyday world, perhaps, but others are still in that world, and may judge you according to its standards.

So, one can (a) pretend to shoot real enemies by aiming a pretend gun at them (the cocked finger); and one can (b) really shoot real enemies with a real gun. But there are at least four other logical possibilities in play here, and they illustrate the levels and complexity of any and all pretending. In addition, then, one can (c) pretend to shoot real enemies with a real gun, by not firing it but instead shouting (say), “Bang, bang, you’re dead.” This, too, constitutes an assault under the law, perhaps even more obviously than the ‘real’ shot from the pretend gun. One can also (d) pretend to shoot pretend enemies with a real gun, as when, for instance, I am joking around with my (real) gun and ‘playfully’ point it at a friend. Not a good idea, as gun-accident statistics demonstrate. And though it is a little hard to imagine the circumstance that would call for it, except within the details of a complicated game, it is logically possible that one can (e) pretend-shoot pretend enemies with a pretend gun. Why? To confuse another player in the game? To complete some ruse de guerre? I don’t know, but logic demands the option—though it also throws open a host of possible second- and third-order pretending.
possibilities within a given game. And, finally, in what is very likely the most common case of pretending when it comes to
guns and play, the paradigm case that implies all the others, one can (f) shoot pretend enemies with a pretend gun.

When my brothers and I took up our imagined space-man and cowboy adventures as children, we were almost
certainly performing the last of these forms of deflection from the real (not a real gun, not a real enemy). We would shoot a pretend enemy with a pretend weapon, and he would pretend die. We might, if the right toys were on hand, substitute a fake gun—a gun made of plastic, resembling a real gun, or fantastic science-fiction-style gun, also made of plastic but not resembling a real gun—in place of the hand with pointed finger. But I want to say that the hand-as-gun thing is actually
essential to the performance of pretending, because here we perform the basic deflection of meaning without anything except the imagined similarity between the index finger and the gun’s barrel, the fist’s sense of gripping something, the raised thumb’s ability to recall a cocked trigger on a single-action revolver.

There are many lurking limits to this kind of play, as my references to the force of law indicate, but of course the
obvious limit is reality itself. This makes it clear that the space in which this common, but in fact profound, kind of play is possible is at the edge of the real—going beyond it. The kind of play evident in pretending is all about the world of the game not being real, conceptually moving away from the presumed limits of reality. Those limits can be painful, as I have suggested. When the pretend pistols go up against the actual police force, that is almost a bad thing. In all seriousness, I cannot say you should do it.

### 3. Finite Games

Gathering some of these insights together, what can we say about transcendental play? I want to be clear, first, that
games and play are not identical categories. Games are organized forms of play; they have elements that might not be
playful. Finite games are games that come to some kind of conclusion, and the conclusion governs how the game is played and what the game means. In philosophical terms this outcome would be the telos or final cause of the game—the purpose of the game. To accept this point, you don’t have to be Vince Lombardi and say, “Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.” You need not be quite that strict about the telos to recognize that a finite game has an outcome. We play until we reach some kind of conclusion.

In certain kinds of finite games called sports, especially the category of territorial finite games that includes
hockey, football, and soccer, we create a gamespace in order to give the contest shape and help achieve the outcome. That is, we construct a very particular kind of constrained arena or forum, a deployment of bounded space which also operates according to a logic of bounded time, set off from ordinary spaces and times. But this constrained time, though distinct from the pervasive time of the world outside the sport—it can be started and stopped, for example, or extended into overtime, even into that pinnacle of sporting drama, sudden-death overtime—does not yet achieve the temporal shift of transcendental play, because this time, like the time outside in the rest of the everyday world, is regulated. So, for example, in a hockey game there are three periods of twenty minutes; in a football game, there are four quarters of fifteen minutes, and so on. Even though this gametime can be counted down dramatically, stopped and started, its actions even captured and studied in slow-motion replays which effectively slow time below the experiential threshold, it is still working according to the logic of the outside, chronological time. The gametime is, as it were, a way of bringing that outside time into the constrained space and squeezing it for dramatic effect. That fact is important because it will show that these games are unstable with respect to realizing the transcendental possibilities of play.

By creating a constrained space, we strive to force a heightened outcome. That is what the field of sport does. There are often arguments, within the game’s logic, about how exactly the space is arranged. Consider the hockey rink. If you are familiar with the game, you know that there are ongoing disputes about whether there should be a red line, whether you can have rink-long passes, or whether they should be shorter passes. There is an icing rule, which prevents the puck from being moved without certain kinds of control. Most significantly, there are the blue lines, which create the possibility of ‘offside’ calls. Going offside is important in territorial games because it creates a limit, such that all attacks on the goal shall be, as it were, square and just. There would be no need for an offside rule if this notion of fair territorial confrontation were not itself generated by the idea of the game’s constraints. We want the outcome to have a certain kind of character. So you are forbidden from hanging around down in your opponent’s end when the puck is behind you: hockey’s offside rule dictates that you cannot advance into the opponent’s end ahead of the puck. In soccer, by contrast, there is also an offside rule but there is no painted line, only the imaginary line that goes through the body of the final defender in front of the goaltender. Hence the possibility, in soccer, of the ‘offside trap’, where the attacker is left hanging without the ball by the defenders running upfield. This is a risky tactic, and a neat nuance of the offside rule’s inner meaning: maintaining fairness.
Non-territorial games are equally interesting precisely because they do not have this kind of spatial limitation to force face-to-face contact but nevertheless strive to achieve interesting, and final, outcomes. Non-territorial games lack the warlike quality of territorial games and so can arrange their gamespace differently, without face-to-face lines of conflict on grids or roughly rectangular plots of property. Baseball is my favourite example of the non-territorial finite game. It takes place in a space that is interestingly constrained along conventional, but not arbitrary, lines. The conventional distance between first base and home plate, for example, is ninety feet. Why is it ninety feet? The question is rhetorical. Do we want to say, “Well, that’s what Abner Doubleday said” or “Well, that’s what God told Abner Doubleday to say.” No, the reason the distance is ninety feet is a matter of pure, stipulated convention—although there is some validity in the suggestion that baseball is awash in threes and nines (three bases, three strikes, three outs; nine players, nine innings, the distance from home plate to the pitcher's mound - sixty feet six inches, etc.). But even if we dismiss this claim of numerical mysticism and insist on pure conventionality, that does not mean the distance could just as easily be some other, say eighty-five or ninety-five feet. In order for the game to be the game, to serve its finite purpose, there has to be some suspense in the possibility of reaching first base, given the ability of athletic human beings and the equipment of the game. If you are a fan of baseball you know that reaching first base is much harder than it looks. The very best hitters get to first base, on hits anyway, something less than four times out of ten. Consider this: there has not been a professional baseball player who hit more than four times out of ten for a whole season since Ted Williams.

Fascinating for baseball fans, too, is that this non-territorial game puts us in a different relationship with time. Time in baseball is not told in minutes and hours; it is told in outs and innings. A baseball game can take as little time as an hour and as much time as eight, ten, twelve hours. In fact, theoretically, a baseball game can go on forever. If the score is high and nobody ever gets a winning run in extra innings, there is nothing in the rules of baseball to stop the game never ending. Meanwhile, the foul lines in baseball, before the invention of outfield fences, which vary from park to park, were considered to extend to infinity. If you extend them in this manner, the field theoretically encompasses the entire earth. Baseball is thus a game that encompasses the entire earth and can last forever. No wonder philosophers like it so much; by contrast hockey and football are boring, they’re just analogues of war.

We can also consider, here, more specific kinds of contests, playful sporting contests, such as the confrontation between individuals in boxing. We create the ring; the ring can then become a metaphor or a synecdoche for any constrained conflict. You will find it in political rhetoric: to enter the ring, to throw your hat in the ring, to call in your assignments, but when they execute the play there is something absolutely incalculable about the success of a thrown pass. We might say, loosely, that the quarterback ‘calculates’ the distance from his position in the pocket to where the receiver will be, but in fact he does nothing of the sort. In philosophical terms, he is not engaged in Cartesian geometry, he is engaged in lifeworld phenomenology. When you are a good quarterback, you don’t measure distances, you exercise skillful judgment and throw to the spot you know the receiver will occupy. That is what it means to be good at this sport, to execute the play you might have learned from the diagram. This interesting incalculability lingers at the center of what looks like the most finite, constrained, drawn-up game.

This is the beauty of any finite game, ultimately: not the contest itself, and certainly not the field, but the moments of pure connection created from within the constraints. That is when you can say, with some plausibility, football is poetry in motion. That is when you have an aesthetic appreciation of the game. We might call this aesthetic dimension the whiff of the transcendent, or the non-finite, in this particular finite game. (There is, to be sure, unsettling violence at the heart of this same game, which makes appreciation of it an uneasy business; I note this point without being able to develop it here.)

I want to make the point about instability in a different way by quoting a famous passage from a work of J. D. Salinger called Seymour: An Introduction. The scene is in Manhattan, at the magic moment of dusk. Two boys are playing marbles while a third, a brother of one of the players, is watching, then commenting on the play. “Could you try not aiming
so much?” he asked me, still standing there. “If you hit him when you aim, it’ll just be luck.” He was speaking, communicating, and yet not breaking the spell. I then broke it, quite deliberately. “How can it be luck if I aim?” I said back to him, not loud but with rather more irritation in my voice than I was actually feeling. He didn’t say anything for a moment but simply stood balanced on the curb, looking at me, I knew imperfectly, with love. “Because it will be,” he said. “You’ll be glad if you hit his marble—Ira’s marble—won’t you? Won’t you be glad? And if you’re glad when you hit somebody’s marble, then you sort of secretly didn’t expect too much to do it. So there’d have to be some luck in it, there’d have to be slightly quite a lot of accident in it.”

What this scene illuminates, in Salinger’s typical fashion, is the kind of insight that we know from the Zen tradition, namely that in the perfection of a truly transcendent or transfinite performance there is no luck or accident. In other words, we go beyond our sense that it would be a good thing or a happy thing if something happened, some outcome was achieved, to a certainty that it always has happened, is happening, and will happen. When the Zen archer draws her bow, the arrow is, in a sense, always already in the target. The mere enactment of its flight is the least of the truths concerning bow, arrow, and target. Now compare the archer to the very best quarterback, tennis player, or hockey forward: even in finite games, there is ever this hint of the transcendent.

4. Outcomes

I am pressed for time—and space—so I am going to move a little more quickly through this next section, in part because I think it will be familiar territory. What are the outcomes that we derive from finite games?

At least since Plato and Aristotle, people have believed that the importance of games was that they created a kind of competitive wisdom: agon, the competition-born wisdom of play. Consider the role of the ancient Greek gymnasium. The gymnasium was for things other than play: it was for socializing, establishing position, finding lovers, advancing political outcomes, and so on. But the most important thing, philosophically, about the gymnasium was that struggle itself was wisdom-producing. To wrestle—to wrestle in nakedness, as the Greeks did—was to bring yourself to the other in order to learn about yourself. Some people think that this claim about wisdom is just a lot of high-toned hooey, but the idea persists: games, especially competitive sports, are thought to build character. At the margins of thought, this claim does run into trouble, however. In what follows I am going to suggest, briefly, some of the marginal problems with the outcomes allegedly generated by finite games.

Consider this image, analyzed by the architect Rem Koolhaas in his book Delirious New York (1978), of the place of a modern gymnasium within a skyscraper. Koolhaas is writing about Manhattan in the middle of the twentieth century, but this could easily be a depiction of a present-day condo or a condo brochure: we have a spa, we have an exercise room, we have a boxing room where these heavily-muscled gay men come together. The idea is that you can come and live here and among the many things you can do is discipline your body. The agon, which for the Greeks produced a kind of wisdom through struggle, has been domesticated, you might say, into a purely personal project of physical discipline: the creation of an obedient athletic body. You get a new, and perhaps somewhat pathological, kind of marginal outcome: you must “Exercise ‘til your body behaves.” Under the force of this imperative, the body becomes a kind of raw material that you are working, or even punishing. The implicit premise here is that the body is unruly and needs to be brought into line. Not only does this continue a kind of unreflective Cartesian orthodoxy about mind and body, it puts the body almost in a subordinate position as something that needs to be tamed and disciplined.

There are other ways in which the outcome of games and other playful things are similarly instrumentalized. Even entertainment, the kind of play that is not athletic, can become a site of competition. People out for an evening of fun are having such a good time that they will be able to say, tomorrow, “I got so wasted!” “How wasted did you get?” “More wasted than he did!” It is interesting how conceptually close these two things are—disciplining the body and competing to make the body suffer through intoxication—even though we might think of them as different. They are both ways of putting otherwise playful elements of our existence and physicality into a competitive frame, a disciplinary frame. We might then link this apparently odd similarity to the insight that many kinds of play and games are subject to the creation of status or position. Golf, for example, which can be in many ways a beautiful game, is inseparable from its status-conferring features, the deployment of capital and its benefits. To have a golf membership, to play golf, to talk golf, to make business deals on the golf course: all these things are unrelated to the game itself, yet attach themselves so inextricably that golf becomes a handy metaphor for privilege.

Other kinds of marginal problems occur when elements which do not seem intrinsic to the play enter into the game and become ineradicable over time. If you are Canadian, you know that fighting in hockey is just such an example. You have an endless, tiresome, and irresolvable debate about whether or not it is “part of the game,” or that it “has always been
part of the game.” Do we find fighting discussed in the rules of hockey? No, but the rules are only one part of the norms and culture of a game. Fighting is part of the culture of the game, like it or not; this would still be true even if fighting were banned, since it would remain as a limit case on the game’s physical violence and aggressive tactics. Does fighting serve any good purpose in hockey? Many people think not, but the counter-argument is that, if a team is down, a player getting into a fight might “fire them up” so that they play harder to come back. Whatever one’s views on this particular example, it is clear from these examples that this kind of argument works, at the margins of a game, to chip away at the positive philosophical idea concerning the outcomes of finite games. Is there really any wisdom to be found in hockey fights? (How one answers that question may indicate one’s position in the debate!)

Finally, in a related problem of marginal outcomes, notice how many of the things we now call play are not only sedentary, they do not have any aspect of somatic or psychological interplay to them. For many children and young adults, ‘playing together’ might mean a mediated contact by means of a screen and two video-game controllers. The players need not even be in the same room in order to play together in this sense. There is a phenomenon described in child psychology known as parallel play: this is where you might get two girls with teddy bears, say, both feeding them but not doing it together—and yet they are nevertheless aware of each other as both engaged in play. Such play is considered an important moment in psychological development. Combined video-gaming is parallel play of a different kind: the two players are not relating to each other at all, even though they are playing the same game. It will come as no surprise to hear that when you do a Google image search of the word ‘play’, the computer icon for ‘start’—the right-facing triangle—is by far the most common image to generate hits.

5. Infinite Games

With those kinds of limitations on finite games in view, but also bearing in mind the hint of the transcendental that I identified before, that kind of Zen-like arrow, what can we say in conclusion about infinite games and the art of play?

Infinite games offer the obvious point of contrast. In such games, there are many possible nodes of temporary outcome, momentary points of contact where the players reach a momentary conclusion or victory, but the point of an infinite game is that it shall continue. Thus a good move in an infinite game is a move that keeps the game going, whereas, naturally, a move in a finite game is one that gets you closer to the end. We play infinite games in a different way than finite ones because we play them not to win. There are no winners, nor is there an end. In fact, we play infinite games in a manner that extends right back to the earliest forms of pretending: we do it, in one very straightforward sense, because it is fun. But an infinite game is more than just fun—or perhaps I should say that fun is more philosophically significant than we sometimes think.

An infinite game is a game that has no purpose beyond itself. But the purpose within itself is precisely to expand the realm of human possibility. I might invoke the Kantian notion of beauty here: this is the creation of purposiveness without purpose. An infinite game is governed by the norms of poiesis, in the original Greek sense of the word: that is, creativity itself. In English we hear this etymological root when we talk about poems and poetry, but poiesis in Greek just means ‘making’. Poiesis does not necessarily mean the making of things; it can be the making of moves, of gestures, of ideas.

Dancing is thus a kind of infinite game. There are, to be sure, forms of constrained dancing. You can go to a conservatory to learn your constrained steps, maybe even in order to show them off later in a ballroom dancing competition, but when we dance at a nightclub we dance because it has no purpose beyond itself. Art-making, of objects or installations to be enjoyed just for what they are, is likewise a form of such infinite game. It is actually quite a curious fact about humans, that we make art, that there is such thing as the art world. Though there is an economics of buying and purchasing art, even of producing and enjoying art, art’s value lies precisely in the fact that these objects are not necessary even as we realize, in our experience of them, that the aesthetic is among the most profound aspects of ourselves, of our human possibilities.

More important here is the openness, the gestural, intimate quality of art. You do not have to be Georgia O’Keefe to see that art is an infinite game in this way. I think that philosophy and poetry are also infinite games in this sense of undirected, non-utilitarian purposiveness. You can imagine that, as a professional philosopher—that paradoxical title!—I am often asked to explain the point of what I do. People are usually too polite to demand this explanation in a direct way. Instead, they say something like, “So you teach philosophy? What do you tell your students they are going to do with it?” There is a particular intonation of that verb ‘do’ that I have come to dread. “What are you going to do with that? What is it going to do?” I don’t know, I want to reply, is doing so important? My students are becoming philosophers; that is quite something all by itself. But it can be hard to make this intrinsic-value argument to an often confrontational non-philosopher.
This generates a version what we call the Paradox of Philosophy. You only come to value philosophy when you are already doing it, because seeing the value of philosophy is itself part of what doing philosophy demonstrates; but you cannot give non-philosophical reasons for why philosophy is worth doing because the reasons philosophy is worth doing are all philosophical. It follows that you can only do philosophy if you are already doing it.

Indeed, we can go farther: this paradoxical quality of the undertaking is part of what makes philosophy an infinite game. All of its reasons for being valuable are contained within itself. It cannot be instrumentalized; it cannot be reduced to some other scale of value. Of course, one always can say, “Well, you should take philosophy because then you will do well on the LSAT and get into law school and make a lot of money.” You can say that, and it might even be true. But that is not why you should do philosophy. You should do philosophy because philosophy is worth doing. And I invite you to find out why. If you are a good teacher of philosophy, you seduce people into seeing themselves philosophically, and then they might just see that philosophy is worth doing. In fact I am of the view that this structure or possibility of seduction is found in all the best aspects, the most playful aspects, of our lives; and this is so because they refuse to be judged by the scale of everyday standards of use-value and necessity. We can therefore say that the most playful kind of games, the highest forms of play, are those which touch the divine. I mean the divine that Aristotle speaks about in the last book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: that which in us as mortals is closest to immortality.

And so we return, near the end of our time together, to the theme of time. What is immortality, after all? Our bodies perish but we are all capable of immortality nevertheless. The immortality I have in mind depends on no supernatural order, and makes no claims about infinite mortal existence; it is, instead, the contemplation of that which is beyond the workaday. Immortality is the entry into that time which is not regulated, which is not constrained, which is open and forever. That happens here and now, not in some other heavenly place, but it happens only when we suspend the normal understandings of here and now: when we no longer tell time, even in outs and innings, but instead experience ourselves as out of time, lost in a game without end. The philosopher Wittgenstein made the point by advising us to think about time on the analogy of the visual field. At any moment, your visual field may be constrained by what is around you, for good reasons and bad. Even in an open field you will be constrained by the field of your vision and the horizon. But vision has no theoretical end; it extends infinitely. We have to move our bodies physically toward the horizon but theoretically that horizon is unlimited. Life itself is like this, in similarly having no limit within our experience of it.

To be sure, this is never easy. As adults, we all too often misplace our ability to drop out of time, so powerful are its mundane demands. But if you can conceive of life and temporality the way I am suggesting, then not only are you immortal, but you are playing infinitely. You are doing what the poet Blake famously did when he wrote, in “Auguries of Innocence” from *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, these lines; “To see the world in a grain of sand / And a heaven in a wild flower, / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, / And eternity in an hour.” I hope that I have, in just under an hour—or, now, in about twenty pages—brought you at least to the brink of eternity. Game on.
Lost in the translation: 
"Chi" and related terms of shame in the Confucian tradition

Louise Sundararajan

Shame is a negative emotion, of which the Chinese seem to have an especially large repertoire, which serves to capitalize on conformity and adherence to group norms, so we are told in numerous cross-cultural studies. A close examination of the language game based on chi and related terms suggests a more nuanced story.

Consider the famous statements of Mencius: “One is not a human without the feeling of commiseration; one is not a human without the feeling of shame [chi] and dislike . . .” (Legge, 1971, Vol. II, pp. 202-204). Unlike emotions such as guilt, feelings of compassion and chi (shame) are enduring sensibilities without any specific antecedents or end points. Such sensibilities are essential to moral autonomy, a factor occluded by the notion of interdependent self construal, but is consistent with the proposal of Kağıtçıbaşı (2005) that the relational self may go hand in hand with an independent autonomous self. Indeed, it was as an alternative to morality through fear conditioning and group think, that Confucius advocated for the development of chi. The Master said:

If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame [chi]. If they be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame [chi], and moreover will become good. (Legge, 1971, Vol. I, p. 146, emphasis in the original)

In support of moral autonomy is the distinction made in the Confucian tradition between intrinsic and circumstantial shame—the former concerns one’s moral character; the latter social norms such as position, appearance, wealth, and so on. The Master said, “When internal examination discovers nothing wrong, what is there to be anxious about, what is there to fear?” (Legge, 1971, Vol. I, p.252). Thus a Confucian gentleman does not let circumstantial shame bother him—only intrinsic shame counts (Cua, 1996, p. 183). In the Chinese tradition, the ability to withstand extrinsic shame is the hallmark of a crowd defying, creative individual, such as Mao Zedong (Fang and Faure, 2011) and countless poets and statesmen before him.

This protocol of shame is missing from the collectivistic accounts of China, an omission which may be attributable to self construal—that of the researcher’s. The assumption in Western psychology is that the self has two pathways, either to affirm itself as an independent agent or to efface itself for the sake of group cohesion. However, evidence is accumulating (e.g., Harb and Smith, 2008) that beyond the individualism and collectivism dichotomy, a relational self can be differentiated from the collective self. The relational self (Gergen, 2009) account does not first start with an atomic self which then forms relations with other atomic selves. Rather, it conceives of the self as having its origin in a matrix of relationships—as Tu and others have argued, “selfhood arises out of filial (or unfilial) relations with parents, not out of themes of self-relation” (Neville, 1996, p. 216, note. 1, emphasis in original).

For illustration, consider the following scenario (Mascolo, Fischer, and Li, 2003): A young child refuses to comply with mother’s request to share candy with grandma. Mother says with a sad voice and expression, “Aiya [my goodness], Lin won’t share her candy,” or “I have a child who won’t share with Grandma” (p. 395). Cast in the framework of the relational self, the child might feel for mother’s distress over her noncompliance, just as mother feels for hers on a routine basis. In China, “heart aching love” (xin teng) is one of the earliest expressions children learn (Shaver, Wu, and Schwartz, 1992), who are often teased with the question, “does your mother’s heart ache for you?” This is part and parcel of the Confucian pedagogy, in which it is empathy— the capacity to feel for the other’s pain, not fear of punishment—that motivates one’s self correction.

The Chinese parent’s tendency to comment on the child’s failure in front of others has been interpreted as shaming by Mascolo, et al. (2003). An important detail that tends to be overlooked is the fact that the “others” in these scenarios are usually not strangers, but members of the in-group—relatives and friends, who give effusive praises to the child when mother makes disparaging statements about the latter. What the child learns in this situation is not necessarily the discrepancy between mother and others (Mascolo, et al., 2003), so much as the dialectic of yin-yang complementarity (Fang
and Faure, 2011) in social discourse, in which mother and others are on two sides of the teeter totter of behavioral appraisals. The potentially buffering role of the in-group other is neglected in the analysis, when the mother-child dyad becomes the focus of a collectivistic narrative that highlights the use of shaming to reinforce the values of modesty and self effacement for the sake of group cohesion.

In sum, there are two accounts of chi that fall along the divide between two types of attachment, secure and insecure (Rothbaum, Morelli, and Rusk, 2011). The collectivistic account casts chi and related terms in the framework of insecure attachment, characterized by the defensive coping of loss of face and its restoration. The Confucian account, by contrast, seems to have capitalized on secure attachment, as evidenced by its emphasis on the constructive coping of compassion, perspective taking (Mom hurting for me), and self correction. It is an empirical question as to which developmental scenario of chi and related terms is more prevalent in different historical contexts--Taiwan, Hong Kong, or mainland China. However, to the extent that the Chinese notions of shame are not always negative in connotation, and to the extent that they are broader in scope than their Western counterpart, there is reason to believe that the secure attachment version of chi constitutes an essential ingredient in the Chinese understanding of this emotion.

References


Adaptation to adversity: Does money or meaning matter more?

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Harvard University

Abstract

When it comes to subjective well-being following challenging life circumstances, what matters more: Material affluence or a sense of meaning in life? Two studies examined this question, using both longitudinal and cross-sectional data. Participants in Study 1, an eight-year longitudinal study, were 39 wheelchair-using adults with spinal cord injuries. At Time 1, participants were administered a survey battery in which they were asked to indicate their annual household income, as well as to complete measures of general well-being, depressive symptomatology, and positive and negative affect. Eight years later, participants completed an online survey that included these same measures. As hypothesized, multiple regression analyses, controlling for Time 1 levels of each well-being variable, as well as gender, age, education, health, religiosity, marital status, level of injury (tetraplegia or paraplegia), and time since injury, revealed that Time 1 income did not predict future subjective well-being on any measure. Study 2 used a cross-sectional sample of 75 individuals with spinal cord injuries to test whether the absence of an income-happiness relationship replicated, and to evaluate the prediction that meaning would have a strong relation with subjective well-being. Participants completed an online battery of questionnaires that included a measure of meaning in life, general well-being, depressive symptomatology, and positive and negative affect. Multiple regression analyses again revealed that income did not predict any of the measures that were administered. Meaning, however, had a strong relationship; indeed, all subjective well-being variables were predicted by greater presence of meaning in life.

What makes life most worth living? More specifically, when it comes to well-being following challenging life circumstances, what matters more: Money or a sense of meaning in life? We all know the axiom, “You can’t buy happiness.” However, the pursuit of financial gain is ubiquitous. We live our lives as though, indeed, money does matter. According to polls by Bloomberg.com, two-thirds of people would take a three-month vow of silence for $20,000. Twenty-five percent of people would abandon all of their friends and church for $10 million. And one in fourteen people would murder for that amount (Kanner, 2001).

And perhaps money matters more in challenging times. Indeed, researchers (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010), found that the emotional strain of negative experiences, such as getting divorced or being ill, appear to be exacerbated by being poor. For example, among people with asthma, 41% of low earners reported feeling unhappy, compared with about 22% of the wealthier group. Angus and Khaneman wrote: "More money does not necessarily buy more happiness, but less money is associated with more emotional pain" (p. 16,492).

There is also some evidence to suggest that in the case of acquired physical disability, which is the focus of the present research, money matters. Smith and colleagues (2005) found that participants who were above the median in total net worth reported a smaller decline in well-being after a new disability than did participants who were below the median. They posited that financial resources could help people deal with the practical demands of disability, and served as a psychological buffer by minimizing the negative impact of physical declines. For example, affluence can facilitate better access to high-quality health care, accessible transportation, and the ability to make expensive home and workplace modifications.

However, there is also research that draws this relationship into question. Using a cross-sectional between-groups design, I recently repeated what has been called “most famous article in the psychological literature on well-being” (Schkade & Kahneman, 1998), a study from the 1970s that compared the happiness levels of lottery winners, people with paralysis, and controls. In the original study, lottery winners were no happier than controls, but both groups were much happier than the paralyzed participants. However, in my replication study, I made several important modifications, namely increasing the average time since injury from 1 year to 20 years, and found that, with time, the paralyzed participants adapted and were no longer any less happy than the lottery winners (Hayward, 2012).
Study 1 of the present research explores this discrepancy further, using 8-year longitudinal data to test the predictive ability of affluence on subjective well-being (SWB). Study 2 incorporates the construct of meaning-in-life, testing the hypothesis that meaning matters when it comes to subjective well-being after significant life challenges.

Study 1

Method
Participants

Forty-four participants with spinal cord injuries (SCI), age 18 to 35 ($M = 26.11$, $SD = 5.50$) were recruited from personal referrals within Northern California, Southern California, and the Miami Beach area in 2001. Fifty percent of participants were female. Socioeconomic status (SES), as determined by the census index of occupations, was also split evenly; 50% of each group was blue-collar, the remaining 50% was white-collar. Sex and blue- or white-collar status were distributed evenly across age. Racial composition of the SCI group was limited to White Americans due to difficulties in obtaining sufficient numbers of racially diverse spinal cord injured persons in the geographic areas in which recruitment took place. Finally, all spoke English fluently.

To increase homogeneity, all participants had sustained a spinal cord injury through traumatic onset (the result of a specifiable incident and onset), eliminating those who had acquired their disability at birth or through progressive disease. Further, the SCI literature presents numerous reports of other factors that may influence post-injury well-being (e.g., Buckelew et al., 1990; Bulman & Wortman, 1977; Coyle et al., 1994; Krause & Sternberg, 1997). These include: time since injury, age at onset of injury, level of injury (tetraplegia versus paraplegia), completeness of injury (complete versus incomplete, an indicator of functional ability), and attribution of blame for injury (self versus other). These factors were assessed and included as covariates in regression analyses.

After eight years, the original 44 participants were located and asked to complete the follow-up questionnaire. Given the time lapse, this posed significant difficulties for locating participants due to changes in addresses, telephone numbers, and last names due to marriage and/or divorce. Intensive searches for current contact information were performed. These included contacting friends and family members using names that were collected during Study 1; past employers; an adoption agency; an address updating service provided by Experian.com; gmail, hotmail, and yahoo email address identification services; social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Plaxo; online person locating sites such as 411.com and USSearch.com; and by calling directory assistance. As an incentive for participation, a donation of $25 to the Miami Project to Cure Paralysis, a leading program of spinal cord injury care and cure research, was made on behalf of each participant who completed the questionnaire battery in full.

All 44 participants were located; one was no longer living, 25 had relocated within the state of California, and three were living in other states. Following collection of potential contact information, multiple attempts to contact participants were made via postal mail, telephone calls, email, and the messaging functions of social networking sites. Of the 43 living participants, all agreed to take-part in the study. However, one individual did not complete the surveys, one participant failed to follow instructions, and two participants did not provide their income data, resulting in a final sample size of 39.

The final group of participants consisted of 20 women and 19 men. Individuals’ socioeconomic status remained largely the same as in 2001 (19 blue-collar, 20 white-collar). Total education level had increased, as had the percentage of participants who were married or in other long-term romantic relationships. Age at Time 2 ranged from 26 - 43 years ($M = 34.10$, $SD = 5.50$).

The means, standard deviations, and counts for the spinal cord injury-specific variables in the final sample of were as follows: level of injury (20 tetraplegia, 19 paraplegia), completeness of injury (21 complete, 18 incomplete), and attribution of blame for injury (20 self, 19 other). Time since injury ranged from 9 – 29 years ($M = 15.06$, $SD = 5.34$); age at onset of injury ranged from 3 – 33 years ($M = 19.01$, $SD = 5.48$). With the exception of time since injury, for each individual, all factors were stable from Time 1 to Time 2.

Measures

Most of the subjective well-being literature divides happiness into two components: emotional well-being and cognitive evaluations of life satisfaction. Emotional happiness refers to the frequency of the experience of two factors: high positive affect (e.g., excitement, enthusiasm, inspiration) and low negative affect (e.g., fear, guilt, anger). Cognitive happiness refers to a global sense of satisfaction with life. Research has shown these constructs are correlated, yet distinct (e.g., Diener, 1984). For instance, Diener, Ng, Harter, and Arora (2010) found that income is strongly associated with

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evaluations of life satisfaction but only modestly related to positive and negative affect. Thus, measures of both affective and cognitive well-being were included in this study.

**Demographic characteristics**

All participants were asked to fill out demographic information, including their annual household income. Income was measured using a scale from less than $10,000 to greater than $150,000, in $10,000 increments. In addition, participants were asked to indicate years of education, whether or not they were religious/spiritual, and whether or not they were married. These factors have been shown to influence SWB in the extant literature (see e.g., Argyle, 1999), so they were later used as covariates in the regression analyses.

**Affective happiness**

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) was administered to measure affective happiness in general. The PANAS is a 20-item questionnaire in which participants are asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert-type scale the degree to which they feel each emotion on the list on average. Responses are summed separately for the positive affect (PA; α = .92) and negative affect (NA; α = .90) scales (10 items each) and range from 10 to 50 for each scale.

**Cognitive happiness**

The Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale Well-Being subscale (CES-D WB; Radloff, 1977) was administered to measure cognitive life satisfaction. The CES-D is a self-report scale containing 20 items that are symptomatic of depression. The CES-D Well-Being subscale contains 4 items that are reversed-scored and address general well-being, such as “I am happy” and “I enjoyed life” (α = .80). Respondents indicate the extent to which they experienced the items over the past week.

**Procedure**

At Time 1, after obtaining informed consent and assuring participants that their responses would be confidential, participants took part in a two-stage memory experiment that was part of a separate study. During the 15-minute break between experimental stages, participants were asked to complete a battery of paper-and-pencil questionnaires. Participants with limited hand function due to tetraplegia were asked to dictate their responses, which were recorded by the experimenter.

After Time 2, participants were emailed an internet link to an online survey, created using the program SurveyMonkey.com. To ensure security of online answers, encryption technology was purchased. After a welcome message, survey instructions, and information about whom to contact in case of questions or concerns about the survey, participants were presented with an online consent form on which they selected “agree” in order to proceed to the questionnaires. After completing the measures, participants completed a general demographic questionnaire and an SCI-specific demographic questionnaire. A debriefing screen then appeared, explaining the full purpose of the study. Participants with limited upper-extremity mobility were given the option of completing the survey by telephone; however, none accepted. Two participants were mailed hardcopies of the questionnaire packet and stamped self-addressed envelopes as they did not have access to the internet. Participants who did not complete the survey within three weeks were sent reminder emails and/or contacted by telephone.

**Results and Discussion**

Preliminary correlational analyses of the relation between income, well-being, and other demographic variables were conducted to test for associations closer to the time of injury. That is, these analyses explored whether finances served to buffer the blow of traumatic injury. As can be seen in Table 1, annual household income was not related to any measures of SWB or any demographic factor with the exception of physical health (greater income was associated with better health).
Table 1
Bivariate Correlation Coefficients between Time 1 Demographic Variables and Time 1 Well-Being Measures in Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>PA</th>
<th>NA</th>
<th>CES-D</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Edu.</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Relig</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Tetra/Para</th>
<th>Comp/Inc</th>
<th>Self/Other</th>
<th>TS 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>PA</td>
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<tr>
<td>NA</td>
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<tr>
<td>CES-D</td>
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<tr>
<td>Income</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>-.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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<td>.13</td>
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<td>.07</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.15</td>
<td>-.39*</td>
<td>-.35*</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.20</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>.40*</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.34*</td>
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<td>Marital St.</td>
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<td>.03</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<td>.11</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>-.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tetra/Para</td>
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<td>-.13</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.44**</td>
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<td>-.03</td>
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<td>Comp/Inc</td>
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<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.23</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.24</td>
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<td>.13</td>
<td>-.18</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self/Other</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>-.34*</td>
<td>.17</td>
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<td>.11</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>TSI</td>
<td>.33*</td>
<td>-.28</td>
<td>.36*</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>--</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: PA = positive affect, NA = negative affect, CES-D WB = Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale Well-Being subscale, Tetra/Para = tetraplegic or paraplegic, Comp/Inc = complete injury or incomplete injury, Self/Other = who was responsible for the SCI, TSI = time since injury. N = 39

* p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

Thus, close to the time of injury, money did not seem to serve as a psychological buffering factor as was suggested by Smith et al. (2005). On several measures of subjective well-being, greater age and better health did appear to provide a buffer. Interestingly, there was also no relation between SWB and almost all SCI-related factors. For example, contrary to common assumptions, paraplegics were not happier than tetraplegics, and people with incomplete injuries were not happier than those with complete injuries. The exception to this pattern was time since injury: greater time since injury was associated with higher positive affect and greater general well-being, likely because the process of adaptation was at a more advanced stage.

To test the hypothesis that higher income at Time 1 would not predict greater well-being at Time 2, I conducted multiple regression analyses, controlling for Time 1 levels of each well-being variable, as well as gender, age, education, health, religiosity, marital status, level of injury (tetraplegia vs. paraplegia), completeness of injury (complete vs. incomplete), and time since injury. As revealed in Table 2, Time 1 household income did not significantly predict future subjective well-being on any measure.

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Table 2
Summary of Regression Analyses for Time 1 Income on Time 2 Well-Being Variables in Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Affect</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>.74</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative Affect</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.79</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Well-being</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Listwise deletion, N = 39.

Study 2

If money doesn’t predict well-being after adversity, what does? Following in the tradition of Victor Frankl and his seminal writings on Logotherapy (1963), there is a growing literature on the importance of having a sense of meaning in life for adjustment to stressful life circumstances (see, e.g., Park & Folkman, 1997). Both theoretical work and empirical studies of positive sequelae following challenging events have burgeoned over the past two decades (e.g., Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006; Linley & Joseph, 2011; McMillen & Cook, 2003; Park, Cohen L.H., & Murch, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). In fact, while only a small percentage of people experience psychopathology after adversity, the majority of people report benefits and a high quality of life (Quarantelli, 1985).

Indeed, in the specific case of spinal cord injury, it has been found that although people who had sustained spinal cord injuries reported strong negative emotions 1 week after their accidents, only 7 weeks later they reported that their strongest emotion was happiness (Silver, 1983). Further, Schulz and Decker (1985) studied adults with spinal cord injuries and found that participants saw themselves on average as being better off than most people, with or without a disability. Additionally, in a study of people with high-level tetraplegia by Gerhart and colleagues (1994), 92% of participants reported that they were glad to be alive and 86% of the group reported that they enjoyed an average or better than average quality of life.

Based on the work of Janoff-Bulman (2002) and others, demonstrating that finding meaning is an important way in which individuals integrate challenging life events into their belief systems to reestablish a positive view of the world, I hypothesized that meaning would predict subjective well-being post-injury. Indeed, there is evidence that post-paralysis, following a period of increased attempts to make meaning, people shift their priorities from materialistic goals to more meaningful ones, that meaning in life is a mediator of adjustment after spinal cord injury, and importantly, that the belief that ones’ life is meaningful is strongly associated with post-injury psychological well-being (Thompson, Coker, Krause, & Henry, 2003). Based on these findings, and the findings of Study 1, I used a cross-sectional sample of people with spinal cord injuries to test, first, the replicability of the lack of an income-SWB relationship, and second, the prediction that meaning would have a stronger association with SWB than would income.

Method

Participants

Seventy-five² spinal cord injured participants were recruited from personal referrals within the Greater Boston area, social networking websites, an SCI online forum, and a national organization that puts out a monthly online newsletter addressing the concerns of people with disabilities. All were full-time wheelchair users. The average age of participants was 44 years (SD = 13.00), 45% percent of participants were female, and 71% of participants were White. About half of the participants (48%) responded that they were religious or spiritual, 48% of participants were in committed long-term

²Although 75 participants took part in this study, when listwise deletion was used in analyses, 15 of these participants were eliminated for not providing responses to one or more of the demographic questions that were entered as covariates.
romantic relationships, and average years of education was 16.74 ($SD = 3.26$). All of the above variables were included as covariates in regression analyses.

At the time of their injuries, the spinal cord injured participants were, on average, 25.26 years old ($SD = 14.88$), with an average of 18.50 years ($SD = 12.62$) since their injuries. Fifty-five percent of participants were paraplegics, and 45% were tetraplegics. Forty-nine percent had complete injuries while 51% were incomplete. Fifty percent had been injured in car accidents, 12% had been injured in diving accidents, and the remaining 38% were fairly evenly split between other sport and recreational activities, disease/illness, falls, gun violence, and other causes.

Measures

As in study 1, I assessed positive and negative affect with the PANAS, and general cognitive well-being using the CES-D Well-Being subscale. In addition, the following measure of meaning was administered.

**Meaning.** The Meaning in Life Questionnaire, Presence of Meaning Subscale (MLQ-P; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; $\alpha = .93$) is a measure of the existence of general meaning and purpose in a person’s life. Respondents indicate the degree to which they agree with each of 5 statements, such as “My life has a clear sense of purpose.” This measure has shown high test-retest reliability as well as convergent and discriminant validity (Steger & Kashdan, 2006).

Procedure

All recruiting materials contained a website address to the online survey. After reading informed consent and instruction pages, participants were asked to complete a battery of questionnaires that assessed aspects of psychological well-being for people with spinal cord injuries. As an incentive for participation, a donation of $25 to a charity of the participant’s choice was made for completing the questionnaire battery in full.

Results

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to test whether subjective well-being was predicted by income and/or a sense of meaning. As Table 3 reveals, income did not predict any of the measures of SWB that were administered. It is also noteworthy that, as in Study 1, injury severity (whether one is a paraplegic or a tetraplegic), had no relation to subjective well-being. Presence of meaning, however, had a strong relation to SWB. Indeed, all well-being variables were predicted by greater presence of meaning in life.

Table 3

| Summary of Regression Analyses for Income and Meaning on Well-Being Variables in Study 2* |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Affect</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>.66***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Affect</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-.36*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Well-being</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>.36*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note. Listwise deletion, N = 60.

Controlling for: gender, age, education, health, religiosity, marital status, level of injury (tetraplegia vs. paraplegia), completeness of injury (complete vs. incomplete), and time since injury.

Annual household income.

Meaning in Life Questionnaire, Presence of Meaning subscale (MLQ-P).

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Discussion

To date, most scientific research on psychological responses to adverse circumstances has focused on negative sequelae, such as depression, PTSD, and substance abuse. Common conceptions of trauma in general, and disability in particular, mirror this agenda. However, “exposure to stressful life events does not invariably end in depression and despair; it may also act as a catalyst for a reevaluation of one’s goals and priorities and a reexamination of one’s sense of self” (Bower et al., 1998, p. 984). Indeed, the findings of the present studies, in conjunction with previous research, provide evidence for a link between subjective well-being and the presence of a sense of meaning in life following adversity.

On the other hand, in contradiction to common conceptions regarding what will make one happy and the behaviors that result from these beliefs, a link between income and SWB was not found in either study. This is particularly noteworthy given the aforementioned literature that demonstrates a link between affluence and well-being in challenging life circumstances (e.g., Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Smith et al., 2005). This discrepancy may be due to differences in measures used and populations examined.

The present research was not without limitations. In particular, the relatively small sample size necessitates using caution in drawing conclusions from the data, and findings should be considered preliminary. In addition, although a substantial number of potential demographic confounds were taken into account, it is possible that the observed findings may have been the result of other, unexamined psychological variables. Further, the generalizability of findings may be limited due to the nature of participants; middle-aged, White individuals constituted the majority of both samples. It is also true that findings cannot necessarily be generalized within the population of people with disabilities. To increase the homogeneity of the samples, individuals who had acquired their disability at birth or through progressive disease were not included; these types of disabilities may be associated with different emotional and cognitive processes. Finally, due to the cross-sectional nature of Study 2, causality cannot be addressed unambiguously.

Despite these limitations, this series of studies adds credence to the growing literature on the importance of meaning, particularly after adverse life experiences. The consistent connection between well-being and the presence of a sense of meaning in life needs to be taken seriously in psychological interventions designed to ameliorate suffering after trauma. Relatedly, in these interventions may promote attempts to find meaning after misfortune, future research needs to explore the process of searching for meaning. Evidence suggests that these two meaning-related constructs, search and presence, have different relations to subjective well-being, with presence being positively correlated and search being negatively correlated (Steger et al., 2006). If this is the case, practitioners will need to proceed with caution during the first phase of meaning construction, perhaps providing additional support while an individual moves through this challenging process.

Finally, on both an individual and societal level, it could be argued that priority shifts should be encouraged. Given that ones sense of well-being is not, or only weakly, related to material wealth and consumption, perhaps our use of time is misguided. The premium placed on the acquisition of financial affluence appears to run contrary to our own sense of well-being. That is, to answer the question with which I began this article, meaning matters more.

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References


Other-Being:  
Traumatic Stress and Dissociation in Existential Therapy

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Abstract

In the present article, we set out to conceptualize and reframe posttraumatic stress and dissociation from an existential perspective. We employ an Other(s)-focused lens for understanding trauma, which we define as an evaluation of a response to a painfully unpredictable Other who can be a person or event. In this way, we propose that what is traumatizing is the person, or Being, in relation to an Other who traumatizes. Traumatic stress is a term which encapsulates a Being’s meaningful and chosen responses to an Other who traumatizes. Dissociation is a unique phenomenon in which a person attempts to escape the Other who traumatizes by forging a felt sense of space between the person and the trauma. Existential therapy, then, is a relationship with a new Other who embodies and highlights ways of being with the trauma which honor rather than escape the pain. Finally, we put forth a therapeutic way of being which is attuned to the uniqueness and agency of the individual taking up the trauma.

Introduction

Traumatic stress and dissociation are frequent topics of scholarship, practice, and debate within the field of psychology. There are myriad understandings of trauma phenomena, including historical, cultural, social, political, medical, and psychological. There are also several manifestations of trauma which carry a constellation of diagnostic labels: depression, anxiety, stress disorders, dissociation, somatoform disorders, brief psychosis, substance abuse and dependence, borderline personality disorder, and most recently, complex posttraumatic stress disorder (Briere & Scott, 2006; Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, Roth, Pelcovitz, Sunday, & Spinazzola, 2005). Individuals who experience trauma incur higher healthcare costs, more frequent medical visits, and lower overall health (Campbell, 2002; Frayne, et. al, 2004; Herman, 1992).

With such high stakes and vast implications following trauma, it is perhaps not surprising that much work has been done to identify risk factors for being a victim of trauma. Of these, being poor, a person of color, and a woman are the most prominent, suggesting that those who tend to be marginalized from society are also the most likely to be victimized by trauma (Briere & Scott, 2006, p. 14). Additionally, having lower-than-average coping skills, nervous sensitivities, or a previous history of mental illness/trauma, can predispose someone to trauma (Briere & Scott, 2006, p. 14). For those who find themselves in a traumatizing situation, immediate responses of anger, shame, or guilt indicate an increased probability of traumatic stress (Andrews, Brewin, Rose, & Kirk, 2000; Leskela, Diepurink, & Thuras, 2002; Stolorow, 2007). Situations involving intentional violence, as in domestic violence or combat, as well as sexual victimization are typically seen as the most traumatic (e.g., Andrews et. al, 2000; Campbell, 2002; Foa & Rauch, 2004; Foa & Rothbaum, 1998; Keane, Fairbank, Caddell, & Zimering, 1989; Sar, Akyuz, & Dogan, 2006).

These risk factors differ from historical understandings of trauma. Freud (1922) theorized a “repetition compulsion” that indicated an effort to “master” the trauma (Herman, 1992), an understanding which mirrors present-day understandings of re-experiencing phenomena. Janet (1919) wrote about a need to “assimilate” traumatic experiences into a person’s ongoing life, and he saw helplessness as the primary condition to rectify in trauma therapy. More recently, psychiatrist Judith Herman (1992) wrote: “Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force” (p. 33). Fellow psychiatrist Mardi Horowitz (1986) also wrote about trauma as a fracture in “inner schemata,” supporting the more recent view of trauma as having a profound impact on what continental philosopher Martin Heidegger called one’s being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Stolorow (2007) married psychoanalytic and existential understandings to conclude trauma represented a dissolution of “absolutisms” that allow one to experience one’s world as stable, predictable, and safe” (p. 19).
This article sets out to demonstrate how conceptualization and care from an existential standpoint are not only viable, but even congruent with more medically-modeled ways of understanding trauma. We reframe The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) criteria for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder to provide a bridge between attending to the practicality of working within a standardized system of care and honoring the unique pain of the individual. Toward this end, we employ an Other(s)-focused lens for understanding trauma, which we define as an evaluation of a response to a painfully unpredictable Other who can be a person or event. In this way, we propose that what is traumatizing is the person, or Being, in relation to an Other who traumatizes. Traumatic stress is a term which encapsulates a Being’s meaningful and chosen responses to an Other who traumatizes. Dissociation is a unique phenomenon in which a person attempts to escape the Other who traumatizes by forging a felt sense of space between the person and the trauma. Existential therapy, then, is a relationship with a new Other who embodies and highlights ways of being with the trauma which honor rather than escape the pain. By fully engaging the uniqueness of Being in the traumatizing situation, it is possible to create a therapeutic environment which facilitates expansion rather than reduction.

**Posttraumatic Stress**

As the primary diagnostic tool used by those who practice psychology and psychiatry, the DSM-5 delineates five main symptom categories, one or more of which must be present in order to be diagnosed with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). DSM-5 added a symptom category for disturbances in mood, but otherwise DSM-IV-TR frames the disorder quite similarly (American Psychiatric Association, 2000/2013). DSM-5 Criteria A defines a traumatic event as something which can be experienced personally, as a bystander, or even as someone learning secondhand of the event which might occur once or several times over a period of months or years (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 271). Though several theories seek to explain the aftermath of trauma, there is a generally agreed-upon distinction between posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and what has more recently been identified as complex trauma (Briere & Scott, 2005; see also Herman, 1992). Posttraumatic stress disorder has typically been framed as a response to a single, time-limited event, whereas complex trauma reflects the recurrent, severe, and often developmental difficulties experienced by individuals whose etiology is far more convoluted (van der Kolk et al., 2005).

What all traumatic events seem to have in common is an encounter with finitude: the existential given of non-negotiable uncertainties and inescapable limitations of what we can control or orchestrate in life reminds us of the ever-present possibility of death. Trauma also evokes what is often referred to in the literature as a shattering (e.g., Herman, 1992; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Joseph & Linley, 2005, 2008; Stolorow, 2007), which throws us toward our own end and reminds us of the ephemeral nature of being. Paidoussis-Mitchell (2012) found that individuals who are traumatically bereaved undergo a similar phenomenon, which she refers to as an ontological awakening. In any case, trauma represents an irreversible shift in one’s life story, or historicity. The experience of trauma, whether omnipresent or encapsulated in a single event, highlights the truth that we live in a world in which we are chronically vulnerable to an Other who can hurt us.

Herman (1992) recognizes the fateful role of the Other, politicizing it while invoking a sense of social responsibility for the way traumatic responses manifest in survivors of trauma: “In the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the active process of forgetting. Repression, dissociation, and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness” (p. 9). With her words, Herman taps into the existentiality of all meaningful situations, which are taken up uniquely but also in the world (Heidegger, 1999, p. 97). It is only through awakening to the uniqueness, or mineness in Heidegger’s (1999) language, of the traumatic event that a person can locate or differentiate themselves from the rest of the world. What we all have in common as human beings is our radical uniqueness, which paradoxically maroons us and renders us inextricable from other people, whose perception of us we rely upon to know we exist (de Beauvoir, 1972, p. 7). Put another way, we are all being(s)-in-the-world who are simultaneously alienated from and yet painfully close to Others who cannot know our pain as we do. This existential ambiguity is what allows for the felt sense of being “torn from a communal fabric” (Stolorow, 2007, p. 20) while still being integral to it.

Being(s)-in-the-world are subject to unknowing Others, who might stigmatize and subjugate, but they are also agents of their own existence. Heidegger writes about Dasein, or the mineness of a person’s agency this way: “And because Dasein is in each case essentially its own possibility, it can, in its very Being, ‘choose’ itself and win itself; it can also lose itself and never win itself; or only ‘seem’ to do so” (Heidegger, 1999, p. 123). This enframing expands on Herman’s understanding and elucidates the relationship between the individual’s meaning-making and trauma as a phenomenon in the world. Meaning is disclosed in a person’s unique taking up of a situation. If we choose the meaning of a situation and call
it trauma, it discloses that we choose it to be traumatic. It does not feel like a choice when a person is buckling under the gravity and mattering of the event; nevertheless, once the meaning is unfolded, it is agency, not forced traumatization as Stolorow (2007) suggests, that appears in the foreground. We know this to be true because of fact that two people experiencing the same event can come away from it unscathed or traumatized, depending on the meaning ascribed to the situation. In this way, agency is not choices; it is choice. It is important to establish that while the event is most often inflicted, imposed, and even institutionalized by an Other in the case of rape used as a tactic of war, it is by definition personalized and lived out in a way which reflects the chosen meaning of the life that is forever altered.

Locating a person’s agency in the midst of trauma is perhaps a hallmark distinction between an existential trauma therapy and other more medically-modeled ways of working. Criteria B of PTSD in DSM-5 highlights this discrepancy with its description of “intrusion symptoms”—a term borrowed from Herman (1992) meant to indicate a re-experiencing of the trauma. Herman’s (1992) stance on trauma is that it is a victimization; that is, a moment in which a person is stripped of his or her agency and subjected to the will of an Other. This moment, then, replays in the person’s mind via flashbacks, nightmares, and persistent thoughts or images (Yehuda, 2004). While this is a widely-recognized trauma phenomenon, there are many possible meanings for the kind of re-experiencing that often occurs following trauma. Existentially, a person’s habitus (Merleau-Ponty, 2002), or tendency toward conjuring a traumatic event or image upon external prompting can also be understood as an existential resurrection. In fact, the person is not re-experiencing the trauma, as it is in the past and temporally inaccessible. But an individual resurrects the event as a way of honoring the trauma’s place in his or her story— even actively taking up the event in the present using the mind’s eye. As such, the present moment represents a convergence of that which has altered the person’s story and that which has not yet come to pass; the resurrection is an ecstases, in Heidegger’s (1927/1962) terms. In this sense, the person’s experience is not merely a “traumatic reliving” (Stolorow, 2007, p.25), but rather a re-construction comprised of the past event and the anticipated painful future lived out in the present.

Indeed, resurrection as re-call or re-collection might be an attempt to escape the pain inherent in a trauma narrative by collapsing the ontic into the ontological, or believing that the unique moment of the trauma is actually a universal truth (Heidegger, 1927/1962). For example, in the case of a woman who was raped as a young girl by her mother’s boyfriend who was a tall man with brown hair, it might be difficult to tolerate standing by a tall man with brown hair at the bus stop as an adult due to her past experience. It was a particular man with brown hair who raped her as a child, but often individuals who are living with deep-seated traumatic stress generalize their trauma to other situations, thus, exacerbating the feeling that one is unsafe and vulnerable in the world. Of course, this felt sense is complicated by the existential pain that comes with being a human whose safety is always uncertain to a degree. Existential pain is a vivid encounter with our smallness as human beings in light of that which is ontological (T. DuBose, personal communication, September 4, 2013). In this way, existential pain can be transformed by coming to terms with the non-negotiable limitations faced in a traumatic situation, but often the pain remains in place if “what ifs and if onlys” attempt to overcome what cannot change (DuBose, 1997). Trauma is an encounter with human vulnerability, or the possibility that any one of us at any time can be preyed upon or abused by an Other being. Traumatic stress, then, we argue, is a realistic response to the experiential knowledge that this is the case and not a deficit needing to be extinguished.

Hypervigilance is encapsulated in Criteria E in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), and it is generally the primary focus of PTSD treatment (Briere & Scott, 2006). It is also the way of being in the world which sediments, to use Spinelli’s (2007) term, the afflicted ways of mooding referenced by DSM-5 Criteria. Existentially, however, hypervigilance is one route through which existential pain expresses itself in the world. One is understandably vigilant so as to not be sideswiped again, which is indeed a lived experience of self-care. Indeed, hypervigilence constricts one’s experiences of trust, but this itself is another agentic choice due to chosen privileging of values and projects, and it can be re-chosen.

When a trauma occurs, the tectonic plates of the soul shift toward the disturbing truth that the Other is unpredictable. A person’s historicity, or story, is forever altered following such a realization, and it is difficult to know how to be in a world which does not have to be benevolent. At the same time, part of our thrown and non-negotiable limitations as human beings is that we are faced with choices and stances at any and every moment. One of those choices might lead to being preoccupied by efforts to escape the uncertainty intrinsic in existence. Such a person might develop a habit of sitting with one’s back to the wall or might adhere to strict self-imposed guidelines about when one can be out of the house or what one can wear in public; he or she might embody reminders of the trauma through chills, shakes, and rapid heart rate (Paidoussis-Mitchell, 2012; van der Kolk et al., 1996). It is easy to jettison these ways of being by declaring them irrational—many trauma protocols seek to desensitize a person to these kinds of responses via repeated exposure. However,
this is faulty engineering, as these responses might not be ‘hyper’ at all–increased vigilance and self-protection might be radically sensible given the person’s experience bumping up against the limits of one’s autonomy. Hence, hypervigilance might be reframed as hyper-attunement, or a chosen way of being in the world which is highly sensitive and adjusted to the precarious nature of living.

As with any way of being, hyper-attunement has its limits. It is exhausting to maintain that level of awareness, and any project which has as its goal to avoid pain is futile. Perhaps it is most painful for human beings braving life after trauma to realize that single-event trauma is in fact an illusion. As founding logotherapist Frankl (1963) suggests, loss, and even horror, is part of the human experience. But Frankl’s decidedly optimistic enframing might eschew horror prematurely. Paradoxically, the savvy trauma survivor learns, either on one’s own or within a therapeutic relationship, that being-toward-Death (Heidegger, 1927/1962) is the way to preserve life. That is, one’s traumatic recognition of the potential to die suggests that one is, in fact, still alive. This is in contrast to the popular meaning-based therapeutic stance that until one finds meaning, he or she is in a state of unresolved cognitive processing (e.g., Hegelson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006; Linley & Joseph, 2012). We propose that trauma does not cast meaning into the lost and found; rather, meaning is already lived out through one’s being-in-the-world. The horror of trauma is--by definition-unresolved, and the fact that one is still alive to live unresolved suggests a more intimate relationship with life and death. Such a person goes on living by inviting finitude, or courageously leaning into the possibility that uncertainty and unknowability opens one to new possibilities, to what is hopeful. And with time, a delicate balance is struck between honoring historicity and opening oneself to new outcomes, others, and the Other.

Dissociation

Dissociation is generally understood in the literature as being the strongest predictor PTSD (Marmar et al, 1994; Koopman, Classen, & Spiegel, 1994). In general, it is an attempt existentially to gain a felt sense of spatiality (Heidegger, 1927/1962) from the self and the event. While this separation may work to a degree, the person is unable to create a literal separation from the self because one cannot become disembodied. Depending on the degree of the person’s need for separation from the world, one’s dissociation may vary. On one end of the spectrum, an individual may feel less present in the moment; on the other, an individual may take up new ways of being, as in one who develops multiple personalities.

One way dissociation manifests is through “blackouts,” or lived experiences of feeling separated even from one’s own memory. This dissociative phenomenon may be different between children who black out and adults who dissociate but remember the event. Perhaps children dissociate (Chu & Dill, 1990; Saxe et al, 1993) and “black out” more often (Sare et. al, 2006; Weniger, Sachsse, & Irle, 2008) because their historicity suggests a more trusting relationship with the ontological. In a sense, they have not built up the scar tissue that comes with living with existential pain. Whereas the traumatized war veteran has more lived experience with finitude, the young child who is being repeatedly molested by her father may be harshly confronted with her limitations for the first time. As she struggles into adulthood, she responds by choosing to create space from such realities.

Existentially, blackouts may be provoked by a hyper-attunement to the painful quality of Being in a traumatizing situation. We can distinguish through the phenomenology of the trauma what Buber (1970/1996) called the personified “thou” from the inanimate “it.” Relating to a trauma as if the trauma itself were an Other being might be the existential root of dissociation, as in the case of the young woman who was molested by her father (a “thou”). This is not to say that a “thou” trauma must result from complex trauma involving another person, or that an “it” trauma only pertains to inanimate events such as natural disasters. For example, trauma resulting from a natural disaster may be an amalgamation of a “thou” who has grown in significance over time, or a felt sense that someone greater than myself (e.g. a God) is abusing me. But needing an abusive mother to be an “it” as a way to avoid contending with an Other I love who is harming me would be an example of an interpersonal trauma relegated to “it” status.

As alluded to before, dissociation can take many forms, depending on how engulfed the person feels by the trauma. In an extreme case, the young woman who was molested by her father might take up different personalities as a new ontic way of negotiating the “thou” trauma’s presence in her story. Regardless, her dissociation is a way to artificially rewind and eliminate her pain by delegating it to an Other who is better-equipped to handle the assault. However, the Others are her, as she is them: the difference is a felt separation of experience. Once the young woman begins to experience the world from the purview of her Others, the world tends to view her as “crazy” or abnormal. Being viewed as crazy is a frequent occurrence with all manifestations of dissociation, as individuals who are actively dissociating might exhibit a disassociative, or vacant stare in their moment of felt separation. Instead of understanding these dissociative states as faulty or abnormal, we suggest they are a human reaction to moments when severe trauma has come too close. The young woman who
dissociates has simply undertaken a process of “disorganizing and reorganizing [her] sense of being-in-time” (Stolorow, 2007, p. 20).

Simply put, the young woman who dissociates is decidedly Being-dys-integrated or dys-connected in the world. When she is reminded of her trauma (triggered), a protective way of being (e.g., dissociative stare, dissociative blackout) takes over so she can move through the situation unscathed. By dys-integrating the self, she can be other than traumatized. But co-existentially (Heidegger, 1927/1962), this protection from the present moment keeps her from recognizing the newness of the situation; that is, the present situation and people in it are different from the original trauma. This woman, in effect, is using her agency to dissociate rather than brave the uncertain world.

When dissociating, one may experience a felt “loss of control” which can be understood as an attempt to reject agency. The person who dissociates has agency, as choice is a given, but he or she is not immediately aware of its enactment—hence the felt loss of control. From such a perspective, the person, or Being, who is no longer present in the moment, is not responsible for what happens or maybe even what has happened in the past. However, the Being whose agency is subdued via dissociation never escaped agency to begin with. The attempt to reject agency would seem paradoxical because the loss of control was the root of the trauma in the first place. But her dys-integrated Being becomes existentially sedimented (Spinelli, 2007) in forfeiting control as a means of protecting herself from owning the raw encounter with her existential thrownness and finitude.

Treatment

In this section, we will outline conventional understandings of trauma treatment before introducing our existential approach. First, let us fully understand the word “treatment.” It has been defined in many ways, including the use of an agent to give properties, as well as the medical administration of a dose, which stems from the Latin word Trahere, meaning “draw” or “pull” (Oxford, 2013). While we refer to our actions with clients as types of “treatment,” please note that we do not see our relationship as a type of treatment in the manner defined above. Rather than giving properties and dosing away an individual’s suffering, it is the therapist who instead is administered a dose of the person’s experience. As the therapist absorbs and metabolizes his or her suffering, the person experiences the therapist as a real Other; that is, a full human being who hears the pain and feels the gravity of the situation in his or her gut.

To briefly summarize the timeline of evidence-based approaches to trauma treatment, we start with Foa and Kozak (1986). Foa and Kozak (1986) found activation and habituation to be central to symptom reduction. That is, they would activate, or initiate an acute experience of the original emotions inspired by the traumatic event, in order to habituate, or desensitize the traumatized individual to them (Foa & Kozak, 1986). Later, Foa collaborated with Rothbaum (1998) to conclude that the problem was the meaning-making around the trauma. This prompted Foa and Rothbaum (1998) to move toward a cognitive-behavioral approach to eliminate faulty thinking like, “I am to blame for being raped.” Next, Foa worked with Hembree and Rauch (2003) to solidify prolonged exposure, an expansion of her earlier work on activation and habituation in which she employed imaginal and in vivo exposure as methods of symptom reduction. Imaginal exposure refers to a re-telling of the traumatic event, whereas in vivo exposure refers to the present-moment re-experiencing of the trauma via homework assignments (Hembree, Rauch, & Foa, 2003). Foa and Rauch (2004) combined prolonged exposure and cognitive restructuring. The addition of cognitive restructuring to the exposure therapy provided a route to both desensitization and replacement of maladaptive thinking.

Van der Kolk et. al (1996) were working around the same time but focusing on affect dysregulation. That is, they found the subjective experience of intense emotion to be more central to the distress than the maladaptive thinking. Foa and Rauch (2006) eventually put forth a similar theory called emotional processing theory, in which they emphasized the fear response as being the gateway emotion to reducing the anxiety symptoms they saw as underpinning trauma. Positive psychology offers an interpretation of Cognitive-Emotional Processing Therapy, which incorporates many of the above ideas while returning to the idea of meaning-making. Hegelson, Reynolds, and Tomich (2006) posit that the subjective distress associated with trauma comes from the search for meaning, which they refer to as unresolved cognitive processing. Linley and Joseph (2011) add that finding meaning allows the traumatized individual to assemble a “new assumptive world” – a shift which not only reduces symptoms, but promotes posttraumatic growth.

Similar to Linley and Joseph, our approach to trauma therapy is a reframing of more cognitive-emotional treatment methods that takes into account the deeper meaning of the trauma. Briere and Scott (2006) return to the idea that activation is the essential element needed to reduce symptoms. Thus, they prescribe a step-wise approach to trauma: “In order to extinguish emotional-cognitive associations to a given traumatic
memory, they must be 1) activated, 2) not reinforced, and ideally 3) counterconditioned” (p. 132-133). From our stance, trauma treatment might be seen to 1) activate, 2) validate, and 3) integrate. It is important to note that these three elements are just that; we do not endorse a step-wise model of care in which there is a pour soi, or observer in de Beauvoir’s language, and en soi, or observed patient whom the treatment is done unto (de Beauvoir, 2009). Instead, we advocate a relationship in which two individuals come to know one another as human beings.

We welcome and warmly acknowledge the importance of the activation phenomenon. However, we might add for the purpose of clarification and differentiation that activation is a naturally occurring process which does not have to be probed, guided, or initiated by the therapist. We suggest the activation is introduced by the client’s own experience in the world, as life circumstances probe activation on their own. If a woman veteran wishes to delay discussion of the traumatic events from war for, let us say, four weeks and prefers to talk about television instead, that is her choice and an existential therapist honors the agency of the individual who perceives television to be paramount in that moment (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). Indeed, it is not our role as therapists to decide what is important to discuss, as what is important is discussed. We trust that if this veteran is authentically traumatized from her experiences in war, her experiences will eventually probe her to discuss these traumas when she is ready. Most importantly, respecting choice not only avoids re-traumatization but creates an empowering atmosphere that fosters courage to “face it.” That is not to say that the therapist lies dormant; the therapist employs a phenomenological process of descriptive clarification (Spinelli, 1997) to mine assumptions or abstractions as they arise. Thus, activation occurs at the individual’s pace—a leap of faith on the part of the therapist, who may be working within a time-limited model or feeling pressure from third parties to perform. Though crisis situations may call for a more direct probing of the traumatic material on the part of the therapist (Jacobsen, 2006), it is possible and preferable to be guided by the client, who is infinitely more familiar with their own experience.

In concordance with the next element of our existential trauma therapy, we choose to validate the person’s experience of the trauma as opposed to the more cognitive stance of “not reinforcing” it. In our view, not reinforcing someone’s response or “cognitive-emotional associations” (Briere & Scott, 2006, p. 123) to the trauma denies the person’s meaning-making by adding guilt and subtracting credence from the experience. That is, the therapist who systematically eliminates emotional primacy of the traumatic memory by selecting only certain less-activating associations invalidates the mattering of the experience. In effect, this invalidation induces an “I’m sick” belief in the individual who might feel guilty for disappointing the therapist by feeling the full weight of his or her authentic experience. Existentially, radically validating the very response that is the most troubling and horrifying to the individual is the human thing to do; we wish to avoid alienating or pathologizing the human condition as invalid or maladaptive, as it is the tie that binds the human relationship which underpins the therapy. This stance is empirically supported by Coker et al. (2002) who found a healing component to sharing trauma relationally.

Radical validation is the therapeutic element which sets apart an existential approach. Briere and Scott (2006) wish instead to “extinguish” reminders of the trauma. Though we acknowledge the almost-gravitational pull to relieve the individual’s burden as a therapist, we reject the notion that pain is necessarily extinguished in order for the person to go on living. The individual’s participation in the present moment is evidence in itself that time has moved forward, even if the person feels left behind in his or her efforts to resurrect or relate differently to that which has come to pass. For this reason, we distinguish and discern a person’s ontic positioning, or locate his or her unique way of taking up the trauma in light of the contingent limitations we all face as human beings (Heidegger, 1927/1962).

To extinguish the response to the trauma would seem to be an attempt to eliminate the actual existence of the event, as one cannot help but respond to an event in some way. Even if we could extinguish a maladaptive response, the traumatic event will always be a piece of the person’s historicity and memory. Thus, we suggest discernment as a way of finding meaning in the traumatic event, as anything that is traumatic must be innately meaningful to the person. Without validating the experience, the person may begin to feel guilt surrounding the event, thus stunting his or her ability to live out meaning.

Integration is an element of treatment which can be seen as an existential alternative to the kinds of counter-conditioning present in more cognitive models of therapy (Briere & Scott, 2006). Integration is not a goal of therapy, per se, but is something that typically occurs within the relationship as a result of clarifying a person’s being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1999). Counter-conditioning might be an unnecessarily mechanized project in the therapy; perhaps engaging a process of mourning can promote new, sustainable ways of being in light of the trauma. DuBose (1997) expands upon DeSpelder and Strickland’s (1987) work on mourning to conclude: “The mourning process is [a] rebuilding of a new self-in-a-life-world. This process focuses less on the personal reactions of someone to loss and more on the readjustment to the social arena: mourning is the most public expression of loss” (DuBose, 1997, p. 368). In this way, integration is both a movement and a recognition of that which has already moved with the passage of time. Most succinctly, integration is what

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happens when the traumatized individual finds his or herself at a loss. As the trauma moves definitively into the past, the present moment in therapy becomes evidence in itself that the individual has already “moved on” as it were. In this way, therapy is a way to account for the ways in which the individual has used his or her agency in the interim since the trauma. The overwhelming question “How will I get by?” is pared down to “How am I already getting by, and do I want to proceed differently?”

To us, complete integration is not a goal unless it is what the client desires. Nonetheless, integration can be best understood as learning a new way of relating to the trauma and the world (e.g., learning new coping skills). We do not advocate a directional movement toward integration in the image of the therapist, but prefer to walk with an individual as they find a way of living in the world that may or may not include resurrection and hyper-attunement. We may offer alternative ways of being-in-the-world when the person becomes stuck, but ultimately, integration lies within the person’s own agency to settle into existential givenness in their own way. For the person who does not wish to fully integrate, he or she adopts a way of being-in-the-world that is dys-integrated or comprised of several different meaningful ways of living.

Conclusion

The field of psychology continues to move toward a goal-oriented model of care which emphasizes fixing a broken being rather than witnessing the life that goes on living. With the advent of DSM-5, a vigorous discussion has been ignited regarding the treatment and conceptualization of diagnoses whose characteristic syndrome cannot be explained and cured using a purely biological model. The question remains whether the DSM-5 can be promoted as an entirely empirical model of present psychological phenomena. DSM-5 is still littered with residue from a time when psychology and psychiatry still agreed that care took precedent over precise diagnostics and measurement—an notion which is increasingly palatable to the medically-modeled faction of psychology, as evidenced by the NIMH’s vow to replace it with an entirely neurologically-based diagnostic manual (Lane, 2013). Trauma is certainly a phenomenon at the centerfold of this debate as the field recognizes the almost endless etiologies and manifestations, few of which can be adequately represented in a one-size-fits-all diagnostic manual of any sort. This debate is what inspired the present theoretical discussion, as the current thrust toward empirically-validated “treatments” and vetting of psychology for a “hard-science” status calls for clarification from those who hold steadfastly to less reductionist approaches to psychological care. By putting forth an existential understanding of traumatic stress and dissociation in particular, a foundation for dialogue across theoretical orientations can be initiated as psychologists grapple with these paradigmatic shifts in their practice.

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Meaning Making Model: Inner purpose, Goals, and Religiosity/Spirituality Partially Predict Acceptance Strategies and Volunteerism Behaviours

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Abstract

The present study aimed to evaluate the influence of global meaning on volunteerism behaviours and on acceptance strategies in response to unchangeable life events. The study is based on the meaning making model proposed by Park (2010). A total of 348 participants completed the survey; ages ranging from 18 to more than 70 years. Vignettes were used as an approach to evaluate the meaning-making model. The present study was a correlational survey design. The predictor variables were global meaning as measured by purpose in life, goals, and R/S experiences, beliefs and practices. The dependent variables were volunteerism behaviours and acceptance style of responses to unchangeable life situations depicted in vignettes. The questionnaire was presented as an online survey. The results supported most of the hypotheses, confirming the relevance of Park’s meaning making model and the validity of the proposed measures. The present study is but a small step in understanding and finding empirical support for the meaning making model (Park, 2010). The results suggest that from a foundation of strong purpose in life, intrinsic goals, and religiosity/spirituality, one is in a better position to grow from negative life events. Together with volunteerism that encourages one to have an outward looking perspective in life, values in oneself could be developed and reinforced, further strengthening one’s abilities to face negative events in life.

Unchangeable situations such as aging, illness and loss shake the core of a person and often lead one to question the meaning of life (Frankl, 2004; Park, 2010; Wong, 2012a). The “will to meaning” is an approach advocated by Viktor Frankl (2004) to find one’s meaning and purpose in life, even in the deepest sufferings. The approach was validated by his survival from his sufferings in the Nazi concentration camps during World War Two. Frankl proposed that with an understanding of the “why”, one would be able to find the “how.” His ideas paralleled a key thought from Nietzsche: “He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how” (Frankl, 2004, p. 9).

Meaning of life is studied across multiple fields and is of interest to both scholars and the public (Wong, 2012a). Given this wide interest and the complexities inherent in any study of meaning, it is difficult to define the meaning of life (Klinger, 2012). The present study focuses on the meaning of life and meaning making processes in unchangeable life situations from the psychological perspective (e.g. Park, 2010). We first provide definitions of the key terms related to meaning of life, evaluate important theoretical background and empirical research in this area, and outline the rationale for a study based on Park’s meaning-making model.

Definitions

As we seek to understand meaning of life and the meaning-making model (e.g. Park, 2010), it is necessary to understand four key terms: global meaning, situational meaning, meaning-making process and meaning made. The terms can be understood by studying the concepts of meaning and meaning making by some of the key contributors after Frankl (2004): Thompson and Janigian (1988), Janoff-Bulman (1992), and Wong (2012b).

Thompson and Janigian (1988) proposed the terms “implicit meaning” and “found meaning” along with the concept of “life scheme”, all of which are relevant to meaning making models. Implicit meaning is the product of personal appraisal of negative life events. Found meaning is how events fit into the overall orderly context. A life scheme is a cognitive representation of one’s life events and goals. Thompson and Janigian proposed the concept of a life scheme as a story about one’s life that includes negative events that need to be overcome to achieve one’s goals. When these negative events happen, a search for meaning is initiated. Found meaning is the result of accommodation of one’s life scheme and/or a change of view of an event. There is a correspondence of Thompson and Janigian’s terms of found meaning, implicit meaning, and life scheme with the present author’s terms of global meaning, situational meaning, and meaning making.
Janoff-Bulmán (1992) examined meaning that is related to traumatic events. One of Janoff-Bulmán’s propositions is that fundamental assumptions govern one’s orientation to life. The key assumptions are “the world is benevolent”, “the world is meaningful”, and “the self is worthy” (Janoff-Bulmán, 1992, p. 6). These assumptions are resistant to change in normal life experiences but traumatic events shatter the key assumptions. Disillusionment and the process of coping and processing of the new experiences are likely to follow after trauma. Over time and with supportive resources, the interpretation and rebuilding of new assumptions are assumed to bring recovery and a new balance in life (Janoff-Bulmán, 1992). The terms fundamental assumptions, interpretation and processing, rebuilding, and new assumptions after recovery (Janoff-Bulmán, 1992) correspond respectively to the terms global meaning, situational meaning, meaning making and meaning made, which are used hereafter.

Wong (2012b, 2012c) has developed a dual-system model for meaning of life which evolved from logotherapy. In Wong’s dual-system model, meaning comprises purpose, understanding, responsibility and evaluative components. Purpose is posited to be the motivational driver of meaning and includes goals and values. As such, it is oriented towards achieving a preferred future. Understanding is related to the cognitive component of meaning. Responsibility is linked with behaviours that are balanced between morality and personal freedom. Meaning drawn from a sense of responsibility motivates doing what is morally right. The evaluative component includes emotional aspects of meaning. A congruent meaning of life is linked with happiness and satisfaction. Wong describes the meaning making process as the transformative process to handle negative life experiences (Wong, 2012b, 2012c).

The perspectives from Thompson and Janigian (1988), Janoff-Bulmán (1992) and Wong (2012b) provide examples of the multiple variations of global meaning, situational meaning, meaning-making process and meaning made. The complexity of the terms and concepts are a challenge for an encompassing meaning making model. The next section examines one variation in the meaning making model proposed by Park (2010). While Park’s model may not be fully in line with Frankl’s concepts, it provides a reasonable basis for the study of meaning making.

**Park’s Meaning Making Model**

Park (2010) proposed a meaning making model (Figure 1) to integrate some of the common features from a number of current theoretical perspectives (e.g. Janoff-Bulmán, 1992; Thompson & Janigian, 1988). The objective for the model was to provide a basis for empirical testing of factors and pathways related to meaning of life in the context of stressful life situations. Park acknowledged that her model might not be all encompassing because meaning of life is a very broad field. Park (2010) suggested that global meaning forms the core of a person’s motivation and interpretation of life. When faced with various situations in life, a situational meaning is determined for the specific situation. Stress could arise if there is a discrepancy between one’s global meaning and situational meaning. To reduce the stress, a meaning making process is attempted. If successful, the meanings that are made facilitate adjustments to the stress. These resultant meanings could lead to modification of the global meaning. However, if unsuccessful, distress would remain and another cycle of meaning making would be attempted to reduce the stress.

Park (2010) suggested that global meaning is made up of beliefs, goals, and sense of meaningfulness or purpose. Beliefs consist of core schemas covering areas such as justice, control, predictability, and coherence (Park, 2010). Goals comprise desired end states or efforts to maintain desired states. For individuals for whom religion/spirituality is important, religiosity/spirituality is posited to be an integral part of beliefs and goals (Park, 2005, 2007; Wortmann & Park, 2009). Sense of meaningfulness or purpose is regarded by Park (2010) as the subjective sense of meaning of one’s activities in life towards a desired state or goal. She also posited that global meaning is built from early life experiences and is continually modified based on personal experience.

Park’s (2010) meaning making model provides a framework for empirical testing. However, as the next section explains, there are challenges in conducting research on the meaning making model.

**Comparisons of Park’s Meaning Making Model with other models**

Given that Park’s model is not all encompassing (Park, 2010), it is useful to review some other models that are considered in recent research. The following section gives a brief overview of models and perspectives by King with her colleagues (e.g. King, Hicks, Krull, & Del-Gaiso, 2006), Steger and his team (e.g. Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008), and Wong (2012b, 2012c). The aim is to provide additional viewpoints that would add to future studies in this area and to foreshadow the possible limitations of the present study. Some of the ideas from the abovementioned authors have been adopted in the present study to enhance Park’s model.
One of the ideas proposed by King et al. (2006) that differs from Park’s approach is that positive affect may enhance the experience of meaning in life. King et al. found empirical evidence that positive mood adds to meaning in life over and above goal-pursuit factors. Daily positive mood is more likely to predict perceived meaningfulness of a day than are reports of daily meaning and goal-related measures. Furthermore, if one is primed with positive affect, one is more likely to find a day meaningful. Equally important, positive affect appears to enhance the distinction between meaningful and meaningless activities. An important conclusion made by King et al. is that meaning pursuits need not be constrained by eudaimonism, but daily pleasure and positive affect could also be present and may even enhance the pursuit of meaning in life. The idea of daily events being an integral part of the meaning making model is adopted in the present study by the evaluation of reactions to common daily events.

Personality, cognitive style and the differentiation between search for meaning and presence of meaning are key ideas from Steger and colleagues (2008). Search for meaning is viewed from three perspectives: as a positive feature of mental health, a sign of dysfunction, or a combination of both positive and negative motivations. In view of the possible influence of personality, cognitive styles and motivations in search for meaning, Steger et al. (2008) pointed out the possible influence of age on presence of meaning and search for meaning. They argued that a younger group could have a greater intensity in the search for meaning because of their developmental needs. In contrast, the search for meaning in older adults could be related to failures or difficulties in life. This possible influence of age was noted for the present study and led to recruitment of participants from individuals across a wide age range so that results from the present study would provide some insight on the influence of age on meaning making.

A dual-systems model of meaning is proposed by Wong (2012b, 2012c). The model encompasses the duality of existential challenges, such as suffering and death, and notions from positive psychology wherein worthwhile life includes positive experiences and emotions. The model is elaborate including considerations for individual differences and cultural influences. Within Wong’s duality model, there are three regulatory systems: approach, avoidance and mindfulness awareness. The approach system is related to “appetitive behaviours, positive affects, goal strivings, and intrinsic motivations” (Wong, 2012b, p.7). The avoidance system includes “tendency to avoid pain and overcome adversities” (Wong, 2012b, p.11). When neither the approach nor the avoidance systems are utilized, there exists a state of mindful awareness of the present moment. All three systems are used to handle positive and negative events in life.

Acceptance is central to the dual-systems model. In the approach system, acceptance is viewed as a process to consider the limitations of our abilities and resources before determining our goals. When faced with unchangeable negative events, as part of the avoidance system, acceptance is the response to the difficulties, pain and suffering. As the mindful awareness of the present moment including its negative emotions and thoughts, acceptance is the basis for reducing the suffering and activating effort in productive directions.

Wong’s perspective on acceptance is similar to that applied in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012). Acceptance is a responsive process (as in “accepting”) rather than an outcome state (as in “accepted”) of meaning made as described in Park’s model. This key difference from Park’s model is adopted in the present study where acceptance is viewed as a response to an unchangeable event rather than an outcome state. Further detail on acceptance is covered in the following sections. Lastly, it is noted that Frankl’s concept of meaning of life highlights that meaning is found rather than made (Frankl, 2004). However, researchers such as Park (2010) and Hayes et al., (2012) have proposed that meaning is made. In Hayes et al., (2012), values are to be constructed rather than clarified, emphasizing the active nature of values. Differentiating the two approaches is beyond the scope of the present paper and the present author has chosen to continue with the term “meaning made” as proposed by Park and leave further exploration of this difference to future work.

A further note is that the essential decision point in Park’s Meaning Making Model is the evaluation of discrepancy between global meaning and situational meaning using distress as one of the criteria. In mindfulness approaches, alleviation of distress is not essential to relate to the difficulties that one faces in life (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Instead, mindfulness suggests a “welcoming and allowing” (Segal, William, & Teasdale, 2013) attitude towards difficult feelings, thoughts and memories. Pain is not sought after; however, struggling with pain is also not a necessity (Hayes et al., 2012). Perhaps, a more dynamic flow in the dual-systems model postulated by Wong (2012b, 2012c) is an alternative representation of the processes of meaning making especially where the mindfulness approach plays a part. With these notes and modifications in mind, the challenges in research on meaning making are examined next.
Difficulties in the Research based on the Meaning-making Model

The following section identifies four challenges for the conduct of research on the meaning making model and suggests ways to overcome the difficulties.

**Operational definition of measures.** One of the main difficulties encountered in studies of the meaning making model is operational definition of the measures because of the abstract and complex nature of the constructs and processes within the meaning-making model (McDonald, Wong, & Gingras, 2012; Park, 2010). The present author suggests that single factor tests (e.g., Purpose in Life scale) are preferred as the way to measure purpose in life as a clearly defined construct. This could help to identify the contribution of purpose in life in the overall construct of global meaning. The other components that may make up the construct of global meaning would be added via other measures.

**Lack of consistent constructs and measures.** Another difficulty is that studies based on the model have used different constructs and measures (Park, 2010). These differences make it difficult to compare and consolidate results from the different studies. Furthermore, the constructs, separate and distinct within the sub-processes, could be linked. For example, the construct of cognitive/emotional processing within the meaning making sub-process is linked with the construct of acceptance within the meaning made sub-process. These links are proposed in Gross’s (2002) emotion regulation framework and Hayes’s (2004) extension of acceptance to Gross’s framework. Acceptance involves not attempting to change negative emotions, thoughts and situations. The negative states are acknowledged. Continued struggle with negative states would increase their intensity. Instead, energy is channelled towards pursuing positive desired outcomes. In the process of pursuing positive desired outcomes, successes could be achieved that could promote positive states. The negative states are no longer the focus and could decrease in intensity (Ciarrochi & Bailey, 2008). (A more detailed explanation of acceptance is provided in the following section). It would be useful to study the interlinked constructs to present a more holistic view and hence the present author has adopted this perspective.

**Religiosity compared with spirituality.** Another issue with earlier studies on meaning of life is the use of the construct of religion because religion can represent a limited viewpoint (Park, 2007). Recent research uses a wider measure which includes spirituality as well as religiosity (Kim & Esquivel, 2011; Lysne & Wachholtz, 2011; Park, 2007). Spirituality is a more universal view beyond formal religious processes and yet it has a commonality with religion in the search for transcendental meaning (Kim & Esquivel, 2011; Lysne & Wachholtz, 2011). The present author adopts a combined influence of religiosity with spirituality (hereafter referred to as R/S) in the evaluation of the meaning making model.

**Time frames of assessment.** There are two aspects regarding time frames that could affect studies based on the meaning making model: experimental designs and the meanings made after the occurrence of stressful situations. Because of the dynamic nature of life experiences and their development over time, it is problematic to measure the meaning of life constructs with cross-sectional research designs. A prospective, longitudinal research design is a way to measure changes over time. Another approach is the use of vignettes to determine the meaning making processes (Park, 2010). Vignettes could be created with a multi-stage format depicting a flow of hypothetical life events, making it an alternative to longitudinal experimental design (Finch, 1987). Since the present study is an initial investigation, simple one-stage vignettes were employed.

According to Park, meanings made should stabilize after several iterations of the meaning making process after the occurrence of stressful situations. A few studies have measured identity reconstruction, as a construct of meanings made in Park’s meaning-making model (Park, 2010). The present author proposes that reconstructed identity includes behaviours that are developed and sustained over a period of time, with volunteerism as a specific example. Volunteerism is a type of planned helping behaviour which requires deliberation on whether to participate in the helping activity, effort to seek out opportunities to help others and a commitment to serve for a period of time (Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Copeland, Stukas, Haugen, & Miene, 1998). Three models (Garland, Myers, & Wolfer, 2008; Omoto & Snyder, 1995; Penner & Finkelstein, 1998) suggest that volunteerism is developed over time and experience with volunteer work and that volunteerism is part of identity reconstruction. In addition, the identity control theory developed by Burke (2006) provides a basis to explain the interaction between self-identities and meaning system. To maintain coherence with self-meanings, one would behave in manners consistent with one’s self-identities. In the event that inconsistencies arise in self-identities, Burke (2006) posited that the discrepancies would lead to changes in one’s identity. Incorporating these models of self-identities into Park’s meaning making model (2010), the present author suggests volunteerism as a possible representation of identity reconstruction, a construct within meanings made.

In summary, the abovementioned difficulties in empirical studies based on the meaning making model mean that there are few studies to date that provide a satisfactory evaluation of Park’s model. The present study overcomes the difficulties in the following ways. Firstly, it evaluates scales that could provide a measure of global meaning. Secondly,
this study specifically evaluates cognitive-emotional processing (Gross, 2002) along with acceptance strategies (Hayes, 2004) in the meaning making process. Vignettes are proposed to simulate the meaning making processes. Thirdly, volunteerism is proposed as a representation of identity reconstruction which is a part of meaning made. Fourthly, if the variables in the measure for global meaning could predict volunteerism and/or the cognitive-emotional processing along with acceptance strategies, such predictive validity could provide support for Park’s meaning making model (2010).

A Possible Measure of Global Meaning

Global meaning has multiple factors within three key constructs: beliefs, goals, and subjective sense of meaning or purpose (Park, 2010). The following section provides the theoretical background, characteristics and limitations of scales that measure purpose, goals, and R/S, and identifies the measurements that are best suited to measure global meaning.

Purpose in Life as one of the Measures of Global Meaning

Purpose in life is part of the core schema behind one’s meaning of life. Frankl’s logotherapy approach is one of the approaches to finding purpose in life and its principle of the will to meaning is a reasonable theoretical basis for the core schemas of one’s meaning of life. Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964) created the Purpose in Life (PIL) test based on Frankl’s logotherapy. The PIL test is a widely used reliable and valid psychometric measure in the field of meaning of life (Debats, 1998; Melton & Schulenberg, 2008).

However, the PIL test does not measure the other aspects of global meaning, such as goals and spirituality (Park, 2010; Schnell, 2010). Hence, for the current study the present author elected to augment the PIL test with additional scales to measure global meaning such as those to measure goals.

Extrinsic and Intrinsic Goals as Measures of Global Meaning

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) advocates that intrinsic motivation drives goals such that consequent actions are inherently interesting and enjoyable. Extrinsic motivation on the other hand is related to actions that lead to a separable outcome such as approval from others and compliance with external control. Intrinsic goals are associated with one’s autonomy, competence and relatedness while extrinsic goals are associated with non-autonomous actions and influenced by external rewards or punishments. Furthering the Self-Determination Theory, Emmons (2003) advocated that goals are essential aspects for life to be meaningful. Of those that are meaningful, Emmons suggested that goals in the areas of intimacy, spirituality, and generativity are positively related to well-being, and power is negatively associated with well-being.

In the context of unchangeable life events of cancer patients, Thompson and Pitts (1993) and Pinquart, Silbereisen, and Frohligh (2009) evaluated the influence of external materialistic and internal non-materialistic goals of cancer patients on their meaning of life. The results from Thompson and Pitts’s (1993) study on cancer patients’ ability to find meaning after a diagnosis of cancer suggested that negative life events would disrupt the meaning of life of people who have external materialistic goals. The physically draining and time-consuming impact of cancer treatment could impact the ability to pursue extrinsic goals. In contrast, those patients with internal non-materialistic goals could maintain their meaning in life when faced with negative life events. In a longitudinal study by Pinquart, Silbereisen, and Frohligh (2009) over the course of treatment of a sample of cancer patients, it was found that materialistic goals were associated with a lower purpose in life and a decline of purpose in life over time. On the other hand, non-materialistic goals were linked with a higher purpose in life that was also strengthened over time. Pinquart et al. (2009) proposed that the ability to fulfil the social and psychological aspects of intrinsic goals provides an explanation for higher purpose in life.

Religiosity/Spirituality as one of the Measures of Global Meaning

Bereavement and health issues are two major types of event that could alter one’s meaning in life. A combination of R/S, through the meaning-making pathway according to Park’s model, is posited to reduce the negative impact of bereavement (Wortmann & Park, 2009) and health issues (Lyse & Wachholtz, 2011; Nelson, 2009; Park, 2007). In the area of health, R/S is postulated to contribute towards global meaning components of beliefs, goals, and sense of meaning in life and also influences the meaning making process (Park, 2007). The influence of these factors and pathways varies depending on the situation. There is supporting evidence for the correlation of positive religious coping with better psychological adjustment during illness. However, there is equivocal support of R/S factors and pathways on physical health outcomes (Lysne & Wachholtz, 2011; Park, 2007). For example, there is a lack of empirical evidence on the positive influence of
prayers and meditation on physical health (Park, 2007). The valence of the beliefs about God could affect health outcomes. God could be perceived as a loving or a punishing God. Belief in a punishing God could trigger a negative meaning, with consequent reduced resilience resulting in poor outcomes (Lysne & Wahholtz, 2011). In contrast, a balance between seeking divine help and having personal self-efficacy was linked to a better health outcome (Lysne & Wahholtz, 2011). Hence measures of R/S should include items on the nature of religiousness and spirituality beliefs.

Wortmann and Park (2009) utilized the meaning-making model in their qualitative review of the influence of R/S on bereavement. The loss creates a discrepancy between the global meaning and situational meaning which leads to a resolution process. Wortmann and Park suggested that there are two possible resolution processes: assimilation and accommodation. When the appraised meaning does not violate global meaning, the appraised meaning is assimilated into one’s global meaning. However, if there is a discrepancy between the appraised meaning and global meaning a religious/spiritual struggle is likely to occur. To resolve this struggle, the accommodation process involves changing both the global meanings and situational meanings. However, the effects of the accommodations may be experienced some time later, in some cases years after the event. Wortmann and Park also indicated the importance of the contributions of R/S in daily practice as well as in response to events. The foregoing evidence supports the importance of R/S in global meaning. R/S is posited to be multi-dimensional (e.g., Lyons, Deane, Caputi, & Kelly, 2011; Park, 2007). Hence a battery of measures appears to be required to measure R/S. Moving from the measure of global meaning, the following section covers volunteerism as one of the aspects of meaning made.

Volunteerism as a Representation of Meaning Made

Current behaviours in the absence of unchangeable life events could be a reflection of meaning made from previous life incidents. The following section proposes volunteerism as a current behaviour that reflects meaning made and could be classified under changed identity in Park’s meaning making model (2010). Functional theory is one approach to understanding volunteerism (Clary et al., 1998). In functional theory, acts of volunteerism could serve different psychological functions in different people. From empirical studies, the six types of functions that are found in volunteers are Values, Understanding, Enhancement, Protective, Social, and Career (Clary et al., 1998). The variation amongst the profiles of the six functions is a means to differentiate volunteers from non-volunteers (Clary et al., 1998). From the study of a sample from the United States population by Independent Sector (1992), it emerged that volunteers differed from non-volunteers in that they had significantly higher levels of Values, Enhancement, Understanding and Social function than non-volunteers. The present author posits that the Values, Enhancement and Understanding functions are linked to purpose in life and hence suggests that volunteerism could be related to meaning making in Park’s model. Additional supporting empirical results follow.

Law and Shek (2009) conducted a study to review the relationship between purpose in life and volunteerism beliefs, volunteering intention and voluntary behaviour. The results from a Hong Kong study of school students showed that a high level of purpose of life was associated with higher levels of volunteer intention and behaviour (Law & Shek, 2009). Piercy, Cheek and Teemant (2011) also provided supporting evidence for the relationship between volunteerism and purpose in life. They conducted a qualitative study of 38 elderly volunteers from the United States who gave intensive volunteer service that was done on a 24-hour-a-day basis at a location away from home. Participants from the study reported that serving brought new meaning to their lives.

By combining the results of Law and Shek (2009) for the younger Chinese sample and Piercy et al. (2011) for the elderly American sample, the present author speculates that current volunteer behaviours could be correlated to global meaning across all ages and cultures. Stronger global meaning would be associated with a higher rate of volunteer behaviour. The presence of such relationships would suggest that current behaviours, such as volunteerism, are useful outcome measures of the strength of a person’s meanings made.

Before moving further into the facets of volunteerism, it is useful to reflect on how Frankl had chosen to serve his fellow inmates during their time in the concentration camps. Wilson, Sandoz and Kitchens (2010) highlighted that Frankl could have escaped with a small group of prisoners. However, when Frankl saw a suffering inmate, he chose to forego the chance to escape and instead remained to continue in his activity as a doctor in the camp. The motivation for Frankl’s service was his values. By following his values, Frankl reported a peace that far exceeded the immediate benefits of escape. This anecdote lends support for the way Frankl, one of the key contributors to notions about meaning of life, lived a life of service to others because of his commitment to his values.
Vignettes as an Approach to Evaluate the Meaning-Making Model

Vignettes are one of the possible approaches for the evaluation of the meaning making model (Park, 2010). Finch (1987) supports the use of vignettes in the empirical study of beliefs, values, and norms. Vignettes are more suitable in these areas because typical attitude statements in surveys may not capture the context of the questions. Vignettes allow the presentation of situation-specific context. Standard and well-defined vignettes allow for presentation of the same stimulus to all the participants (Hughes & Huby, 2002). The use of combinations of vignettes can also enhance the depth and generalizability of the responses (Finch, 1987). Vignettes in survey form allow an economical collection of large amounts of data within a reasonable timeframe (Hughes & Huby, 2002). Hence, in the present study, vignettes were used to evaluate meaning making processes. The following section explains the theoretical background of acceptance strategies and an example of a study that used vignettes to measure acceptance strategies in response to unchangeable life events.

Acceptance as a Measure of Meaning Made and Meaning Making Processes

In Park’s meaning-making model, acceptance is proposed as one of the outcomes of the meaning made sub-process and cognitive-emotional processing is proposed as one of the meaning making sub-processes (Park, 2010; Figure 1). The present author suggests that Gross’s (2002) emotion regulation framework together with Hayes’s (2004) extension of the framework with the inclusion of acceptance provides a theoretical basis to explain the combined influences of cognitive-emotional processing with acceptance. As mentioned in the earlier section, acceptance is here viewed as a responsive process rather than as an outcome of meaning made. This viewpoint is consistent with the ACT approach used by Hayes et al. (2012).

When one encounters challenges and opportunities, emotions arise (Gross, 2002). Under these circumstances, emotion regulation refers to the processes that determine the types of emotions to be experienced, when these emotions are experienced, and how the emotions are experienced and expressed (Gross, 2002). There are two key strategies for emotion regulation: antecedent-focused and response-focused regulation. Cognitive reappraisal is antecedent focused and expressive suppression is response focused.

Gross’s (2002) emotion regulation framework was expanded by the inclusion of acceptance (Hayes, 2004; Wolgast, Lundh, & Viborg, 2011). Acceptance increases the options of emotion regulation by influencing both antecedent-focused and response-focused strategies. In the response stage, acceptance allows the experience of emotions without attempting to alter or suppress emotions (Wolgast et al., 2011). During the antecedent stage, acceptance reduces the impact of negative emotions and enables better recovery (Wolgast et al., 2011). Acceptance is posited to have a more direct effect than cognitive reappraisal on behavioural avoidance. Acceptance strategies are more adaptive than cognitive reappraisal in enabling the tolerance of more aversive emotional experience. Hence, acceptance approaches are negatively associated with avoidance (Wolgast et al., 2011).

The measurement of avoidance employed by Wolgast et al. (2011) may not be representative of overt behavioural response. More specifically, the situations presented in their study may not be representative of everyday life because they used film clips from movies. They also did not attempt to determine the factors that influence the use of different acceptance strategies. A measure developed by Nakamura and Orth (2005) could provide a better alternative to measure acceptance strategies.

Nakamura and Orth (2005) reviewed empirical studies and found that the influence of acceptance on physical and mental health is equivocal. Hence, they proposed a differentiation of the types of acceptance. Nakamura and Orth (2005) proposed that, when faced with unchangeable situations, a person could respond with active acceptance, resigning acceptance, or non-acceptance. Their proposal follows from the notion that acceptance has emotional, cognitive, and behavioural components (Wright & Kirby, 1999). Active acceptance at the cognitive and emotional levels leads to adaptive behaviours, as posited by cognitive theory (Wright & Kirby, 1999). On the other hand, resigning acceptance leads to passive behaviours, resigning thoughts with a poorer view of the future, and emotions that centre around denial, resignation, and hopelessness (Nakamura & Orth, 2005). Non-acceptance of unchangeable situations involves reactions that seek to regain control, refusal to admit the unchangeable nature of the situation, and emotions of anger or blame (Wortman & Brehm as cited in Nakamura & Orth, 2005).

Nakamura and Orth (2005) designed a study using vignettes to evaluate acceptance reactions to unchangeable situations. The results from their study showed that active acceptance was adaptive to unchangeable situations whilst resigning acceptance and non-acceptance could lead to problematic reactions. Active acceptance was positively related to
better mental health and behaviour control. In contrast, resigning acceptance was correlated with denial. While Nakamura and Orth (2005) provided a structure to measure acceptance strategies, they did not include a measure of self-concept such as global meaning. Hence, for the purposes of the current study it was deemed useful to utilize their design concept to evaluate the association of global meaning with acceptance reactions using the vignettes from their study.

**Consistency of Coping Processes Across All Ages**

This last section of the review examines the sampling requirements for the proposed study. Sampling is an important part of research design. It is necessary to understand if there are factors that could affect the study besides those factors that are included in the design, and age is one of the factors that could affect the present study. The following section explains the influence of age on coping.

From the development perspective, a linear progression model of life stages suggests there are differences in developmental milestones according to age (Jacobs, 2010). One develops linearly from one stage to the next with different developmental activities at each stage. However, there is no consistency in the linear models in the number of stages (e.g., eight stages in Erikson, 1965; three stages in Jacobs, 2010; nine stages in Levinson, 1986). The division of stages appears arbitrary. Instead of a linear model, Jacobs (2010) recommended a representation that is analogous with a spiral staircase. A complete turn of the spiral staircase occurs repeatedly as one progresses through each life stage. Key issues such as identity, generativity, and integrity are repeatedly explored at all ages. According to this model, the present author speculates that meaning in life would not be dependent on age but instead the issues are repeatedly explored as one progresses through life. Hence, the present author suggests that age is not an influential factor in the meaning of life although the focus for the search for meaning could differ at each stage (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan & Lorentz, 2008). Recruitment of participants for the present study targeted all ages to validate the present author’s proposition.

**Aims and Hypotheses**

The aim of the present study was to evaluate the relationships of global meaning with volunteerism and acceptance strategies at the point of occurrence of unchangeable day-to-day difficulties. Consistency of these relationships across age groups was also evaluated in the present study. Global meaning is operationalized by measures of the meaning of life, goals, and R/S. Volunteerism is proposed to be a measure of current behaviours based on one’s meanings made. Acceptance strategies at the point of the unchangeable life situations were solicited through the use of vignettes. In accordance with the study aim, three hypotheses were proposed. Firstly, greater emphasis on purpose in life, intrinsic goals, and R/S would predict a higher commitment to volunteerism. Secondly, greater emphasis on purpose in life, intrinsic goals, and R/S would predict greater use of active acceptance and less use of resigning acceptance and reactance in the vignettes. Finally, the influence of higher purpose in life, intrinsic goals, and greater R/S is consistent across all ages.

**Method**

**Participants**

In all, 348 participants completed the survey. The participants’ ages ranged from 18 to more than 70 years. Fifty two percent of the participants were not students, 37% were students at James Cook University Singapore, 6% were students at James Cook University Australia, and 5% were students from universities other than James Cook University. The participants from the purposive recruitment source were predominantly older than the participants from the JCU student recruitment source. While the gender distribution for the purposive recruitment source is approximately equal, the female: male ratio for the JCU students is approximately 4:1. Singapore and Malaysia-born participants formed 71% and 12% respectively of the total sample.

**Materials and Measures**

The present study was a correlational survey design. The predictor variables were global meaning as measured by purpose in life, goals, and R/S experiences, beliefs and practices. The dependent variables were volunteerism behaviours and acceptance style of responses to unchangeable life situations depicted in vignettes.
The questionnaire was presented as an online survey. The questionnaire started with an information page and a consent page. The survey had 59 items in four sections that took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The first section consisted of four questions about participant demographics information.

**Global Meaning scales.** Three groups of scales were used to measure the Global Meaning construct. The first was the Purpose in Life test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). The scale comprises 20 items, with each item measured on a 7-point Likert scale. Alpha coefficients reported in the literature range from .86 to .97 and split-half reliabilities range from .77 to .85 (Melton & Schulenberg, 2008).

The second scale was Thompson and Pitts’s (1993) unnamed 13-item measure to evaluate intrinsic and extrinsic goals. Participants are requested to rate the extent to which each goal is one of their goals on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 4 (Very much). The reported Cronbach’s alphas for the measures of goals range from .62 to .78 (Thompson & Pitts, 1993).

The third aspect of Global Meaning on R/S was measured using a battery of scales: the Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (Underwood, 2011), the Spiritual Belief Scale (Schaler, 1996), and the Religious Background and Behaviour Questionnaire (Connors, Tongan, & Miller, 1996). The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale has 15 items rating religious and spiritual experiences. The responses are rated on a 6-point scale ranging from many times a day, every day, most days, some days, once in a while, and never or almost never. Underwood (2011) reported a Cronbach’s alpha of .85 for this scale.

The Spiritual Belief Scale measures spiritual thinking in the areas of release, gratitude, humility and tolerance (Schaler, 1996). Each of these areas is measured with two items giving a total of eight items that are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Schaler (1996) reported a Cronbach’s alpha of .92 for this scale.

The Religious Background and Behaviour Questionnaire have three sections. The first section reports the religious/spirituality background ranging from atheist, agnostic, unsure, spiritual, and religious. Participants are instructed to respond by selecting only the one category that best describes their own background. The second section comprising 6 items covers the frequency of religious/spiritual behaviours in the past year (e.g. “thought about God”) that were rated on an 8-point scale ranging from 1 (never), (2-7 = (rarely), (once a month), (twice a month), (once a week), (twice a week), (almost daily)) to 8 = (more than once a day). The last section with 6 items covers the lifetime occurrences of religious/spiritual behaviours (e.g. “believed in God”) on a 3-point ordinal scale ranging from 0 (never), 1 (yes, in the past but not now), and 2 (yes, and I still do). Cronbach’s alpha for this measure has been reported as .85 and test-retest reliability as .97 (Connors et al., 1996).

**Measure on volunteerism.** The items used to measure volunteerism asked participants if they had participated in volunteer work in the past twelve months.

**Vignettes and Acceptance/Reactance measure.** Nine vignettes of changeable life situations developed by Nakamura and Orth (2005) were used to solicit the acceptance/reactance responses of the participants. The vignettes cover day-to-day events of various severities. The scenarios include malfunction of the television, breaking of a leg, failing the driving test, partner ending a relationship, missing a social event because of illness, a hairdresser ruins one’s hair, loss of an important personal belonging, isolation at new work place, and friend discloses one’s secret. The cognitive responses (“What do you think in such a situation?”) and emotional responses (“How do you feel in such a situation?”) for active acceptance, resigning acceptance, and reactance styles are rated on 4-point Likert scale: 1 (Very unlikely), 2 (Unlikely), 3 (Likely), or 4 (Very likely). Examples of cognitive responses are: It is all right; I will not watch the television today (active acceptance), This evening is spoiled for me anyway – I will go to sleep (resigning acceptance), and I am going to complain at the store where I bought the television (reactance). Examples of emotional responses are: I am relaxed and do not take it too seriously (active acceptance), I am frustrated (resigning acceptance), and I am angry (reactance). Cronbach’s alphas reportedly range from .75 to .85 for this measure (Nakamura & Orth, 2005).

**Procedure**

The survey was administered as an online questionnaire that was developed using an Internet web survey tool, SurveyGizmo (SurveyGizmo, 2011). The web link for the survey was presented to the participants via email or the James Cook University online research management system. Two methods were used to recruit participants for the study. Purposive recruitment was used to recruit participants from amongst the principal researcher’s acquaintances. Convenience sample was used to recruit university student participants.
Results

The data were processed and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 20.0 with alpha set to .05 for all analyses. The analyses evaluated the statistical significance of the variables purpose in life, extrinsic and intrinsic goals, and R/S as predictors for volunteerism and acceptance/reactance strategies to unchangeable life events. Consistency of these influences across ages was also evaluated.

A total of 419 participants accessed the online survey. Of the total access, 348 surveys were fully completed (83%) and 71 only partially completed. Only the 348 fully completed surveys are included in the study.

Reliabilities

Cronbach’s coefficient alpha was used to evaluate the reliabilities of the measures. The reliabilities of all measures except for the intrinsic goals subset of Thompson and Pitts’ measure exceeded the recommended minimum of .7 (Table 1). In previous literature, reported reliabilities for the intrinsic goals measure range from .62 to .71 (Thompson & Pitts, 1993). Since the present reported reliability is within the range, no change was made to the items in the intrinsic goals measure in the present study.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Possible Scores</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose in Life Scale</td>
<td>20/140</td>
<td>105.56</td>
<td>16.17</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrinsic Goals</td>
<td>1/4</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic Goals</td>
<td>1/4</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale</td>
<td>16/94</td>
<td>57.08</td>
<td>20.10</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Beliefs Scale</td>
<td>8/40</td>
<td>29.03</td>
<td>9.33</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Background and Behaviours Scale</td>
<td>0/58</td>
<td>28.50</td>
<td>17.18</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Acceptance</td>
<td>18/72</td>
<td>50.20</td>
<td>8.10</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resigning Acceptance</td>
<td>18/72</td>
<td>42.47</td>
<td>6.83</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactance</td>
<td>18/72</td>
<td>40.86</td>
<td>8.78</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Preliminary Data Checks

With the exception of the Spiritual Beliefs and Religious Background and Behaviours scores, all scores conformed to the normality guidelines and are eligible for parametric tests.

Multi-collinearity of the three R/S measures was a concern because the Pearson correlations between the measures were > .7 (Table 2) (Pallant, 2007). This indicated a strong likelihood of redundant variables assessing spirituality, which necessitated the selection of one of the three scales as a measure of R/S. The Daily Spiritual Experiences scale is the more commonly used measure (Underwood, 2011), has psychometric validity in multiple languages, and was normally distributed. Hence, the Daily Spiritual Experiences scale was preferred over the other two scales as the predictor measure in the following analyses.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Daily Spiritual Experiences</th>
<th>Spiritual Beliefs Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily Spiritual Experiences</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Beliefs Scale</td>
<td>.813**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Background and</td>
<td>.861**</td>
<td>.812**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviours</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Pearson correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)
Data Treatment

There were few participants in the older age group of 60 years and above (2.3%) and the youngest age group of 18 to 19 years (8.0%). Thus, the number of age groups was consolidated from seven to four groups.

Order of variables in the regression analysis

Hypothesis 1 (H1) proposes that greater emphasis on purpose in life, intrinsic goals and R/S and a lower focus on extrinsic goals would predict a higher commitment to volunteerism. Volunteerism of the participants was differentiated by whether or not they participated in volunteer work in the past 12 months.

Hypothesis 2 (H2) proposes that the same predictors would be associated with greater use of active acceptance and less application of resigning acceptance and reactance.

Hypothesis 3 (H3) proposes that the influences of the predictor variables purpose in life, extrinsic and intrinsic goals, and R/S on volunteerism and acceptance strategies are consistent across all ages.

In the analyses for H1 and H2, the purpose in life, intrinsic goals, extrinsic goals, and R/S variables were entered together in one block of the regression analysis to evaluate the significance of the predictors. A logistic regression method was used for the analysis on volunteerism (H1) because the volunteerism variable was categorical. Multiple regressions were used for the analysis on acceptance strategies (H2) because the acceptance variables were continuous.

Prior to the entry of the predictor variables, the regression analyses included two controlled variables in the first step. Scores for one key measure, Purpose in Life, varied significantly with gender ($t (346) = 1.99, p < .05, 95\% CI: .04 to 7.2$). Hence, the gender variable was entered in the first step of the regression analyses to allow for the effect of gender to be controlled for before analyzing the influence of the predictors: purpose in life, extrinsic and intrinsic goals, and R/S.

The age variable was also included in the first step of the regression analyses to determine support for Hypothesis 3 (H3), which proposed that the effects of the predictor variables of purpose in life, extrinsic and intrinsic goals, and R/S on volunteerism and acceptance strategies are consistent across all ages.

The following sections present the results of both steps of the regression analyses for each of the hypotheses.

H1: Volunteerism participation in the past 12 months

**Likelihood of volunteer participation in the past 12 months.** After Step 2, the model containing all the predictors was still statistically significant, $\chi^2 (6, N = 348) = 43.39, p < .001$, indicating the model was able to distinguish between participants who reported to be volunteers and non-volunteers. The model as a whole improved, and explained between 11.7% (Cox and Snell R square) and 15.7% (Nagelkerke R squared) of the variance of volunteer behaviour, and correctly predicted 63.8% of cases. As shown in Table 3, four variables made a unique statistically significant contribution to the model (age, extrinsic goals, intrinsic goals, and daily spiritual experiences). The strongest predictor was intrinsic goals, recording odds of 3.00. This means that participants with stronger intrinsic goals were three times more likely to volunteer than those who are less motivated by intrinsic goals. Furthermore, older participants and those with higher frequencies of daily spiritual experiences were associated with higher odds of volunteering. The odds ratio of .55 for extrinsic goals was less than 1, indicating that those who are motivated by extrinsic goals were less likely to volunteer than those for whom extrinsic goals are not a strong motivation.
Table 3
Logistic Regression Predicting Likelihood of Volunteer Participation in the Past 12 months

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>1.57**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-1.45</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>1.50**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose in Life</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrinsic Goals</td>
<td>-0.60</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.55*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic Goals</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>3.00**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Spiritual Experiences</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>1.02*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-4.64</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p<.01 * p<.05

In summary, H1 was partially supported. Extrinsic goals, intrinsic goals and daily spiritual experiences were statistically significant predictors of volunteer participation in the past 12 months.

H2a: Predictors of Active Acceptance

To test for the second hypothesis concerning predictors of acceptance, preliminary analyses confirmed that there were no violations of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multi-collinearity and homoscedasticity. Separate analyses were conducted for each of the three types of acceptance: active acceptance, resigning acceptance, and reactance.

After entry of the predictors in Step 2, the total variance explained by the model as a whole increased to 18.9%, $F(6, 341)=13.21, p < .001$. The model after Step 2 accounted for an additional 13.5% over Step 1, $F_{change}(4,341) = 14.19, p < .001$. The only statistically significant predictor is the purpose in life variable ($\beta = .34, p < .001$). This implies that participants who have higher Purpose in Life scores were more likely to adopt an active acceptance strategy to unchangeable life events.

Table 4
Multiple Regression Predicting Active Acceptance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>48.22</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>.19**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-1.30</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>28.04</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-1.39</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose in Life</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>.34**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrinsic goals</td>
<td>-1.30</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic goals</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Spiritual Experiences</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p<.01
H2b: Predictors of Resigning Acceptance

After entry of the predictors in Step 2, the total variance explained by the model as a whole increased to 30.8%, \(F(6, 341)= 25.27, p < .001\). The predictors account for an additional 19.9% of the total variance, \(F\) change (4,341) = 24.54, \(p < .001\). There were three statistically significant predictors: gender (beta = .19, \(p < .001\)), purpose in life (beta = -.50, \(p < .001\)), and extrinsic goals (beta = .11, \(p < .05\)). Participants who were female, with lower purpose in life scores, and greater emphasis on extrinsic goals were more likely to adopt resigning acceptance strategies to unchangeable life events.

Table 5
Multiple Regression Predicting Resigning Acceptance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Constant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Purpose in Life</th>
<th>Extrinsic goals</th>
<th>Intrinsic goals</th>
<th>Daily Spiritual Experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>42.00</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>-1.24</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>52.20</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p<.01, *p < .05**

H2c: Predictors of Reactance

After entry of the predictors in Step 2, the total variance explained by the model as a whole increased to 22.8%, \(F(6, 341)= 16.78, p < .001\). The predictors account for an additional 18.9% of the total variance, \(F\) change (4,341) = 20.82, \(p < .001\). There were two statistically significant predictors: purpose in life (beta = -.42, \(p < .001\)), and extrinsic goals (beta = .29, \(p < .001\)). Participants who had a lower purpose in life score and greater emphasis on extrinsic goals were more likely to adopt a reactance strategy to unchangeable life events.

Table 6
Multiple Regression Predicting Reactance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Constant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Purpose in Life</th>
<th>Extrinsic goals</th>
<th>Intrinsic goals</th>
<th>Daily Spiritual Experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>42.51</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>-1.20</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>-1.20</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>46.90</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>-1.20</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p<.01**

In summary, H2 was partially supported. The greater emphasis on purpose in life was associated with greater use of active acceptance and less application of resigning acceptance and reactance. Lower focus on extrinsic goals was associated with less application of resigning acceptance and reactance but was not related to more application of active acceptance. There was no significant prediction from intrinsic goals or daily spiritual experiences.
H3: Influence of Age on Volunteerism, Active Acceptance, Resigning Acceptance, and Reactance

Age was included in Step 1 in the logistic regression analyses of volunteerism behaviours and the hierarchical multiple regressions of active acceptance, resigning acceptance and reactance strategies. This was to examine the validity of Hypothesis 3 which proposed that age would not be a factor in the fore-mentioned variables, given that age is not expected to be influential in the development of meaning of life and thus acceptance strategies should be consistent across all ages. After Step 2, the age variable was a statistically significant variable only in regression models for volunteerism (volunteerism in last 12 months) and not for the acceptance strategies.

The results partially support H3. The influences of the predictor variables purpose in life, extrinsic and intrinsic goals, and R/S on volunteerism were not consistent across ages. There were differences in volunteerism across ages; volunteerism in the past 12 months was associated with older participants. However, the influences of the predictors on acceptance strategies were consistent across all ages.

Discussion

The present study aimed to evaluate the influence of global meaning on volunteerism behaviours and on acceptance strategies in response to unchangeable life events. The study is based on the meaning making model proposed by Park (2010). Global meaning is operationalized with the measures of purpose in life, extrinsic and intrinsic goals, and R/S. Volunteerism is proposed to be a measure of meaning made. Acceptance strategies, proposed as a representation of meaning-making processes and meaning made, were measured for unchangeable life events as simulated through vignettes. The results supported most of the hypotheses, confirming the relevance of Park’s meaning making model and the validity of the proposed measures. A summary of the results follows.

H1 Volunteerism

Volunteerism behaviours in the past 12 months. The present results support the proposition by Garland et al. (2008) of a dynamic transactional relationship between religious faith and service to the community, in that R/S was related to volunteerism behaviours in the past 12 months.

Age was a significant predictor for the variable on volunteerism participation. The older participants were more likely to provide volunteer service in the past 12 months. This was consistent with results from previous studies (e.g., Clary, Synder & Stukas, 1996). Further discussion is made in the later section on the influence of age on the meaning making model.

In addition to providing supporting evidence for previous studies, the present study augmented the previous studies by showing the association of life goals with volunteerism behaviours in the past 12 months. This finding indicates that meaning making models could contribute to studies of volunteerism.

H2 Active Acceptance, Resigning Acceptance, and Reactance Strategies

Hypothesis 2 covers a proposition that global meaning could be represented by purpose in life, extrinsic and intrinsic goals, and R/S. H2 also posited that the meaning making process could be represented by acceptance strategies. These propositions were evaluated by the predictive relationships of global meaning with acceptance strategies using vignettes to depict unchangeable life situations. Consistent with Frankl (2004), purpose in life was a significant predictor of acceptance strategies. This lends support for purpose in life as a significant component of global meaning and contributes to the use of acceptance strategies in the meaning making process.

However, only extrinsic goals were predictive of two types of acceptance strategies; intrinsic goals were not associated with any of the acceptance strategies. This was not in line with the expectations from theoretical considerations (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Emmons, 2003; Pinquart et al., 2009; Thompson & Pitts, 1993). One of the possible explanations for the lack of predictive associations of intrinsic goals is the nature of the vignettes used in the present study. The unchangeable life situations were not associated with intense distress such as being diagnosed with cancer or death.

R/S was not predictive of acceptance strategies. Wortmann and Park (2009) proposed that the assimilation and accommodation processes based on R/S influences resolve the discrepancies between global meaning and situational meaning. Acceptance of losses is part of the assimilation process. The accommodation process involves repetitive meaning making iterations that could spread over years. As such, from the theoretical perspective, R/S is likely to be related to acceptance strategies. The lack of a significant prediction by R/S from the present results could be explained as follows. For intense life situations, the accommodation process is posited to be repetitive in nature and takes time to take effect.
(Wortmann & Park, 2009). However, since most of the unchangeable life situations proposed in the present study was not intense and the responses were solicited in a relatively brief survey, it is not likely that accommodation processes were activated.

**Active Acceptance.** Participants who have a higher purpose in life score appear more likely to adopt an active acceptance strategy to unchangeable life events. The influence of gender and age were removed after the introduction of the purpose in life influence as a predictor. This suggests that the association of purpose in life with acceptance strategies is independent of gender and age.

**Resigning Acceptance.** Participants who are female, with lower purpose in life scores and greater emphasis on extrinsic goals appear more likely to adopt resigning acceptance strategies to unchangeable life events. More than 80% of the participants were from Singapore and Malaysia, pointing to a possibility of a cultural influence on the association of gender with resigning acceptance.

**Reactance Strategies.** Participants who have a lower purpose in life score and greater emphasis on extrinsic goals appear more likely to adopt a reactance strategy to unchangeable life events. The influence of age was removed after the introduction of the predictor variables of purpose in life and extrinsic goals.

In summary, the consistency of purpose in life as a predictor of acceptance strategies provides support for the relationship of global meaning and meaning making processes in the meaning making model. The extrinsic goals variable added to the predictive value for resigning acceptance and reactance strategies.

**H3 Age**

Age was a significant predictor of volunteerism in the past twelve months. It thus appears that the influence of the various predictor variables on volunteerism could be moderated by age. In contrast, age was not a significant predictor of acceptance strategies. This supports the proposition by the present author that the influence of global meaning on meaning making processes is not dependent on age. Specifically, age was no longer a significant predictor for active acceptance once purpose in life was introduced as a predictor variable. Similarly for resigning acceptance and reactance, age was also not a significant predictor when purpose in life and extrinsic goals were introduced as predictors.

The presence of age as a moderating variable for volunteerism and not acceptance strategies suggests a few possibilities. Firstly, global meaning as a construct could include variables that represent the influence of age. Beliefs are not measured in the present study although Park (2010) suggested that they form one of the components of global meaning. In this context, beliefs include one’s self-views of justice and benevolence (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). In the functional theory of volunteerism (Clary et al., 1998), the function of one’s volunteer work varies for oneself. The values function is a measure of one’s altruism and humanitarian motives for volunteer work and was found to be one of the differentiators of volunteers and non-volunteers (Clary et al., 1996). Perhaps the inclusion of a measure of beliefs in global meaning could contribute to the measure of the values function in volunteerism and reduce the moderating effect of age. Secondly, volunteerism may not be a proxy for meaning made and age might therefore be a moderator of the effects of the representations for global meaning. Thirdly, this characteristic is specific for the sample used in the present research. Fourthly, the survey items measuring volunteerism may not represent the construct of volunteerism sufficiently. For example, volunteer work may have been made compulsory instead of being freely chosen during the secondary school and junior college years of the younger participants. Stukas, Snyder and Clary (1999) reported that students who had a lower intention to volunteer but were required to volunteer by institutionalized programs had lower future intention to volunteer. Since older participants are more likely to be given the freedom to choose their volunteer work compared with younger students, it could account for the differences in volunteer behaviour by age. The nature of volunteer work could also differ substantially (Piercy et al., 2011). For example, volunteering for fund raising activities compared with activities at a home for the elderly could require a substantive difference in motivation for the volunteer work. More demanding volunteer work may be needed to activate the influence of purpose in life, goals and R/S.

The present author speculates that the inclusion of measures of beliefs as a component of global meaning together with additional details on volunteerism could account for the influence of age on volunteerism.

**Implications for Clinical Research and Practice**

The present study provides empirical support for possible measures of the constructs in the meaning making model (Park, 2010). Specific profiles of purpose of life, goals, and R/S predicted volunteerism behaviours and acceptance strategies providing empirical support for the validity of the predictors to represent the global meaning construct.
The results from the present study suggest that extrinsic and intrinsic goals and R/S could be important influences of volunteer behaviour. Together with the information on the influence of age and gender, the profile of extrinsic and intrinsic goals and R/S could be used to improve recruitment of suitable candidates for volunteer work.

The results also support the use of vignettes as a viable research vehicle. The present research used simple, single-stage vignettes. Future studies could use multi-stage vignettes (Finch, 1987) to simulate the various stages of hypothetical events.

The predictability of the acceptance strategies applied in unchangeable life events by global meaning could be of value to the psychotherapy of clients. Purpose in life predicted acceptance strategies. In addition, extrinsic goals are also a significant predictor of resigning acceptance and reactance strategies. Hence, the predictor measures of purpose in life and extrinsic goals may help in the case formulation, prognosis, and tracking of progress of therapeutic changes. Inventories of the predictors could be used at intake assessments to determine the likely acceptance styles of the clients. This information could be used to help in the analysis of the difficulties faced by the clients. Interventions could be designed to focus on the deficits in meaning of life and goal setting to improve acceptance strategies and reduce maladaptive strategies. The same inventories could be used to track progress of the interventions. Furthermore, as a preventive initiative, public education on the meaning making model could help the community become better prepared and equipped to handle possible unchangeable life events. The consistency of the acceptance strategies across all ages suggests that it is never too early to share these concepts. Meaning of life need not be a concept only for older people but is also applicable to adolescents.

Limitations

Past studies involved participants from Western cultures (e.g. Park, 2008; Schnell, 2010). In contrast, the participants for the present study were mainly of Chinese ethnicity, from Singapore and Malaysia. Cultural differences could arise from participants in other countries with predominantly Western-oriented cultures but the findings detailed important information about this Asian sample.

Despite attempts to recruit a reasonably representative sample, the gender distribution of the participants does not represent the general population. The significance of gender as a predictor of the outcome measures could be influenced by the uneven gender distribution in the sample.

While the specific results of the present study may be questioned because of the limitations in the present design, the objective of the study as an initial step in the study of the meaning making model and to guide future research in this area is met.

Future studies could consider alternative scales that are not collinear with the Daily Spiritual Experiences Scales to improve the measure of R/S. For example, future studies should also collect information on valence of beliefs and prayers and evaluate its impact (Lysne & Wahholtz, 2011). The 35-item Aspiration Index (Kasser & Ryan, 1993) could improve the measure of goals in future studies. The trade-off between the briefness of the scale used in the present study compared with the more detailed items in the Aspiration Index should be evaluated.

In the present study, volunteerism was used as a proxy for meaning made. However, this may not be a comprehensive view. Future studies should include other measures for the construct of meaning made. For example, either perceptions of growth or positive life changes (Park, 2010) could be a good measure of meaning made. This is in line with theories on posttraumatic growth (Janoff-Bulman 2004). Alternatively, a more comprehensive perspective of volunteerism could be gathered by gathering information about the specific functions of volunteerism (Clary et al., 1998).

The results from the analysis of volunteerism also suggest the benefits of the inclusion of a measure of beliefs as a component of global meaning, in line with Park’s model. A possible scale for the measure of beliefs is the World Assumptions Scale (Janoff-Bulman, 1989).

In the present study, the vignettes depicted scenarios that were not overly distressing. Future studies could evaluate the use of more drastic events. In addition, the sequence of vignettes could be used to evaluate the meaning making process. To further the investigation of acceptance approaches, scales that are more central to ACT, such as the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (Hayes et al., 2004) could be used. These scales could overcome the possible weakness in the use of the acceptance strategies in Nakamura and Orth (2005).

Conclusion

The present study is but a small step in understanding and finding empirical support for the meaning making model (Park, 2010). The results from the study suggest that from a foundation of strong purpose in life, intrinsic goals, and R/S,
one is in a better position to grow from negative life events. Together with volunteerism that encourages one to have an outward looking perspective in life, values in oneself could be developed and reinforced, further strengthening one’s abilities to face negative events in life. In short, knowing the why would help one to find ways to the how, even in the face of suffering. Frankl’s gems of wisdom for living a meaningful life remain a constant guide (Frankl, 2004).

References


Attitudes of College Students Towards Purpose in Life and Self-Esteem

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Abstract

The Purpose in Life Test and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale were utilized to assess the importance of purpose in life and self-esteem of students at two private universities in the northeast United States. One private institution was composed entirely of graduate students and is secular while the other is religiously affiliated and has both undergraduate and graduate programs. While undergraduates scored significantly higher on the items of self-esteem, they scored significantly lower on purpose in life. Both undergraduates and graduate students, however, rated purpose in life as very important in their lives. The results of this study have implications for college and university counselors regarding the importance of promoting life meaning in counseling relationships.

Since the 1990’s, numerous articles addressing the pressing needs of 21st century college students have appeared in the literature on higher education. More recent studies have focused on critical aspects of college students’ attitudes, particularly the construct of developing a meaningful philosophy of life (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010; Gorsuch & Miller, 1999). Numerous constructs related to life meaning have also been studied, such as spirituality and religious orientation (Astin et al., 2010). While a meaningful philosophy of life can be related both to religiosity and spirituality, it may also be separate from spiritual practices. Nevertheless, psychotherapists such as Frankl (1969; 1997), and researchers such as (Astin et al., 2010; Schulenberg, Baczwaski, & Buchanan, 2013), and Wong (2012b) among others, have written extensively on the important value of meaning and purpose in a healthy life, from both a secular, developmental model (Chickering & Reeser, 1993) and a spiritual perspective (Frankl, 1969; 1997; Kwee, 2012).

Frankl (1967; 1997) theorized that having a purpose in life was needed to achieve meaningful life goals and live a fulfilling and worthwhile life. Absence of a clear purpose in life humans may seek to fill the emptiness in their lives with distractions and peripheral concerns, contributing to poor psychological health. A client’s inability to develop purpose in life may lead to what Frankl (1969) termed the existential vacuum, which can result in depression, anxiety, and addiction. According to Frankl (1969; 1997), developing a strong purpose in life should be the primary goal in counseling. Frankl called his approach Logotherapy or therapy through meaning. Frankl stated that “…in the final analysis there is no situation that does not contain within it the seed of meaning” (Frankl, 1997, p. 53). Frankl furthermore stated that all of his clients who progressed in therapy had found or rediscovered a strong sense of meaning and purpose in their lives (Frankl, 1969). Thus, to Frankl, assessing and instilling purpose in life in clients is a critical function for any counselor in any counseling encounter.

Although the issue of over diagnoses of mental disorders (Much & Swenson, 2010) is still hotly debated, recent research on college students has suggested incident rates of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse are high (Gallagher, 2011; Kay & Schwartz, 2011; Levine & Dean, 2012). Purpose in life and meaning in life have been found to be the mediating factors against depression and suicide (Harlow, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1986; Lightsey & Boyraz, 2011; Schulenberg, Baczwaski, Buchanan, 2013). Purpose in life and meaning in life have also been linked to greater academic success (Chickering & Reeser, 1993; Dalton, & Crosby, 2010; Greenway, 2005) and with overall satisfaction of the college experience (Chickering & Reeser, 1993; Schluckbier, 2013).

Self-Esteem

Like purpose in life, the study of self-esteem is also essential in counseling research because healthy self-esteem has been positively correlated with lower depression, decreased stress levels (Beck, Brown, Steer, Kukyen, & Grisham, 2001; Heisel & Flett, 2004; Rosenberg, 1965; 1989) as well as a decrease in suicidal thoughts (Beck et al., 2001; Granello &...
Granello, 2007). Self-esteem is defined as an individual’s set of thoughts and feelings about her or his own worth and importance and a global positive or negative attitude towards oneself (Beck et al., 2001; Rosenberg, 1965). Self-esteem is significantly correlated with lower depression and higher personal satisfaction (Beck et al., 2001; Rosenberg, 1965) and greater purpose in life (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; 1967). Thus, self-esteem is also an important attribute to assess and reinforce with counseling college students, adults, and any other population. Naturally, unrealistic self-esteem has also been shown to have detrimental effects (Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012; Szymanska, 2010) and such caution should be noted in any study. Our study focused on the more traditional, previously mentioned positive attributes of self-esteem that provide a buffer against depression, anxiety, and the existential vacuum.

Purpose in Life

Frankl (1969; 1997) theorized the search for meaning was the primary motivational force in human existence, but according to Yalom (1980) life may not have a specific purpose in and of itself. Rather, purpose in life is subjective and may depend on the particular individual, personal circumstances, and life experiences (Frankl, 1969). More recently, Morgan and Farsides (2009) asserted that meaning in life might be more important and more complex than indicated in previous studies. Purpose in life may be influenced through discovering creativity within oneself, helping others, political activity, spirituality, science, creative artistry, etc. Inability to find meaning in life may lead to an existential vacuum experienced through boredom, indifference, and anxiety that are likely to inhibit personal fulfillment. Detachment from meaning may also result in the pursuit of illicit pleasures (e.g., drug abuse, risky sexual behavior, or problem gambling) in order to manufacture some sense of excitement to escape from boredom (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; 1967; Heisel & Flett, 2004).

Meaning in life has been defined as “coherence and purpose in one’s existence, and the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals” (Reker & Wong, 1988; p. 221). Further, purpose in life has also been highly correlated with meaning in life (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). Meaning in life has been correlated with emotional well-being (Lightsey & Boyraz, 2011; Schulenberg, et al., 2013) and a concept of critical importance to the human condition (Wong, 2012a b). Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964) developed the Purpose in Life (PIL) test in the mid 1960’s as an attitude scale based on Frankl’s concept of the existential vacuum. In the present study, we used Crumbaugh and Maholick’s PIL test to assess undergraduate and graduate student’s responses to purpose in life. Various studies have used this measure to investigate connections between substance abuse and purpose in life, quite consistently showing significantly lower levels of purpose in life among substance abusers when compared to normative control groups (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964).

The Current Study

Given that numerous researchers have demonstrated the importance of constructs such as self-esteem (Beck et al., 2001; Rosenberg, 1965; 1989), life meaning (Frankl, 1997), and purpose in life (Crumbaugh, 1968), as positive attributes that aid in human resiliency, we decided to study how these positive attributes might be manifest in a sample college population. Research on college students suggests incident rates of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse are high (Gallagher, 2011; Kay & Schwartz, 2011 Levine & Dean, 2012). Furthermore, students who attempt suicide score also high in areas of depression, anxiety, and abuse of substances (Gallagher, 2011; Kay & Schwartz, 2010).

One of the largest annual studies of incoming college freshmen has for more than two decades posed a question on “Developing a meaningful philosophy of life” (Astin et al., 2011). Roughly twenty-thousand students each year fill out this survey. Astin and colleagues have been researching meaning in life among college students for over 20 years and increasingly students have cited life meaning as important. A 2010 study published in the Journal of the American College Health Association reported optimism, health values and religiousness were positively correlated with greater psychological health, well-being, and less distress (Burris, Brechting, Salsman, & Carlson, 2009). Given the importance of meaning and purpose among college students with respect to their well-being, this is the main focus of our present research.

In addition, we recruited both undergraduate and graduate level students, so that a comparison between these two groups could be made. We also looked at demographic variables (i.e., age, ethnicity, marital status, and religiosity) of participants across the constructs. Our hypotheses was that purpose in life, as measured by the PIL test, would be very important to students in our survey and that graduate students who are generally older and more experienced would evidence higher scores on both purpose in life and self-esteem. For the purposes of this research, the RSES was paired with the Purpose in Life test in order to compare self-esteem to PIL within the college populations being surveyed. Given the
established importance of developing purpose in life as a countermeasure against depression, anxiety, and substance abuse, this research study has as its primary goal the assessing current college students’ purpose in life and the related construct of self-esteem. We hypothesized that purpose in life was important to college students and that PIL is related to self-esteem.

Method

Participants

The total sample for this study included 497 participants from the two institutions in the Northeastern part of the United States, one a private, secular all graduate university and the second, a Catholic affiliated institution composed both of undergraduate and graduate students. These particular institutions were selected as the authors work at both. The survey was sent out via Survey Monkey through the two institution’s listservs to students in the College of Education at the Catholic university and the entire student population at the secular university. Though using the listserv is efficient, a response rate cannot be determined. Approximations, based on number of students on the listserves, are 1500 sent surveys, for an estimated response rate of just above 30%.

Participant demographics are as follows: 77.7% (n = 386) female and 20.5% (n = 102) male, with the majority of respondents describing themselves as Caucasian (87.7%, n = 436) and the other participants identifying as African American (1.8%, n = 9), Asian American (1.8%, n = 9), Hispanic (1.6%, n = 8), Multi-ethnic (3.2%, n = 16), and American Indian (0.6%, n = 3). Respondents ranged in age from 18 years to 46 years, with the majority of participants between 18 – 21 years (47.1%, n = 231), followed by those over the age of 25 (31.2%, n = 153), and 22 - 25 years (21.6%, n = 106). The sample included both currently enrolled undergraduate college students (n = 287) and graduate students (n = 210). Of the undergraduate students, 61 were freshman, 55 were sophomores, 80 were juniors, and 81 were seniors.

A demographic questionnaire provided the researchers with personal information about their participants such as participant’s marital status, religious, and spiritual practices. Of the sample, most identified as single (73.6%, n = 366), followed by married (20.9%, n = 104), and divorced (3.4%, n = 17). When asked about religious practice, participants were evenly split between those who did identify as religious (40.2%, n = 200) and those who were not religious (40.4%, n = 201). Sixteen and one-half percent (n = 82) indicated that they were not sure whether they identified as religious. A little over half of participants (52.9%, n = 263) had a spiritual practice (defined as meditation, prayer, or contemplation), while 37% (n = 184) did not, and 8.2% (n = 41) reported they were not sure.

Instruments

The Purpose in Life Test. The Purpose in Life (PIL) (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1968) test was developed to assess Frankl’s theory (1969) that the primary aspiration of people is to develop a purpose in life. The authors selected the PIL for the study because the test directly assesses purpose in life. The instrument is designed to measure the extent by which respondents evaluate themselves as having a purpose in life. The PIL consists of 20 open-ended statements, each having 7 graded possible answers in a Likert scale format measuring the extent of one’s meaning and purpose in life (Crumbaugh, 1968). Higher scores indicate a stronger degree of purpose in life. Split-half reliability for the PIL was found to be high (0.90), and test-retest coefficients were found to be sufficient (0.83 by Meier and Edwards (1974) and 0.79 by Reker and Cousins (1979). PIL has convergent validity with several questionnaires (e.g., r= 0.68 with Frankl’s questionnaire, r = 0.33 with the Kuder preference scale, r = 0.32 with Rotter’s internal-external locus of control scale; reported in Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1981).

Self-Esteem. Another construct related to purpose in life and psychological health is that of self-esteem. The study of self-esteem is important in counseling research because it has been associated with psychological well-being and is inversely correlated with depression (Beck et al., 2001; Rosenberg, 1989; Sanchez & Baron, 2003). One of the most extensively used instruments to assess self-esteem is the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965; 1989). Self-esteem is defined as an individual’s set of thoughts and feelings about her or his own worth and importance (Rosenberg, 1965). The RSES is a one-dimensional instrument derived from a phenomenological conception of self-esteem that captures subjects’ global perception of their own worth by means of a 10-item scale, 5 positively worded items and 5 negatively worded items. The RSES was designed as a Gutman Scale, though is almost exclusively scored as a Likert-type scale. The 10 items are answered on a four point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Rosenberg, 1989). The original sample for which the scale was developed consisted of 5,024 high school juniors and seniors from randomly selected schools in New York State. Although younger than the authors’ study of college students, purpose in life appears very important to both populations (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Rosenberg, 1989), and many of the undergraduates in
the authors’ study would be close in age to high school juniors and seniors. The RSES generally reports high reliability, test-retest scores typically in the range of .82 - .88 and Cronbach’s alpha for various samples are in the range of .77 to .88 (Rosenberg, 1989).

Procedure

After approval from both institutions’ Institutional Review Board, potential participants were invited to respond to the survey via electronic mail. The email had a link to the survey, which was housed at a commercial online site for electronic survey research. To collect the sample, students were contacted via departmental list serves, and permission to use list serves was granted from departmental chairpersons.

Results

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the how purpose in life and self-esteem were manifested in the lives of undergraduate and graduate students in two Private, northeastern universities, one secular and the other religiously affiliated. The results on the RSES and PIL confirmed our hypothesis that purpose in life and self-esteem would be established as significant by the collegiate population studied.

The hypothesis that purpose in life would be strongly correlated with self-esteem was also confirmed (p < .001). There was a significant (p < .001) negative correlation (F= -.537) between purpose in life and self-esteem due to reverse scoring on the PIL instrument. Interestingly, there was a significant difference reported between undergraduates and graduate students on the variables self-esteem and purpose in life. An independent samples t-test (t = 2.97) found a significant difference between graduate (M = 15.98, SD = 4.27) and undergraduate students (M = 17.37, SD = 5.53) on self-esteem. Undergraduates reported higher self-esteem. For purpose in life, an independent samples t-test (t = 4.16) revealed a significant difference (p < .001) between graduate and undergraduate students. Graduate students (M = 101.3, SD = 21.61) had higher scores on purpose in life than undergraduates (M = 90.84, SD = 31.41).

Self-esteem and purpose in life also were examined as they related to age of participants. The sub groups by age who completed the self-esteem inventory included ages 18 - 21 (n = 225), ages 22 - 25 (n = 101) and over 25 (n = 149) for a total of 475. The sub groups for purpose in life consisted of ages 18 - 21 (n = 231), ages 22 - 25 (n = 106) and over 25 (n = 153) for a total of 490. ANOVA tests indicated that there was a significant difference (p < .01) among the ages for both self-esteem (F = 5.80) and Purpose in Life (F = 5.64). A post hoc Scheffe test indicated that for self-esteem there was a significant (p < .01) difference between groups ages 18 to 21 and the group ages 22 to 25, but no significant difference between the groups ages 18 to 21 and those over 25. Also, there was no significant difference between ages 22 to 25 and those over 25. A post hoc Scheffe test indicated that for purpose in life there was a significant (p < .01) difference between ages 18 to 21 and ages 22 to 25, and a significant difference (p < .01) between ages 18 to 21 and over 25. There was no significant difference between ages 22 to 25 and those over 25.

In order to compare factors across the two types of institutions, secular and religiously affiliated, a number of tests were used. To examine the self-esteem and purpose in life of the participants, according to institution, an independent sample t-test was used. Because Levine’s Test (F=7.59, p< .001) indicated that the variances between the two groups were significantly unequal, the results of the t-test assuming inequality of variance was used.

There was a significant difference in the mean score for purpose in life between students at the two institutions. The mean score of graduate, non-religiously affiliated students on purpose in life was 100.69, compared to 94.48 of the mean of students at the religiously affiliated institution students (see Table 1). Independent samples t-test (t = 2.642, df = 359) was found to be significant (p < .01) with an assumption of unequal variances (see Table 2).

Age

There was no significant difference (p >.05) between the two institutions on the variable self-esteem, according to age. However, an ANOVA found a significant difference (p <.05) among the ages on the PIL, but a Scheffe was inconclusive in determining whether the difference was due to a small sample size for some of the age groups. This finding lends support to the possibility that the difference is perhaps due to undergraduate versus graduate students.
Ethnicity

With regard to self-esteem there was no significant (p > .05) difference among ethnic groups. However, with regard to purpose in life, there was a significant difference (p < .001) among the ethnic groups among students at the two institutions. A post hoc Scheffe test revealed that the only significant difference was between those who failed to identify their ethnicity.

Marital Status

There was no significant difference based on marital status for self-esteem, however there was a significant (p < .001) difference on purpose in life. Subsequent post hoc Scheffe test revealed that the difference was between those who failed to identify their marital status and those who did not.

Religion

Again, there was no significant difference for self-esteem, but a difference (p < .001) for purpose in life. A Scheffe test revealed that the difference was between those who answered the demographic question on religion and those who did not.

Discussion and Implications for Counselors

The survey results indicated that purpose in life was important to the undergraduate and graduate students in this study. The results also suggested a strong correlation between purpose in life and self-esteem, and thus the research hypothesis was supported and the null hypothesis is rejected. The survey results provided some support to Astin, Astin, and Lindholm’s (2011) findings that meaning in life is very important to college students.

In view of the above, our recommendation is for college and university counselors to promote purpose in life among the students they counsel. Purpose in life could be promoted through journaling, homework exercises, service projects, bibliotherapy, and simply discussing the topic in counseling sessions (e.g., “How is purpose/meaning present in your life?” or “How could you begin to develop stronger purpose/meaning in your life?”).

Until recently there has been very little reported in the college counseling literature regarding purpose in life. It is our opinion that counselors serving the collegiate population should address existential issues such as purpose in life as frequently as depression, anxiety, or career concerns. A further recommendation we might glean from this and other studies (Astin & Astin, 2009; Frankl, 1969; Troutman, Nies & Bently, 2011) is to include a question on purpose in life in clinical intakes so as to gauge the relative presence or absence of the construct in students’ lives.

Self-esteem has long been a significant factor in optimal mental health and positive self-esteem serves as a countermeasure against depression (Rosenberg, 1965; 1989) and it is the opinion of these researchers that college counselors would be wise to assess it. Undergraduate students scored significantly higher on self-esteem but report significantly lower scores on purpose in life than graduate students surveyed. These confounding results may be explained in that undergraduate students may have unrealistically high self-esteem given less life experience than their graduate student colleagues. Graduate students’ lower self-esteem may be mitigated by higher expectations and tougher competitions in Graduate studies. They also reported a higher sense of purpose in life than undergraduates, because they might have a better idea regarding their future career than undergraduates.

Counselors working with undergraduate and graduate college students might use this information to inform their practice, and ask these groups about factors such as self esteem and purpose in life at intake, or throughout the counseling relationship. Once assessed, counselors could assign homework such as journaling, cognitive restructuring regarding life purpose, or simply asking students, “What brings meaning to your life?” Further, results from this study indicated some differences in self esteem between particular age groups. Students aged 18-25 and 22-25 were significantly different, and counselors might consider this when working with these particular aged college students.

The cautionary note of unrealistic self-esteem in college students as researched by Twenge, Campbell, and Gentile (2012) and Szymanska (2010) warrant more attention. Because undergraduates in our study scored higher in self-esteem than the graduate student population, yet were lower in purpose in life, questions should be raised regarding the “negative” construct of self-esteem. Although self-esteem usually has been associated with positive mental health (Beck, et al., 2001; Rosenberg, 1989; 1965), unrealistic self-esteem associated with less life experience or based on topical issues popularity, appearance (e.g., weight, dress, etc.) and the like may be counter to optimal mental health (Szymanska, 2010; Twenge,
Campbell, & Gentile, 2012). College and university counselors should address what self-esteem in their student clients is based upon (e.g., own personal values vs. what peers think).

Finally, because spirituality and religious values also have a strong relationship to purpose and meaning in life (Astin et al., 2010; Frankl, 1969), college and university counselors should engage students who identify as religious or spiritual in a discussion on the importance of the client’s spiritual practice and how that practice enhances their personal life and helps them manage depression, anxiety and personal disappointment. The issue is not for the counselor to play a spiritual role, but rather to help the client explore how their personal beliefs and spiritual values can enhance their sense of life purpose, provide a buffer against depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation and make for a more meaningful collegiate experience.

Limitations and Future Research

Because the sample size for this study was limited to two small, private universities in the Northeast United States, a limitation of the study is the degree to which these results may be generalized to the general population. In addition, undergraduate and graduate students may differ on self-esteem and purpose in life particularly if there is a wide age gap between such groups. Further research is needed to confirm the results beyond small, private college students. Additionally, the research relied on data that was self-reported, which is susceptible to social desirability response bias. The research was cross sectional in design, and future research using longitudinal designs might explore more deeply how the constructs of self-esteem and purpose in life change after several sessions of counseling. Further, qualitative study into the essence behind self esteem and purpose in life with college students might help capture the experience of this sample and lead researchers to a more in depth understanding of these notions, and thus providing information for mental health and college counselors. Despite the study’s shortcomings, the present research offers important information for counselors working in colleges across the United States.

Conclusion

This study on purpose in life and self-esteem has highlighted the importance of these constructs in a sample of college students. The survey also illustrates a strong positive relationship between purpose in life and self-esteem in a sample of college students. Previous research has established purpose in life serves an important buffer against depression (Beck et al., 2001; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1967; 1968) and college and university counselors should assist college students in exploring purpose in life as a means for pursuing optimal mental health, while promoting realistic self-esteem for similar reasons. As this study was limited to two private institutions in the Northeast United States, further study of broader collegiate populations is warranted.

References


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**Table 1.** Purpose in life of religiously affiliated and non-religiously affiliated graduate and undergraduate students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>SEM</th>
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<tr>
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<td>1.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GradUnderRel</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>94.5</td>
<td>28.13</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. GradNon = graduate, non-religiously affiliated institution. GradUnderRel = graduate and undergraduate, religiously affiliated institution

**Table 2.** Purpose in life of religiously affiliated and non-religiously affiliated graduate and undergraduate students

*Independent Samples t test*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EqualVar</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>DF</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.59</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>487</td>
</tr>
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</table>

| NonEqualVar | 2.64* | 359 |

A Patient Specific Approach to Chronic Pain: Development of the Pain-Filter Extension Model and the SH-9TF-P Questionnaire

Christopher A. Cooper*
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Abstract

The complex effects of chronic pain on well-being and quality of cognition were investigated in a clinical setting with a patient-centered value-based insight approach. Preliminary results were presented for development of a self-report instrument, the Subjective Happiness - 9 True/False - Pain (SH-9TF-P) questionnaire for patient specific analyses of chronic pain and structured treatment in a time-limited setting. A review of the literature indicates that thoughts provoked by long standing pain are negatively affected by cognitive processing that operates outside of full conscious awareness, and therefore have influences on an overall level of functioning. This article reports the assessment and treatment developed from the Pain Filter Extension Model. A conceptualization is offered for ways of interpreting a Pain-Role Identity. Outcomes for value added processing are not directly or consciously available to the individual, but are indicated by greater levels of subjective well-being and improved functional levels of cognitive distortion.

Chronic pain is estimated to affect up to 40% of people, and for approximately half of those individuals there are no definite organic causes (Kraaimaat & Evers, 2003). Pain is a dynamic, conflicting, and complex physiological and psychological experience, ranging from acute episodes to chronic disease (Bertakis, Azari, & Callahan, 2004; Cano & Leonard, 2006; Cooper, 2008; Smith & Osborn, 2007). Pain is fundamentally threatening, interruptive, and aversive, and interferes with everyday tasks of life. Furthermore, it provokes an important concept of interest; identity confusion (Van Dammea, Crombez, & Eccleston, 2008). Chronic pain also creates difficulty for understanding how people struggle to make sense of unwanted, stressful experiences, and how they avoid, adapt, or alter the perceived causes of those experiences (Van Damme, Crombez, & Eccleston, 2008).

Since approximately twenty percent of our population is under medical care for pain conditions without an acknowledged cause or origin, decisions of treatment course and medication choice are difficult. Research indicates a need for clearer diagnoses of pain conditions where there is a lack of objective medical criteria. Of the complex determining factors involved in treatment outcomes, catastrophizing appears to be the strongest psychological predictor (Sullivan, Lynch, Clark, Mankovsky, & Sawynok, 2008).

In deciding what represents clinically important improvement, the patient’s experience of pain for understanding the indications is necessary in conjunction with the medical interpretations. In a dynamic manner, pain and its consequences are intrinsically subjective and influenced greatly by a person’s mood, previous pain experience, and coping resources. Our understanding of pain is still deficient in understanding why the extraordinary complexity associated with long-standing pain presents limitations for satisfactory treatment. Success depends on both clinicians’ and patients’ interpretive criteria (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Robinson et al 2005), where the patient’s interpretation is of primary importance. In this research, the goal was to investigate coping with chronic pain by recasting it within the frameworks of cognition, life goals, and self-concept, in relation to a subjective sense of well-being.

Specifically this research compares three distinct patient groups with normal control subjects on standardized measures of subjective happiness, cognitive distortion and pain level rating using a questionnaire and interviews. The SH-9TF-P questionnaire was developed for pain patients referred by medical doctors, with specific attention to the time limited nature of psychological interventions. The questionnaire is an easily administered one page assessment tool that indicates relationships between measures of subjective happiness ratings and cognitive distortions with relevant correlation regarding levels of pain. Assessment supports an effective approach that is more process oriented and based on functional and contextual frameworks.

Literature Review

Cognitive perspectives generally accept that changing cognitions has a corresponding impact on emotional reaction and symptomatic perception. Research indicates two common misappraisals associated with chronic pain:
overestimating the likelihood of a negative event occurring, and catastrophizing the consequences of a negative event should it occur (Moses & Barlow, 2006). Current pain literature indicates the importance of the connections between alteration of comprehensive and accessible thoughts, but how such alterations affect functional behaviour are unclear. A point of importance is that in a cognitive model for emotional disorders, the skills learned by the patient are used prior to emotional provocation whereas chronic pain is both prominent and continuous.

The task of clearly perceiving pain depends on both selecting and enriching sensory information. Accurate identification of the quality of somatic sensation is fundamentally difficult due to primacy of subjective interpretation. As such, it is a focus of disinterest to the biomedical approach, where at a basic level of current standards for pain assessment, inquiry elicits a response on a numerical scale indicating the extent to which pain is experienced and allows for an adjective description of the quality and location (i.e. burning, pressure, etc.). Whereby, the biomedical model facilitates differentiation of pain pathologies. Qualities and levels are subsequently monitored and diagnoses made accordingly; however, it does not address the thought processes associated with the pain experience or functional behaviour associated with cognitive distortion.

Regardless of pain types, McCracken and Gross (1998) reported more chronic pain patients in psychologically based multidisciplinary rehabilitation programs returned to work and saw doctors less frequently than patients in programs which focused primarily on physical strengthening and capacity. The understanding is that patients having participated in psychologically based programs progressed better; however the question remains as to what component of these effective treatments was responsible for the improvement. Research suggests that the primary factor is not a reduction or change in pain level, nor a change in physical capacity due to strengthening. Rather, it is psychological processes such as fear, anxiety, or depression, in relation to the patient’s current overall state of being. For example, McCracken et al (2007) reported that when pain patients’ fear of their situation is effectively reduced, their quality of life increases.

Other factors that have been correlated with positive treatment outcomes are patients’ satisfaction with the treatment, their understanding of it, and seeing positive outcome measures (McCracken et al, 2002). The finding that patient satisfaction with overall care received is a strong predictor of treatment outcome measures indicates that at some level of processing, appraisal dictates the level of success of patient outcomes. However, this processing seems initially to occur at a non-conscious level, affecting core beliefs, as well as at the conscious level of cognitive evaluation where core beliefs are accessible (See Figures 1 and 2). Since the experience of pain is to some degree a psychological representation, it will be modified by cognitive appraisal.
The foundations guiding the current research are in the processes whereby experiential factors mediate the physical symptoms of pain over extended periods. This is the process that formulates individuals’ conscious definitions, which are not easily placed on a continuum of physical to experiential. A state of abnormality exists when patients do not recognise accurate meaning for themselves, and therefore are not able to communicate potentially important understandings with whom they interact. The result is often a state characterized by catastrophic thinking where a sense of helplessness and distress-amplifying thoughts prevail.

This pattern, a response to the somatic component of chronic pain, contributes greatly to behavioural deficit. Catastrophic thought affects patient functioning not only passively through content and frequency (Vowles, McCracken, & Eccleston, 2008), but more importantly by a context that has a potential of increasing the amount of pain one may be experiencing. Patients experiencing longstanding pain reported increases and decreases in pain, based on the extent of activity limitations that were initially dictated by pain levels. In some cases, this occurs even when association with a specific activity creates anticipation of a pain level. People in a dysfunctional pain state can become depressed, inactive, and preoccupied with physical symptoms (Compas, Haaga, Keefe, Leitenberg, & Williams, 1998). When a patient’s incorrect interpretation of physical sensation is that it is presently, or will be harmful if the current activity level is maintained, a dysfunctional chronic pain state exists. Vowles et al. (2008) indicated such a disruption in behaviour and thought is likely to interfere with other potential influences on behaviour and thus limit response choices.

As it is not apparent to what extent and respect fear of pain causes deviation from a psychological norm, a framework encompassing severe health anxiety has been useful in directing this research. The emphasis is on fear being activated and maintained by misinterpretations of somatic symptoms. In fact, earlier data indicates that there are no unique differences in the physiological responses of pain and anxiety (Keefe & Gil, 1986). As psychological factors play a prominent role in the transition from acute pain to disabling chronic pain conditions (Laekeman, Sitter, & Basler, 2008; Turk & Burwinkle, 2005), differences in how people adjust cognitively to continuous and noxious sensation are of importance.

Stewart, Sherry, Watt, Grant, & Hadjistavropoulos, (2008) conclude that regardless of theoretical perspective, four essential components for understanding anxiety as related to health, and therefore pain, may be considered. First is the affective component, consisting of fear over the somatic sensation of pain. The second and third respectively are the cognitive component that realizes a pain condition with a lack of objective criteria, and a preoccupation with bodily symptoms. Lastly is the behavioural component that involves bodily checking and reassurance seeking. Accordingly, fear of pain develops that is context dependent in the early phase, and serves to direct attentional focus (Stewart et al, 2008) leading to a generalized sense when the pain experience is chronic.

Stewart et al (2008) indicate that anxiety sensitivity would be the most appropriate cognitive behavioural approach to the treatment of conditions involving elevated health anxiety. Studies among adult pain patients suggest that coping styles like withdrawal, fear, worrying, and catastrophizing are associated with poorer outcomes such as increased psychological distress and decreased physical functioning (Kraaimaat & Evers, 2003). When pain is interpreted as threatening, pain related fear will likely develop (Roelofs et al, 2004), and be more disabling than the pain itself (Laekeman et al, 2008). This pattern supports a negative view of self and maintains chronic disability, disuse, and depression. Both depression and disuse are associated with decreasing pain tolerance and therefore promote the painful experience, increasing the cycle of fear and avoidance (Cooper, 2008).

Other research has highlighted additional cognitive factors that are central for understanding the process of pain such as rumination (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006), magnification and helplessness (D’Eon et al., 2004), catastrophic thinking, depression, anxiety (McCracken et al, 2008; Soares & Grossi, 2000) meaning and chaos (Bullington et al, 2003). From these, one can derive that what is needed is a way to investigate how patients with chronic pain concretely live and understand their specific life-world situations (Bullington et al, 2003).

Research in the area of pain catastrophizing has focused specifically upon the three principle factors of rumination, magnification, and helplessness (D’Eon, Harris, & Ellis, 2004). Pain, like other areas where mood-states can be affected by environmental and situational criteria, appears to be an area in which people have strong mood-related beliefs that are not entirely accurate. Therefore, the extent to which people have insight into what makes their moods fluctuate is of great importance (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Watson, 2000). This would require ones’ questioning the validity of held beliefs in order to be more accurate of their reality. From a clinical sense, this addresses the question of how fear of pain develops for the individual.
Behavioural deficit is a key factor associated with pain conditions, which are often interpreted as symptoms of emotional difficulty, especially when they create hardship for close others (Cooper, 2008). Whether or not behaviour is considered normal or symptomatic of disorder depends on the theoretical perspective from which it is considered. Categorizing behaviour as symptomatic of a disorder involves a complex set of criteria. Presently, there are no known studies that look at patients’ flexibility in formulating pain problems. Remarkable examples are illustrated by reports of patients with cancer that initially present with only psychological symptoms. The symptom-disease model is useful here because organic pathologies can exist, and may eventually be verified independently of psychological symptoms.

In contrast, psychological pathologies simply represent hypothetical abstraction from behavioural phenomena. For example, a model of misdirected problem solving positions pain behaviour as part of a class of phobic behaviours (Eccleston & Crombez, 2007). Of interest to pain research is the higher apparent incidence of pain symptoms in a psychopathological population, as compared to pain in general populations (Birket-Smith & Mortensen, 2002; Block, personal communications, 2009). Other research has indicated that the number of pain conditions or pain sites was a risk factor for psychiatric disturbance in pain patients (Linder, Poston II, Haddock, Foreyt, & Ericsson, 2000). Consistent with the Stress-Pain hypothesis presented by Keefe and Gil (1986), here it is possible to hypothesize that a clear understanding of
an individual’s principles of learning will account for interpretation of their physical state; an explanation in terms of physical symptoms would be complimentary. As with any illness or disorder, informing a patient that they have symptoms not fully accountable by physical aetiology is not likely to alleviate the symptoms, however, may be a necessary component in the process of healing. Bullington et al (2003) refer to this as the first step in moving from chaos to meaning. A self-relevant understanding of pain is important for the patient’s successful integration of body and self (Afrell et al, 2007).

Several articles have suggested the importance of considering the concept of self and identity in relation to pain (Leeuw, Goossens, Linton, Crombez, Boersma, & Vlaeyen, 2007) and identify this as a needed focus of study (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Conceptualization of a pain-role identity helps determine the degree to which behavioural deficits interfere with a person’s normal behaviour. Chronic pain has the potential to change an individual’s concept of self and their experience (Afrell et al., 2007). Jackson (2005) noted that certain features of chronic pain result in the sufferer being seen to breach the categorical division between mind and body and confound the codes of morality surrounding sickness and health. As chronic pain is not a typical developmental component, people are not likely to have the appropriate behavioural skills to deal effectively with their physical state. Pain results in learned deficiencies in many aspects, resulting in a performance deficit due to reciprocal aversive conditioning and improper self-guided learning.

Cause becomes elusive as symptomatic behaviour can be explained in terms of social learning and value-based theory equally, as by medical analogy. Any focus toward hypothetical internal forces allows for theories of psychopathology to influence the way we understand the pain experience when viewed from the individual history of maladaptive behaviour. Such theory is called upon when there is clear evidence that psychosocial risk factors play a role in pain symptoms, when emotional changes accompany severe chronic pain, and when the goal for therapy is long-term adaptation to pain as well as symptom relief (Compas, Haaga, Keefe, Leitenberg, & Williams, 1998).

**Pain-Role Identity**

Stable complex patterns of behaviour are in part transmitted through observation of role models. As pain behaviour is often reproached, good role models may not communicate their pain behaviours as such. Pain is the condition that elicits the pain-role, not alleviating pain directly; however, the role is the means for having pain responses validated by important others. With constant high pain, it is common that awareness be directed by the pain sensation rather than non-pain standards. A self-aware person may vary the extent to which they respond or act according to their socially sanctioned personal standards and beliefs or to their pain affect. Constant pain is an experience in which the sufferer increasingly recognizes their previously accepted self; whereby thoughts, memories, and emotions express the perception of pain. Consequently, inadequate modeling and insufficient and poorly managed reinforcements are likely to produce a pattern of behavioural deficits. Kut *et al.* (2007) reported that modulation of self-perceived role identity in emotionally meaningful settings may greatly contribute to a beneficial influence on pain management.

An individual pain-role is based in cultural standards, or accepted characteristics of being in a pain state. It is then a result of the complex interlocking set of beliefs which make up a person’s self-concept or personal identity. The degree of matching between the pain-role standard of the culture and the individual’s assessment of his or her own pain-role identity attends to the question of how much pain they are experiencing.

The strength of the pain-role identity is considered a function of the discrepancy between the personal inventories made of their own pain-typed attributes in relation to the ideal attributes prescribed by society. A positive self-identity is maintained by having more culturally approved attributes; the discrepancy is smaller, and conversely a negative image results from a wider gap between ideal and actual attributes possessed. This author’s research supports this, as indicated by greater variation between subjective well-being and errors in thought, or cognitive distortion. Research (i.e., Rusu & Hasenburg, 2008; Vowles, McCracken, and O’Brian, 2011) indicates significant differences between pain groups in variables such as positive mood and thought suppression. Here, the understanding is that while thought suppression is at work disabling one from activity, thoughts that are active have more to do with locus of control and errors in thought that are not related to pain, but show to be correlated with and influence pain experience. A greater discrepancy between personal and ideal attributes makes the pain-role identity more vulnerable as self-concept shapes itself accordingly. Positive reinforcement leads to a functional/adaptive self-concept with less variability in the self-ideal discrepancy.

This understanding of the self-ideal discrepancy has been used as a theoretical framework for gaining better understanding for the roles of cognitive and motivational processes in well-being. For example, Conway and Giannopoulos’ (1992) replication of earlier research reported that people less aware of their own thoughts and feelings have lower self-esteem but are more self-reflective in general. Here, it is suggested that greater self-reflectiveness is due to unrealistic self-understanding. Their research indicated that lower self-esteem is associated with greater self-reflectiveness.
and that self-reflectiveness and internal-state awareness are correlated. Furthermore, both self-esteem and self-reflectiveness have significant correlational values with depression (Conway and Giannopoulos, 1992).

Muraven (2005) reported that for depressed individuals there is a relative inflexibility of attentional resources that seems to explain their poorer cognitive performance. Accordingly, people who are depressed use less information and ineffectively integrate what information they have when making decisions. This is thought to result from a reduced ability to shift focus of attention to external matters as easily as when not depressed (Knapp & Deluty, 1987; Conway & Giannopoulos, 1992). This model applied to chronic pain patients suggests that they would have the same attentional resources as normals; however, due to their pain more attention is spent thinking about self-related criteria. In addition, difficulty re-focusing attentional resources to other relevant information consequently reinforces their maladaptive pattern of thought. Furthermore, individuals who cannot stop thinking about themselves are more likely to engage in catastrophic thinking and behaviour as self-awareness is likely to be more avoidance based or aversive when individuals cannot stop being self-aware (Muraven, 2005), thereby adversely effecting self-concept and role identity.

Soares and Grossi (2000) reported that the relationship between pain intensity and self-esteem is to some extent importantly mediated by levels of emotional distress as measured by The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), where self-esteem alone had little to do with pain intensity. A recent cross ethnic study reported findings consistent with the biopsychosocial model in that both distress and pain are positively interrelated, and are both positive independent indicators of disability (Edwards, Moric, Husfeldt, Buvanendran, and Ivanovich, 2005). As chronic pain disability has high correlation with reduced self-esteem, this understanding has important implication for the present research as both self-esteem and pain have strong mediating effects on a person’s sense of well-being. Lyubomirsky, Tkach, and DiMatteo (2006) reported that a sense of satisfaction in life and not suffering from pain were strong predictors of self-esteem among populations who felt optimistic, sociable, being in a good mood, and feeling satisfied with life, which were also predictors of happiness. They indicate further that research has shown high correlations for happiness and self-esteem, however, they point out that their findings support the understanding that happiness and high self-esteem can exist independently.

This suggests that low self-esteem by itself is not a strong predictor of chronic pain. Rather, the physical state of chronic pain produces the reduced self-esteem, independent of personality characteristics, that is contributory to a disabling chronic pain state. Bullington et al. (2003) concluded that chronic pain patients suffer from an experience of chaotic disintegration; a disorientation that leads to a problematic sense of self. A person’s developmental history as a characterization of their current self-concept in the context of pain may be a function of their cognitive distortions and catastrophizing behaviour as related to pain and the values associated with these processes.

In summary, cognitive change has a corresponding impact on both emotional and physiological presentation. Misappraisal, catastrophizing, and then rumination appear to be important mediating factors related to problematic cognitions. Better outcomes in this regard reduce the negative impact of pain when there are no physical changes that can account for such improvement.

**The Current Research**

This research compares patients with normal control subjects on standardized measures of subjective happiness, cognitive distortion and pain level rating using a questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire SH-9TF-P is a short, 14-item measurement consisting of 4 subjective happiness questions scaled for a mean from zero to seven, 9 true/false that indicate types of cognitive distortion, and a 0-10 pain scale. The cognitive distortions component of the questionnaire assesses dichotomized thinking, locus of control, rumination, and helplessness, in a language juxtaposed to a sense of self in the first person. In the current research, pain patients’ subjective happiness ratings and cognitive distortions have high negative correlation. Findings here are supported by other current research, for example Vowles and McCracken (2008) report that therapeutic approaches that are being developed are more process oriented and based on functional and contextual frameworks. In addition, information from pain subjects on their experience of pain was collected using semi structured interviews based on the subject’s responses to the questionnaire.

**Hypotheses**

Three main hypotheses were examined in the present research to address pain levels, subjective happiness, and cognitive distortion. Firstly, it was hypothesized that for a general population, a normal distribution for both happiness ratings (SHS) and cognitive distortions (CD) would be observed; additionally, a positive correlation was expected between SHS and CD.
Secondly, compared to the young adult normal population, it was hypothesized there would be different levels of subjective happiness and cognitive distortion for the pain group, the senior pain group, and for senior normals. Differences and directions were expected to vary in relation to age, gender, and pain levels. Here, it was hypothesized that for these three groups combined, there may be an inverse curve where the proportion of CD scores would be slightly higher at both ends of the distribution. More specifically, it was hypothesized that the young pain group would score significantly lower on SHS in relation to pain scores and higher on CD than the other groups of subjects. The senior normal group, as compared to the normal population, was hypothesized to have a similar SHS and lower overall CD rating. It was expected that the senior pain group would indicate lower SHS than normals, but not significant differences in CD.

Lastly, influence due to amount of pain was predicted to be small if significant for the entire pain group, but some significant differences between subjects were expected. It was expected that the time related to being in pain would have more of an impact than the actual pain level on both SHS and CD. However, for the senior pain group, it was hypothesized that pain would affect SHS, with less influence on CD than the young pain group.

Methods

Participants

Four different groups were used for a combined sample \( N = 500 \), 61% female, with a mean age of 34. The first group consisted of normal subjects, \( n = 278 \), selected through a snowballing procedure by 64 university students taking a 6 credit psychology course in an international setting in Estonia. This was a culturally diverse sample, with most subjects being from Estonia, ethnic Russian Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, and Finland, and less frequently from Sweden, France, Germany, Canada, and Great Britain. Ages ranged from 20 to 35 with a mean of 26, and this sample was 51% female.

The second group was senior normals, \( n = 63 \), 82% female with a mean age of 68. This sample was derived from seniors who were taking continuing education courses in a university setting. Subjects were not told that the questionnaire would be used for pain research until after completing it.

The third and fourth groups were patients presenting with pain at primary medical care facilities who, when asked by a general practitioner if they would like to take part in a chronic pain study, volunteered to be interviewed and fill out the questionnaire. It is only the age that separates this sample into two groups. The third part of this sample, \( n = 30 \), made up the senior pain group with a mean age of 62 (range from 48 to 77), and this group was 93% female. The fourth group is the young pain group, \( n = 130 \), with a mean age of 29 (range from 21-39), and were 66% female. All patients in the pain groups either had been diagnosed with depression, or scored 14 or higher on the Beck Depression Inventory II (English, oral administration).

Instrumentation: Development of the SH-9TF-P

The Subjective Happiness Scale, 9 True/False, Pain Questionnaire (SH-9TF-P) was initially used as a short form assessment tool for chronic pain patients limited to approximately five days stay in a health clinic/hotel catering to medical tourists. The first section of the questionnaire is a four part subjective happiness scale developed by Lyubomirsky and used with permission. Lyubomirsky (2001) discussed the role of cognitive and motivational processes in well-being and highlighted the implications of a construal approach for its enhancement. Use of this scale in pain research is promising as cognitive and motivational processes are of importance for understanding the experience of chronic pain. Winefield and Chur-Hansen (2004) indicated that this is especially important for people with undiagnosable physical symptoms. However, ways of accessing the cognitive factors that are important have still evaded pain researchers and are not addressed by the subjective happiness scale alone.

This understanding led to the use of short true and false questions thought to identify cognitive distortions; the hypothesis being in an ideal situation, all responses would be false indicating the person has no cognitive distortions or thinking errors. Furthermore, the true/false questions chosen were discussed as being potential core beliefs for rumination, locus of control, and dichotomized thinking, and combinations thereof could be interpreted as indicating helplessness, magnification, depression, and anxiety while allowing a quick insight to and foundation for interview questions of how a person interprets, interacts with, and understands their life-world situation. The last part of the questionnaire is the 0 to 10 pain scale often referred to as the numerical rating scale (NRS).

After the basic concept of the questionnaire was formed, presentation with a thorough theoretical orientation was given to a class of psychology students as a course project. Questions for the cognitive distortion part were discussed in full
detail for exhaustive possible individual and combined meanings and then either rejected or accepted for use. First drafts of
the questionnaire that included the SHS portion were administered twice to $n = 50$ people within the university setting
(assuming normality) and results analyzed; data for CD indicated slightly skewed distributions for CD and an SHS
comparable to data provided by Lyubomirsky. Several questions were removed from the CD portion as a result and some
changes to wordings of others finalized the version as it was used in this research. The questionnaire was presented to
several professional psychologists and a number of psychology faculty members for discussion of content and implication
of use. Translations were then made into respective native languages of the students involved in the project and
independently reversed translated for accuracy check. Students were then instructed on how to administer the questionnaire
to general populations and sent out to collect data from 5 to 8 personal contacts. Data were returned to the author within a
two-week period and the results discussed. CD counts indicated a close to standard normal distribution and SHS means
were again comparable to what would be expected from previous research of the SHS in English and translated versions for
normal populations.

Procedure

Data collection for this research began in the early part of 2004. For the general population, subjects were asked to
answer the questions and return it to the person administering it. Pain scores were not taken from this group. Pain samples
were collected from patients in primary medical facilities after they were asked if they would take part in chronic pain
research. Subjects were asked to answer the questions and instructed to mark the number on the scale that correlated to the
level of all pain being experienced at the present time. Collection for the pain sample continued over a three year period.
Interviews were conducted in English and if a translated version was available, questionnaires were administered in the
patient’s native language by this researcher. Some pain and general population sample data were also collected by
correspondence from cooperating faculty and general practitioners using the English and Estonian language versions.

Statistical Analysis: Tests of Hypotheses

A description of participants using a data set cross-tabulation for sex differences indicated males were
overrepresented for the general population, underrepresented for the senior normals and senior pain groups, but did not
differ significantly from female representation in the young pain group (Adjusted Residual 5.5, -3.7, -3.7, and -1.4
respectively, $p < 0.0001$). The combined sample means for SHS were not significantly different (female $M = 4.5, p < 0.06$,
males $M = 4.9, p < 0.08$) nor for CD (female $M = 3.74, p < 0.097$, male $M = 3.9, p < 0.13$); however, both were higher for
male subjects. One way ANOVA confirmed the first hypothesis, indicating a relatively standard normal distribution for the
general population on both SHS and CD scores; SHS $M = 5.18 (SD = .91)$, CD $M = 4.04 (SD = 1.65)$. Furthermore, a
Pearson two-tailed test revealed a significant, but small correlation between SHS means and CD means ($r = .15, p < 0.05$).

The second hypothesis of comparing the general population for significant differences in levels of SHS and CD to
the young pain group and the senior pain group was confirmed. For senior normal’s as compared to the general population
there was no significant difference in SHS as predicted, however, inconsistent with the hypothesis, the difference between
the general population and senior normal’s on CD was not significant at the $p < 0.05$, although the difference was in the
direction predicted ($p < 0.31$). There was a significant difference in SHS means of .67, ($p < 0.05$) between the general
population and senior pain group.

The general population and the young pain group indicated large significant differences in SHS means of 1.65, ($p < 0.0001$)
and CD means of 1.24, ($p < 0.0001$). In sum, the young pain group has a significantly lower SHS mean than the
general population, senior normals, and senior pain group. However, the young pain group had a significantly greater CD
value (lower CD mean) than the general population, senior normals, and senior pain group.

It was also hypothesized with the entire population as SHS increased, so would CD, which was supported by the
data. Pearson two-tailed test revealed a significant correlation between SHS means and CD means ($r = 0.36, p < 0.01$). In
addition, there is a positive correlation between CD means and age ($r = 0.17, p < 0.01$). A positive correlation here indicates
that with age, CD value decreases.

For pain scores, as expected there was a significant negative correlation between pain scores and age ($r = -0.21, p
< 0.01$), quite a large negative correlation between SHS means and pain score means ($r = -0.58, p < 0.01$), and a negative
correlation ($r = -0.28, p < 0.01$) for pain and CD means, which indicates cognitive distortion responses increase as pain
increases. Note: CD means are scored inversely to CD value. With pain score as the dependent variable for comparisons
across groups using a Tukey HSD Multiple Comparisons One-way ANOVA procedure, significant differences were
indicated between all three groups from whom pain data were collected. Age and pain are reliable indicators for higher levels of CD and lower SHS. One-way ANOVA indicated an F ratio of $F = 5.12$ ($p < 0.001$), for the difference between CD means for each group: the young pain group ($M = 7.21$, $SD = 1.55$) is higher than the general population ($M = 5.96$, $SD = 1.65$), senior normals ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 1.75$), and senior pain subjects ($M = 5.3$, $SD = 1.70$) (all $p < 0.001$).

Correlations between groups reveal some predicted information, as well as providing further insight on the complexity of a pain population that warrant additional research with this instrument. More specifically, comparison of the correlations between the general population (gp) and the young pain (yp) groups indicate relevant findings in regard to CD on several specific items on the SH-9TF-P: gp indicated significantly less than yp that ‘other people’s behaviour is wrong’ when related to the concept of slander ($gp$ $r = -0.25$, $p < 0.001$; $yp$ $r = 0.15$, $p < 0.001$). Significant correlations also show far more often that yp indicate ‘other people make them unhappy’ in relation to slander, inconsiderateness, and fault of the other person, and that the yp group is far more unhappy in relation to ‘not getting what they want’. In addition, and as predicted, far more of the yp group also indicate higher CD for both rumination questions: thinking about things they do not have control over and contemplating a lot about the past. Yp indicate significantly more than gp that it is other people’s fault that their feelings are hurt, thus indicating less responsibility for their own emotional states.

**Discussion**

This is the first use known to this author of a first person subjective well-being approach for assessing and treatment planning of chronic pain patients. Findings suggest this instrument offers an alternative way of specificity and depth of psychological assessment emphasizing the complexity of chronic pain problems as related to self for multidimensional assessment and treatment. The SH-9TF-P indicates clear usefulness with chronic pain patients, unlike many personality specific psychological measures that have been used. The question is not about whether chronic pain patients have psychological problems in dealing with their situation, but where and how they affect the individual’s way of reconnecting with self and world in a changed complex physiological and existential experience.

That which is of importance is a clearer view of the foundations for catastrophic thought or depression for example, and how they are maintained, prolonged, and or increased. Results from this research indicate that this questionnaire reveals criteria of interest for dealing with individual patients in a chronic pain setting and is therefore worthy of further development. However, given the subjectivity of pain indicated by combinations of response types, caution should be used in generalizing findings from this research to a larger pain population without further validation.

Within an interdisciplinary biopsychosocial perspective, psychological interventions are directed at the way pain is experienced by the individual (Gonzales, Martelli, & Baker, 2000). This includes the feelings and thoughts associated with it as well as psychophysiological changes that accompany it; for example, muscle tension due to stress and fear reactions relevant to pain. Pain is considered the more pronounced, the more it affects the mental processes and behaviour of the affected person. For this, the following factors are of importance: duration, number of treatments/doctor visits, psychological impairment, family and social problems, and work related problems (Frischenschlager & Pucher, 2002).

In this research, pain is understood as an unconditioned stimulus that leads to a conditioned response. Through value processing (see Figures 1 and 2), any subjective stimulus that would otherwise be neutral may become associated with the complex experience of pain and the consequent reactions are a conditioned pain response. Afrell *et al.* (2007) reported that the body is our access to the world and every change of the body, such as through illness or injury, changes our experience of the world. Due to the complexity and the associated physiological responses that become connected to the pain role identity, the assessment and treatment of chronic pain are complex and multidimensional. For understanding how meaning controls pain, further understanding of how the body is an aspect of self-identity, affected by the extent to which we can rely on the body, our awareness of body, and the quality of the perceptive flow from it (Afrell *et al.*, 2007). The perception of the information coming from the body is filtered through understandings. Research on the use of analgesics for example, has shown that negative affect such as depressive symptoms and catastrophizing reduce their effectiveness on pain (Sullivan, Lynch, Clark, Mankovsky, & Sawynok, 2008). The findings of a great deal of research indicate that people with chronic pain relate in individual ways to their body.

The present research understands that chronic pain sufferers exhibiting higher levels and complex combinations of psychological distress and maladaptive cognitions must be approached more so from a novel individual perspective. Here, as this research has shown individual differences in pain subjects highlight specific areas of potential intervention. Direction of treatment is dictated by cognitive distortion and, thought content and processes that are related to them. Depth of treatment goals are dictated by SHS and CD values, and higher pain levels. Effective treatments are those that induce a
state of possibility by directing the patient into greater potential for beneficial change from a perspective that is patient specific. This is supported by research, for example Vowles, McCracken, and O’Brien’s (2011) findings that as a patient’s fear of their pain is reduced their life-world situation begins to improve.

As this research was not based on a random clinical trial, it can be largely understood that a level of heterogeneity exists as with patient samples that typically present in clinical practice. Diversity among patients is expected in populations accessed by health care for psychological interventions, as they are not usually identified on the basis of DSM-IV criteria (Compas, Haaga, Keefe, Leitenberg, & Williams, 1998). Data collected from heterogeneous samples as used here also highlights the need to identify subgroups of patients that may differ in their response to specific psychological treatments and suggests an important role of self-perceived role identity, and its associated emotional status, on pain perception. Furthermore, the concept of acceptance is not highlighted in this research directly; rather, with chronic pain it is understood as a consequential desired result based more in re-evaluating (Vowles & McCracken, 2008), for example life goals and creating greater meaning and understanding of a sense of self. Hence the concept of value added processing: greater and more applicable understanding of the complexities of physical limitations in a realistic sense as it pertains to one’s life-world situation. Afrell et al. (2007) clearly iterate how a patient stands in relation to acceptance is reflected in their attitude toward their life situation and the degree to which their pain body is integrated into the self. Therefore, acceptance is a central concept for dealing with pain; however, there is not one straightforward process that people take to achieve it. Accordingly, the integration of the pain body into the self is a necessary component of acceptance (Afrell et al, 2007).

Somewhat interesting were the findings that empirically, there do seem to be clusters of CD responses observed in each of these groups. One of the more interesting findings is that when comparing the overall highest and overall lowest levels of CD, on a number of variables there were no significant between group correlations, but within groups there were ranges in both directions with significant interactions with SHS. From a phenomenological perspective of the individual, different combinations of responses indicate different levels and categories of subjective distress.

Results from this study are consistent with other research that associate avoidant strategies and pain (Gonzales, Martelli, & Baker, 2000) and for avoidance strategies to be associated with greater difficulties in light of internal versus external personal focus (McCracken et al. 2007). Findings also support previous research that chronic pain patients have a lower sense of responsibility for personal change and look outward for that responsibility (Karlin et al, 2005). And finally, they are consistent with other research supporting the need for more flexible cognitive strategies for coping to increase adjustment to chronic pain (e.g., Dahl et al. 2004; De Vlieger et al. 2006; Grossi, Soares, & Lundberg, 2000; McCracken et al. 2004, 2005).

For pain patients, results here show that certain combinations of responses are indicative of more careful clinical scrutiny, especially when controlling for depression. For pain patients, subjective happiness ratings and cognitive distortions have a high negative correlation. Pain data compared respectively to that of known community levels and for pain patient levels, which is clinically useful indicators. These results strongly suggest that there are distinct patterns of responding in each group of subjects, and that an appreciation of these differences can lead to a deeper understanding of pain management for individuals in the clinical setting.

References


### Appendix A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Not a very happy person</th>
<th>More happy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>A very happy person</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. In general, I consider myself:

Not a very happy person | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | A very happy person

2. Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself:

Less happy | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | More happy
3. Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>A great deal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4. Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>A great deal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Answer the following questions True or False. Spend little time on each question.

- True    False – I sometimes think other people’s behavior is wrong.
- True    False – I have been known to say, “That is the way I am.”
- True    False – Other people often make me unhappy.
- True    False – Often times I find myself thinking about something I do not have control over.
- True    False – I tend to think and contemplate a lot about the past.
- True    False – Often times my feelings are hurt by other people’s inconsiderateness.
- True    False – It is a healthy response to feel wounded by slander.
- True    False – It is other people’s fault that they hurt my feelings; they should change.
- True    False – When I do not get what I want, I often get unhappy.

If ‘0’ is no pain and ‘10’ is the most pain you’ve ever experienced, rate your pain now

| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |

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The Practice of Personal Meaning Cultivation

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Abstract
This article explores Franklian psychology as it relates to personal meaning and mindfulness practice. Meaning cultivation is seen as a principle outcome of mindfulness practice, and happiness is seen as an organic experience that emerges from meaningful living. Recommendations for clinicians are discussed, with mindfulness presented as a meaning-based intervention that holistically addresses both meaning through doing and meaning through being. The article concludes with questions for further inquiry.

The Practice of Personal Meaning Cultivation

We Just Want to Be Happy
A quick peruse of the self-help section of any book store will prove that people today are obsessed with finding happiness. Today’s Western wisdom teachers, such as Sharon Salzberg (2011), are teaching that happiness is not a switch that you can simply turn on and off. Rather, the attainment of happiness involves a moment-by-moment practice of paying attention, also called mindfulness practice. Salzberg’s book Real Happiness provides an excellent primer to mindfulness practice. Research has provided evidence which links mindfulness and happiness.

Hollis-Walker & Colosimo (2011) demonstrated that there is relationship between mindfulness and psychologically adaptive variables, such as happiness, though self-compassion is a crucial attitudinal factor to get from mindfulness to happiness. A study by Choi, Karremans & Barendregt (2012) showed the people who practice mindfulness are perceived as being happier than people who do not. There is also anecdotal evidence, such as an article by Amy Gross (2012) entitled, “Your Brain on Happiness,” which provides further qualitative data for the link between practice and happiness.

The Meaning Behind Mindfulness
Through first-hand mindfulness practice experience of this author and instructive clinical texts, such as Segal, Williams & Teasdale’s (2002), the function of mindfulness practice can be seen as a combination of awareness, acceptance, self-distancing, and compassion. We will see in the continuation of this article how Viktor Frankl’s (1962; 1973) understanding of personal meaning is at the core of these functions of mindfulness practice with its potential to point towards happiness. It is the cultivation of meaning through mindfulness that creates the potential for happiness.

The first step of mindfulness practice is paying attention to and learning to accept one’s own internal and external world. In the most basic practice, one sits and tracks each breath with their attention. If one stays present one will notice that the awareness naturally shifts to the thoughts and feelings that are part of the individual’s mental sensations. These mental sensations occur automatically and the individual understands that what arises is basically automatic. One can accept the thought or feeling that presents itself and it will quite naturally pass. Thus, one will learn that awareness and acceptance are the stance of least resistance to moving through difficult memories, emotions, and critical evaluations.

With awareness and acceptance one will come to know the Franklian concept of self-distancing (Graber, 2004). An individual cannot be simply reduced to their feelings, thoughts, and actions because mindfulness teaches us that these three facets of our humanness can simply arrive and retreat much like waves breaking on the shore and then flowing back out to sea with the tide. The ability to self-distance is the key ingredient in Frankl’s idea of realizing the noetic, or spiritual self (Frankl, 1972). The noetic self is the level of the individual that is connected to freedom. It allows us to choose an attitude of meaning even when all other access points to meaning have failed. Thus, mindfulness not only cultivates awareness and acceptance, but allows a practitioner to discover their spirit.

According to Frankl, and similarly seen in mindfulness practice, when a person learns self-distancing and connects with their spirit they become more compassionate and embrace responsibility as the most authentic expression of this newfound freedom. As practitioners learn that they are at the mercy of their thoughts and feelings, they understand that so is everyone else. From this insight, compassion arises. With compassion one learns one’s most basic freedom – to respond with wisdom, rather than react briskly, towards another. Freedom is not simply doing whatever one wants to do. Rather,
freedom is seen in the choice to interact with the world in a way that demonstrates one’s core values, in other words, to respond with a meaningful attitude. This brings us full circle back to Salzberg’s (2011) emphasis that happiness cannot be directly pursued. In the exploration presented in this article, meaning can be cultivated through mindfulness practice. Delle Fave, Brdar, Freire, Vella-Brodrick & Wissing (2011) provided empirical evidence that meaning leads to happiness, and below is a survey of research which point to the link between meaning and mindfulness.

Empirical evidence for the meaning-mindfulness link

Sealy (2012) showed how breast cancer patients cultivate meaning through meditation. Jacobs, et al. (2011) reported that mediation retreat participants experienced greater purpose in life, which resulted in longer term cellular viability. Pruett, Nishimura & Priest (2007) demonstrated how mindfulness practice can aid people in recovery by helping them experience life as more meaningful. Thus, one can work towards meaning cultivation through mindfulness practice which may organically lead to greater happiness.

Recommendation for Clinicians

As seen in Bellin (2013), meaning can be created and discovered in what we do (meaning through doing) and in who we are (meaning through being). Therapists are challenged to come up with creatively unique meaning interventions for clients who might struggle with meaninglessness and other noögenic pathologies. Mindfulness practice is a valuable practice that deserves more attention as a meaningful based clinical intervention. As seen from the exploration above, mindfulness engages both doing and being modalities of the individual, as it relates to the themes of compassion, choice, and freedom. It can also be tailored to an individual lifestyle and situation as the practice of paying attention, moment-to-moment can be done while sitting, walking, eating, communicating, or during any creative activity.

Next Steps and Conclusion

Moving forward from this preliminary exploration, a next step would be to directly explore, through empirical and qualitative inquiry, the following questions: How does mindfulness practice impact the experience of personal meaning? How is meaning cultivated from mindfulness practice different and similar from meaning experienced through other modalities? How can we further understand and make use of the natural emergence of happiness from meaning? These questions would benefit the clinicians’ work and also the daily experience of clients who are searching for more happiness in their lives. Further research is needed to answer these empirical and practical questions.

In conclusion, the search for happiness seems futile. A more promising venture is the cultivation of meaning through mindfulness practice that can organically blossom into a happier lived experience. Clinicians can benefit in exploring mindfulness as an intervention for clients who struggle with meaning and/or happiness. Given the relationship between mindfulness, meaning, and happiness, further research into the relationship between the three seems warranted.

References


www.existentialpsychology.org
Unearthing the Humanistic Predilection of Daseinsanalysis

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been renewed interest among the mental health professions in the principles of humanism. This rekindled discourse can be supplemented by an examination of the existential-phenomenological psychotherapy approach known as daseinsanalysis, as primarily influenced by the works of Martin Heidegger and Medard Boss. Daseinsanalysis complements humanistic values while providing a sophisticated philosophical scheme to frame the human way of being. The authors provide a brief explication of humanistic philosophy and daseinsanalysis, particularly as each are consistent in informing psychotherapeutic practitioners.

Unearthing the Humanistic Predilection of Daseinsanalysis

Using poetry to illuminate the human experience, the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976 AD) offered the following lines: “The world’s darkening never reaches to the light of Being. We are too late for the gods and too early for Being. Being’s poem, just begun, is man” (2001a, p. 4). Man, for Heidegger (1927/1996), is best understood through the concept of Dasein, which means the self as extant in the world. This idea is a hallmark of the existential movement and, by extension, rests at the foundation of meaning-making by humanists.

Heidegger was concerned with the manner in which the self as Dasein operates in the world - what are the givens of human existence? To translate Heidegger’s Dasein into operations for psychotherapeutic activities, Medard Boss (1903 – 1990 AD) appropriated Heidegger’s philosophy into a brand of existential-phenomenological psychotherapy known as daseinsanalysis. It may be helpful for practitioners to view the structure of daseinsanalysis as providing a gestalt switch, much in the same way as described by Kuhn (1962), whereby the therapist undergoes a holistic perceptual shift in his or her worldview. The daseinsanalytic view as put forth by this article can help facilitate such a paradigmatic change in the way a practitioner views the process of therapy.

In order to make Heidegger’s (1927/1996) ideas applicable to therapy, Boss (1963) appropriated what were originally ontological structures into ontic givens. As a result, the authors caution against reducing the ideas of Heidegger’s philosophy into mere talking points between a therapist and client. In fact, Boss (1963) recognized the difficulty of making Heidegger’s ideas practical. Boss recommended that psychotherapists interested in this approach first understand how the different elements of daseinsanalysis work together to create a holistic picture of the way individuals are embedded in the world.

Humans’ intrinsic absorption in the world is echoed by the philosophical system known as humanism which became formalized in the middle of the twentieth century. Both humanism and daseinsanalysis share many of the same postulates regarding the human condition.

Humanism as Philosophical Ally to Daseinsanalysis

While contemporary humanism emerged in the middle of the twentieth century (Hansen, 2010), it was largely overshadowed by the natural sciences in terms of positivism, objectivism, and medicalization, in part, because humanistic theory objected to a natural science vision of human nature. As Toulmin (1990) argued, the natural sciences advanced during the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries when an engaged way of knowing shifted to detachment that emphasized abstraction and universality. Generally, the philosophical dualism of Descartes is credited with facilitating the wide acceptance of the natural sciences as the established arbiter of truth (Toulmin, 1990).
The scientific worldview remained more or less the reigning discourse until the middle of the twentieth century when the Third Force of psychology arrived, which was known as humanism and was led partly by Abraham Maslow, Rollo May, and Carl Rogers (cf., Malsow, 1962/1999; May, 1967; Rogers, 1989). While securing an understanding of what this Third Force meant presents a challenge, the authors of this article find helpful a recent definition of humanism as put forth by Schneider and Längle:

Humanism is a philosophical perspective whose subject matter is the whole human being. Humanism is concerned with such existential themes as meaning, mortality, freedom, limitation, values, creativity, and spirituality as these arise in personal, interpersonal, social, and cultural contexts. In psychotherapy humanism places special emphasis on the personal, interpersonal, and contextual dimensions of therapy and on clients’ reflections on their relationship with self, others, and the larger psychosocial world. (Schneider & Längle, 2012a, p. 428)

The holistic and philosophical perspective, the exploration of existential themes, the giveness of cultural-social facticity, and the fostering of personal reflection demonstrate that the spirit of humanism is alive and well in the daseinsanalytic approach to psychotherapy. Even though daseinsanalysis is typically considered an existential-phenomenological approach, it considerably overlaps the humanist tradition.

Moreover, it is important to note that all psychotherapies share tenets that may loosely be called humanistic (Wampold, 2012). Schneider and Längle (2012b) have argued that humanism is a foundational element of therapeutic effectiveness, that humanistic practice principles are a salient dimension of therapeutic training, and that the humanistic treatment philosophy is an important contributor to social well-being. Daseinsanalysis fits into this framework of humanistic psychotherapies.

**The Humanistic Renewal**

In recent years, many scholars have noted that the mental health professions have begun to revisit the ideas of humanism (Elkins, 2009; Hansen, 2005, 2010). This is a result, in part, from the postmodern turn. According to Hansen (2000, 2005), postmodern ideas have created new trends and alternative methodologies allowing psychotherapists to revisit their humanistic foundation.

Postmodernists questioned the assumptions of logical positivism, objectivistic science, and medicalization as certain areas of psychology and counseling decentered from a polarized, singular perspective and moved toward a multiple perspective discourse (Savickas, 1993). Mental health culture has traditionally been dominated by reductive ideologies such as diagnosis, psychopharmacology, and empirically supported treatment movements (Hansen, 2003; 2010). The pendulum, however, has started to swing back in the direction of humanistic principles.

Bekerman and Tatar (2005) reviewed abstracts published in three major academic journals that inform the practice of psychotherapy and discovered an incremental interest in alternative methodologies allowing psychotherapists to revisit their humanistic foundation.

Wickwire (2000) believed that these changes stem, in part, from a reaction to the information-knowledge-service era. He believed that the existential-experiential-spiritual era is beginning.

Authors, such as Dawes (1994) and Hansen (2004), have found that newer forms of psychotherapy are based on the shift to postmodern ideas. This has resulted in a flurry of theoretical formulations and practice innovations (Xu, 2010), which, in many ways, has brought areas of psychology and counseling back to their beginnings in humanistic thought and philosophy (Hansen, 2005). Elkins (2009) has argued that there are strong indications in the mental health literature of a renewed interest in humanism, and this interest is robust and growing.

It is timely, then, to examine a psychotherapy, such as daseinsanalysis, that can contribute to the growing dialogue regarding the return to the humanistic roots of therapy. In fact, daseinsanalysis may be best suited to meet this challenge, since it provides a philosophical account of what makes therapy possible in the first place. Before engaging in such a dialogue, a distinction must be made between the humanism of the Third Force of psychology and the humanism of Jean Paul Sartre (1905 – 1980 AD).

**Sartrean Humanism and Humanistic Psychology**

For some, juxtaposing Heidegger and humanism in the same article is blasphemous. This problem arises from a misunderstanding regarding the kind of humanism Heidegger (1993) was referencing when he wrote his Letter on
Humanism – namely, the kind as espoused by Jean Paul Sartre. Heidegger charged Sartre with misconstruing the fundamental insights of Being and Time. For Sartre, the human being has often meant the free, choosing individual who is fundamentally created by the choices and values that he or she posits (Scott, 1975).

According to Scott (1975), Sartre’s conception of the person is a historical in that there appears no heritage to which the person is responsible. Contrariwise, Heidegger (1927/1996) examined existence not in terms of a willing ego but in terms of Dasein with Being at its ground; Dasein is thrown into the world both free and unfree. Dasein has a responsibility to its tradition just as it has a responsibility for its own death. The Sartrean version of humanism is profoundly different from the contextual and relational definition given by Schneider and Längle (2012a).

Daseinsanalysis’ complementarity to humanistic psychology is fundamentally different from the humanism of Sartre. Greening (2007) distilled Bugental’s (1964) account of humanistic psychology into five basic postulates. In the following, the authors will articulate each of the five principles of humanistic psychology while succinctly appropriating them in the language of daseinsanalysis.

5. “Human beings, as human, supersede the sum of their parts. They cannot be reduced to components” (Greening, 2007). Dasein contains irreducible philosophical structures.

6. “Human beings have their existence in a uniquely human context, as well as in a cosmic ecology” (Greening, 2007). Dasein is thrown into facticity (i.e., born into a social, cultural, and historical world).

7. “Human beings are aware and aware of being aware—i.e., they are conscious. Human consciousness always includes an awareness of oneself in the context of other people” (Greening, 2007). Dasein is the only being whose being is an issue for it, which gives it exclusive access to the ontological; Dasein is also amidst other Daseins in a shared world.

8. “Human beings have some choice and, with that, responsibility” (Greening, 2007). Although Dasein is thrown into facticity, through authenticity, Dasein can exercise choice and agency.

9. “Human beings are intentional, aim at goals, are aware that they cause future events, and seek meaning, value, and creativity” (Greening, 2007). The very nature of Dasein means that it is always engaged in projects, has foresight, and creates meaning out of its context.

The foregoing has aimed to demonstrate a sharp contrast between the humanism of Sartre and the humanism associated with the Third Force of psychology. The authors argue that the latter, humanistic psychology, is philosophically similar to the daseinsanalytic approach, the particulars of which are more clearly explicated in the following section.

### The Humanistic Elements of Practice in Daseinsanalysis

Psychotherapists using the daseinsanalytic approach ground their intentions in a philosophical understanding (Boss, 1963; Heidegger, 1987/2001b). Heidegger (1987/2001b) and Boss (1963) believed daseinsanalysis sufficiently explained the philosophical ground for the human way of being. This philosophical account takes into consideration that Dasein, a word appropriated by Heidegger (1927/1996) to replace words like self, is powerful in describing human existence. Daseinsanalysis is phenomenological because psychotherapists attend to the world of the client as the client perceives it (Boss, 1963). Primary attention is given to the sensations, perceptions, and ideations that appear in consciousness when a client focuses attention on his or her lived experience (Husserl, 1931). Daseinsanalysis is thrown into facticity (i.e., born into a social, cultural, and historical world).

The beliefs of daseinsanalysis support the goal of liberating individuals from constriction and suffering. The relationship between Being and Dasein creates a therapeutic milieu wherein psychotherapists avoid making inferences, which creates an opening allowing for what is seen and heard to present itself on its own terms. Through this relationship, a psychotherapist is able to respond to the appeal of the client to “be” himself or herself (Boss, 1988/2000). Being is difficult to operationally define because of Heidegger’s (1927/1996) belief that words close-down meaning. However, one way to look at Being is to view it as the source of all meaning – the mere wonder that there is anything at all. The fact that there is something at all, something is always revealing itself to us (Boss, 1988/2000). Daseinsanalysis can be viewed as an approach to therapy concerned with freeing individuals from a linear way of seeing choices (Boss, 1988/2000). Healthy individuals are able to enact and carry out their authentic possibilities; in other words, unhealthy individuals are blind to their potentials and bound by societal expectations and cultural norms.

Humanistic psychology would generally advocate for the same position as the aforementioned, especially in terms of the need for the therapist to be present during the therapeutic encounter, as well as taking the standard of health to be the
degree to which the client has actualized his or her potentials. However, the notion of Being for humanistic psychology is left implicit. Daseinsanalysis can provide humanistic therapy a structure so that such “existential themes as meaning, mortality, freedom, limitation, values, creativity, and spirituality” (Schneider & Längle, 2012a, p. 428) are made philosophically explicit to the psychotherapist. This may help the therapist conceptualize clients.

### Being-There and The Clearing

The term Dasein describes human existence as being-there (Boss, 1979). This term makes it clear that humans are not objects that stand alongside other objects. In other words, humans are different from inanimate objects, like hammers, and are different from animals. Heidegger (1987/2001b) believed that it is helpful to think about the kind of existence of human beings (i.e., Dasein) as a clearing (Lichtung) or a realm of openness. He used the metaphor of a clearing in the forest as a way to illustrate the nature of human existence. The darkness of the forest gives way to the openness and light of the clearing. The clearing (i.e., consciousness or awareness) provides a space where objects show themselves without preconceptions.

For Boss (1963), in contrast to a scientific approach where the self is confined within the epidermis of the body, Dasein is not necessarily confined to the body in any particular moment. Dasein stands out into the world beyond the body, extending to even the most remote thing that can be recalled, perceived, or imagined (Boss, 1988/2000). Humanistic psychology echoes the uniqueness and exceptional capacities of human beings. It also rejects the scientific reductionist view of the self while abstaining from making a claim regarding the self’s location in space and time at any particular moment (Bugental, 1964). For daseinsanalysis, the self can be anywhere, at any time, depending on the intent of the client and the parameters of his or her imagination.

### Phenomenological Approach

A therapist subscribing to the approach of daseinsanalysis is first and foremost a phenomenologist (Hall, 1968). In the spirit of Heideggerian phenomenology, the psychotherapist respects and appreciates the beings that present themselves during the therapy session — especially those that remain obscure or covered-over. Careful phenomenological attention must be given in order for beings to reveal themselves to us. This kind of phenomenology views the self as always in flux — continually recreating itself. The therapist does not try to interpret what arises during psychotherapy against a preconceived theory; nor does the therapist make mental conclusions or judgments about the client (Boss, 1963). Psychotherapy facilitates Dasein’s perpetual rebirth and becoming.

The phenomenological method of daseinsanalysis requires a therapist’s personal and theoretical assumptions to be called into question through the process of bracketing (Husserl, 1931; Scott, 1975). Instead of relying on their own assumptions, by bracketing, psychotherapists are able to return to the things themselves, to the way beings present themselves, again and again in order to grasp what is happening in the session. Because there is no hidden agenda or causal explanation for what arises during a therapy session, a psychotherapist does not look for anything in particular (Boss, 1963). Instead, the primary task of a therapy is to affirm the clearing or openness of the client in order to allow hidden phenomena to come to light. As a result, anything that comes into being during therapy is given the right to speak. In this way, daseinsanalysis is adamantly anti-theoretical in its approach to psychotherapy (Boss, 1963).

Daseinsanalysis emphasizes the quality of the therapeutic relationship in-and-of-itself and the therapist’s capacity to authentically attend to the presence of the client (Scott, 1975). In a similar way, Carl Rogers (1957), a founding member of the Third Force of humanistic psychology, insisted that the therapeutic relationship in-and-of-itself is necessary and sufficient; the interventions and techniques of the therapist are always secondary to the relationship with the client.

Daseinsanalysis does not incorporate a body of novel techniques into the therapy process (Boss, 1988/2000). From the daseinsanalytic perspective, techniques are viewed as getting in the way of what makes therapy possible—the phenomenological-attentiveness of the therapist and the intimacy of the therapeutic relationship. Techniques are replaced by a philosophical understanding of the foundations of psychotherapy and the human way of being that supports the primacy of the therapeutic relationship. That relationship is based on eight areas of understanding regarding the human condition known as the existentials.

### The Existentials

The existentials inform the therapist about the client’s phenomenological awareness. Boss (1963) believed that everyone has all of the eight existentials in common, because they are universal aspects of human existence, regardless of one’s cultural orientation. From the perspective of daseinsanalysis, a therapist uses the existentials as a guide to bring the diverse aspects of a client’s worldview into awareness (Boss, 1963).
The authors believe that humanistic psychotherapy implicitly assumes the existentials as part of the therapy process. Since all forms of psychotherapy are essentially humanistic (Wampold, 2012), it is helpful for any therapist to have a thorough understanding of the existentials – the fundamental building blocks of Dasein. The following section illustrates how a therapist could integrate the existentials into the therapeutic process.

The first existential of **spatiality** was termed the-there of Dasein by Heidegger (1927/1996). This means that closeness or remoteness is not viewed in terms of miles (Boss, 1963). Instead, existential spatiality is defined by the degree of the client's concern for something. In other words, clients can be closer to something that is across the universe from them and further away from something that brushes up against their body. For example, an individual can be removed hundreds of miles from his or her family, yet remain existentially near to them. As a result, a therapist using the approach of daseinsanalytic would be aware of and attend to the presence of an absent family since this is very much a part of the client's world.

An example of the existential of **temporality** can be illustrated through various cultures' time-orientation. For instance, Heidegger (1927/1996) worried that some cultures understand time-orientation as clock-time. He called this time the calculative, vulgar time of everyday life. He had concerns that this type of time-orientation contributed to meaninglessness. Boss (1963) believed that therapists could help clients develop meaning and self-awareness by reflecting on the client's use of time and degree of fulfillment in life. It is through this process that clients are able to make authentic choices for themselves, which are not based on clock-time.

The third existential is **openness** or, as Heidegger (1987/2001b) called it, the clearing. Spatiality and temporality, according to Boss (1963), come together to create a phenomenological awareness for the client. The clearing permits clients to experience an openness where their possibilities and potentialities come to light. Heidegger (1987/2001b) used the metaphor of coming upon the light of a clearing from the darkness of a forest to visualize the existential of openness.

**Being-with** (Mitsein) one another in a shared world is another existential. It is the way the client relates to other people in the world (Heidegger, 1927/1996). It is important for psychotherapists to pay attention to a client's perception of his or her place in the social world – the social context of his or her life. For example, a client who describes his or her partner as cruel is making a statement about his or her perception of that person. A daseinsanalytic therapist would help a client explore how this perception relates to his or her broader social world, as a result, facilitating greater self-awareness for the client (Heidegger, 1927/1996).

**Language**, another existential, greatly influences the world of the client. The kind of language that a client uses reveals aspects of the client's world. Heidegger (1927/1996) said that language has a bewitching power over Dasein. Idle talk leads Dasein down the path of falling prey to the-they (das Man) in which Dasein then loses itself; in other words, the kind of language the client uses shapes the world of the client. Clients using depressive language actually depress their world. Through the therapist and client dialogue, a psychotherapist would help a client to become aware of his or her use of words, as a result, shifting a client's perception of the world through the kind of language the client chooses to use.

The **attunement** or mood (Befindlichkeit) existential colors the client's awareness (Heidegger, 1927/1996). The mood of a client determines, in advance, how he or she will encounter the world (Boss, 1963). From this perspective, a client in love will perceive the world differently than a depressed client; a depressed client might miss the smile on someone's face, whereas a client in love would be more likely to recognize a smile in passing. Through the process of helping a client become aware of his or her mood, a therapist and client can work together to develop an alternative perception of the client's world.

According to the existential of **historicity**, clients are bound, to an extent, by historical conditions (Heidegger, 1927/1996). Clients do not always have absolute freedom to make choices because time and place dictate an embeddedness in an historical context. For example, a client dealing with an issue of spirituality must take into account that Western culture has been predominated by Christian ideology. Once clients recognize the influence that their background has on their choices, they are able to reevaluate decisions and commitments, which then contributes to a deeper sense of authenticity.

The final existential is **mortality**. Everybody dies (Heidegger, 1927/1996). Heidegger believed that because meaning is deferred until death, life is an unfinished and an incomplete project. As a result, death is threatening to clients and is a source for anxiety because there is always unfinished business. Psychotherapists' help clients come to peace and acceptance regarding their mortality. From this perspective, only when clients have an authentic relationship to death are they able to live authentic lives.
All eight of these existentials, in their own way, elucidate the themes of embeddedness, potentiality, and meaning-making, which are so much a part of humanistic psychotherapy. Consequently, practitioners may find the above helpful for making explicit the structures of the client’s world.

Existential Anxiety or Angst

Existential anxiety or Angst is the foundation upon which all of the existentials lie. Essentially, anxiety is about human existence itself. This kind of anxiety is called Angst (Heidegger, 1927/1996). When clients are in Angst, they take on a mood of uncanniness and not-being-at-home; in other words, they do not feel like themselves (Heidegger, 1927/1996). From this perspective, clients are struggling with anxiety about their existence itself – the way their life is. Angst drives clients to become who they were meant to be. Existential anxiety and guilt shed light on the possibilities for health and sickness.

Boss (1962) believed that when existential anxiety and guilt are properly understood, they have the ability to transform Dasein. Psychotherapy can transform anxiety and guilt into a form of mature openness:

The highest aim of all psychotherapy is and remains the opening up of our patients to an ability-to-love-and-trust which permits all oppression by anxiety and guilt to be surmounted as mere misunderstandings.

Such trust can and may be fitly called the most mature form of human openness. (Boss, 1962, p. 191)

It is the job of the therapist to help the client discover the transformative power of Angst; and in doing so, clients are able to live more meaningful lives. When clients discover that they have misunderstood their anxiety and guilt, they experience heightened levels of connectedness. As such, it is the therapist’s responsibility to help the clients become open to and understand their existential condition, which will lead clients to a more authentic relationship to themselves, revealing themselves to be one with their worlds and carrying-out their own potentialities for being whole, unified, and complete (Craig, 1988).

Daseinsanalysis’ emphasis on Angst as an important mode of disclosedness provides a supplement to the postulates of humanistic psychology. Existentialism, one of the traditions daseinsanalysis incorporates, tends to recognize both the negative and the positive aspects of existence (e.g., anxiety and authenticity; Wong, 2004), while humanism pays more attention to the human potential for growth (Bugental, 1964). Certainly, human flourishing is an important goal for clients. However, the daseinsanalytic approach places in the same esteem equally esteems the positive as well as the shadow sides of life and, therefore, describes a more holistic picture of human existence, which gives clients more insight in the hope of leading to greater authenticity.

Implications for Psychotherapy and Research

Over the last century, critiques on modernity have opened up innovative horizons, leading to greater acceptance of alternative views on the world and the self (Hansen, 2004). The revival of the humanistic perspective provides a balance to the scientific-reductive approaches to therapy (e.g., psychoanalysis, behaviorism, cognitive-behavioral therapy; Fishman, 1999). Daseinsanalysis is one way for humanistic psychology and psychotherapy to revisit its philosophical roots.

Therapists and researchers interested in a method similar to the approach in this article may find the following implications helpful:

1. The relationship between the therapist and the client is most important. Techniques are viewed as getting in the way of what makes psychotherapy possible (Boss, 1988/2000). Drawing upon Heidegger’s (1987/2001b) sense of the clearing, the therapist’s job is not to create or promote direction but to foster a state of open-mindedness where a client’s authentic choice can occur. This primarily happens through a trusting relationship where clients can freely verbalize their perceptions that allow them to experience a heightened awareness.

2. The therapeutic relationship is a holistic perspective made up of eight areas of understanding regarding the human condition known as the existentials (Boss, 1963). They can be viewed as pieces of a puzzle that come together to create a picture of the client’s phenomenological world.
3. The therapist is a phenomenologist and does not try to interpret what arises during therapy against a preconceived theory (Boss, 1963). The therapist does not make mental conclusions or judgments about the client and, as a result, is required to bracket his or her worldview in order to enter the world of the client.

4. Since the existentials are the same for both therapist and client, it follows that the language used by the therapist and by the client profoundly influences the outcome of psychotherapy. For instance, if a therapist uses negatively tinged words to talk about the client (e.g., depressed, anxious), those words color the therapist’s and the client’s world (Heidegger, 1927/1996). As a result, psychotherapists are encouraged to be intentional in the language they use. Since a client’s language reflects his or her relationship in the world, therapists attend to the ways clients engage in their surroundings and recognize how language reflects the perception of those surroundings.

5. The client comes to therapy with a contextual background – both historically and socially (Heidegger, 1927/1996). From the standpoint of daseinsanalysis, a client does not exist in a vacuum. As a result, it is important for therapists to help clients explore their cultural-historical context and identity as well as their social connectedness or disconnectedness to other people.

6. Anxiety about death is considered to be a form of Angst (Heidegger, 1927/1996). According to daseinsanalysis, most clients struggle with death anxiety, which is about existence itself – the way life is. Angst drives clients to become who they were meant to be. It is the job of the therapist to help the client discover the transformative power of Angst, and in doing so, clients are able to live more meaningful lives.

7. While Heidegger did not talk specifically about particular contexts such as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic class, his phenomenological view incorporated a foundation in which to look at clients from a holistic perspective that emphasizes historical and cultural embeddedness (Heidegger, 1987/2001b). As a result, cultural considerations are at the forefront of this approach, in terms of the importance of the contextual aspects of all eight existentials, including being-with, historicity, and language.

8. Daseinsanalysis can ground humanistic psychotherapy in a philosophical structure that describes the most basic elements (e.g., the existentials) of Dasein, that appear as humanistic and existential themes in therapy. By making the structures of Dasein explicit, daseinsanalysis may help a psychotherapist be better able to conceptualize clients.

**Limitations**

While daseinsanalysis’ primary contribution lies in helping clients to live more authentically through heightened awareness, it is important to recognize its limitations. A potential limitation of daseinsanalysis is its phenomenological approach (Boss, 1963); it might be viewed by practitioners and programs interested in evidenced-based outcomes as lacking in measurable quantitative data. A similar limitation of daseinsanalysis is that it does not lend itself to diagnosis because of the focus on individual fulfillment as opposed to normative adjustment.

A challenge for therapists-in-training is to not oversimplify the philosophical underpinnings of daseinsanalysis. To adequately apply this theory, therapists need to have a solid grasp of the basic postulates of phenomenology, existentialism, and humanism. While seemingly simple, Heidegger’s thought is intricate and complex (Heidegger, 1927/1996). Keeping this in mind, it is important to underscore the key role of language in paving the path towards client authenticity.

Another challenge that confronts practitioners using daseinsanalysis is the degree to which they are able to abandon their own presuppositions about the world and enter the world of the client (Scott, 1975). The process of self-reflecting in this manner is never really complete. As a result, therapists need to be mindful of their own biases and have the ability to self-monitor continually. Being attentive to these limitations will allow therapists to avoid the pitfalls of oversimplification and inspire them to seek additional preparation.

**Conclusion**

A renewed flourishing of humanistic thought is underway (Elkins, 2009). One of the benefits of this renewal, as Hansen (2004, 2005) suggested, is that an integration of humanistic perspectives can counterbalance the dominance of medicalization in contemporary mental health care. Examining daseinsanalysis is one way to offset medicalization and to contribute to the reintroduced humanistic dialogue. What’s more, researchers or practitioners may find daseinsanalysis helpful since it grounds the basic postulates of humanistic psychology (Bugental, 1964; Greening, 2007) in the philosophical structure of Dasein.
In daseinsanalysis, focus is given to understanding the theoretical underpinnings of the existentials, anxiety, guilt, freedom, and possibilities (Boss, 1963; Heidegger, 1987/2001b). The ultimate aim is to help clients maximize their fulfillment in life by liberating them from constriction and suffering, by helping them realize what brings them to life. As Heidegger’s metaphor illustrates, therapists act as a guide by leading clients out of the darkness of the forest and into the light of the clearing.

References


Applying Meaning at Work: Effective Use of Meaning in the Workplace

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Abstract

In response to growing mechanistic perspectives of organizational behaviour and organizational psychology, a meaning-centred approach to work may be needed, which recognizes the importance of meaning-making processes and their correlations with job satisfaction and productivity. This paper builds on Wong's (2007) call for the development of models that examine the dynamic relationships between meaning and work. Exploratory models of meaning are needed as it provides an infrastructure that assert meaning-making and sense-making processes as essential in their impact on worker beliefs and behaviours. To build the exploratory model, two management theories were examined: Freeman's (1984) Stakeholder Theory and Hunt and Morgan's (1996) Resource-Advantage Theory of Competition. The resultant exploratory model is comprised of Responsibility, Proactivity, Addressing External Stressors, Humane Orientation and Adaptation and Growth. For its contribution, the working model encourages enhances firm-level and individual-level performance and assesses the impact of a meaning-based methodology on corporate governance. As organizational behaviour and I/O psychology depend on both \textit{a posteriori} and \textit{a priori} methodologies, a monolithic mechanistic perspective of work may be deficient in integrating data inputs particularly as human capital, business relationships, real-time information, accounting and analytical information that contains disparate elements that can obstruct firm vision. This exploratory paper facilitates a working model of applying meaning of work and provides impetus for business management studies, organizational literature, leadership and I/O psychology for action-oriented research.

Applying Meaning at Work: Effective Use of Meaning in the Workplace

The relevance of meaning within the workplace has taken a pivotal role within counselling, psychiatric and psychological studies in recent years. The average individual works between 80 to 100 thousand hours over their lifetime (Pryce-Jones, 2010), while facing a wide variety of individual and organizational stressors leading to work alienation (Sarros et al., 2003), decreased meaning at work (Burger et al., 2012) and worker burnout (Philp, Egan & Kane, 2012). Wong (2007) offers a strong link between the need for meaning and management research, particularly as macro and micro pressures assail both the individual and organizations in multiple sides. Macro pressures include factors such as: (1) increased globalization and global interdependence, (2) increased diversity in the workforce leading to complexity, (3) sustainable development issues, (4) increased political domestic and international volatility such as terror threats, and (5) widening resource inequality between the Global North and the Global South (Baylis, Smith & Owens, 2011; Wong, 2007).

Micro level forces, on the other hand, focus individual level interactions and behaviour in response to micro-level, meso or macro-level pressures (Voegtlin, Patzer & Scherer, 2012). Wong (2007) delineates some micro level pressures: (1) unchecked greed culminating in “widespread corporate scandals” (p. 351), (2) breakdown of communal values, (3) decreased social responsibility, (4) increased worker burnout and (5) imbalance between work and family life. Clearly, an alternative model is necessary in understanding the value of meaning in the workplace and it is in this line of reasoning that the creation of a viable model of applying meaning at work is predicated.

This paper builds on Wong's (2007) call for the development of comprehensive models on the relationship between meaning and occupation, which integrates current relevant research in psychotherapy, clinical, industrial/organizational psychology and management studies. In construction of an exploratory model, the paper builds upon previous theoretical and empirical frameworks provided by Wong (2007, 2011a, 2011b, 2014), Philp and colleagues (2012), Ashkanasy, Ashton-James and Jordan (2003), Grant (2012), and lastly Burger, Crous and Roodt (2012). These studies elaborate on a multidimensional perspective on work and meaning.

Steger, Dik and Duffy (2012) define the concept of meaningful work from a two-fold approach: (a) the extrinsic meaning behind the occupation, and (b) the intrinsic value of the occupation via significance and positive valence. Within
the positive valence of meaningful work, Steger, Dik and Duffy (2012) also posit that an eudaimonic orientation supersedes the hedonic orientation. This broader view suggests that finding meaning at work is more than just finding value for oneself. Finding meaning is also about a reorientation of helping others find their own meaning while considering the shared human condition that confronts all individuals within the organization (from leaders to followers) (Wong, 2011b).

The five-fold exploratory model introduced here is comprised of (1) Responsibility – Responsibility for one's actions, thoughts, feelings and decision-making, (2) Proactivity – Making a proactive and conscious effort to spend time meaningfully and positively, (3) Addressing External Stressors – Finding meaningful ways to neutralize and channel stressors, (4) Humane Orientation – Cultivating seeds of compassion and virtue towards all stakeholders, and (5) Adaptation and Growth – Associating meaning making with growth and learning.

**Figure 1** Exploratory Model of Applying Meaning at Work

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**Need for an Exploratory Model of Work Meaning**

To expound on the paper's exploratory model, an essential focus must consider the interface of meaning, macro-level and micro-level pressures and the conjoined theoretical underpinnings that underlie meaningful work as it presents considerable challenges for academics, organizational leaders, employees, followers and other stakeholders. Two management theories are especially relevant in relation to the construction of the model: Freeman's (1984) Stakeholder Theory and Hunt and Morgan's (1996) Resource-Advantage Theory of Competition. Stakeholder theory is defined as a comprehensive account of identifying both stakeholders (agents) as well as the conditions (environmental factors) to better
understand how relationships between business ethics, business processes, social change, stakeholder differentiation, management and values operate in the real world (Freeman, 1984; Friedman & Miles, 2002). Resource-advantage Theory is defined as the normative perspective that firms “seek superior financial performance” via the accumulation of both tangible and intangible assets, which are utilized to gain strategic market position, brand equity and operational efficiency (Hunt & Morgan, 1996). Stakeholder theory is particularly associated with component four (Humane Orientation) (Bledow, Frese & Mueller, 2011) in the model, while Resource-Advantage Theory is associated with component three (Addressing External Stressors) and component five (Adaptation and Growth) (Hunt & Morgan, 1996). These assertions will be elaborated in the next section.

Through integration of both theories, the model addresses the pragmatic question of how organizational leaders can proactively engage the complexity of work meaning and fluidly apply their leadership orientation to be effective facilitators of change within any given industrial and cultural context. The exploratory model offers a complementary perspective to Wong's (2007) spiritual oriented meaning model of work suggests that both leaders and followers need to engage the work place mindfully, meaningfully and spiritually, while attending to business best practices/processes that optimally differentiate one's firm from competitors to gain superior financial performance (Friedman & Miles, 2002; Hunt & Morgan, 1996). Moreover, the exploratory model can also be utilized to gain a better understanding of the seemingly contradictory forces that underlie normative business practices and corporate social responsibility behaviours.

Identification of Theoretical Foundations

The primary aim of this paper is to identify some of the key theoretical foundations within the proposed exploratory model of applying meaning at work. More specifically, the paper is a deeper investigation of the two management theories (Stakeholder and Resource-Advantage Theory) and their contributions to processes that are in thematic parallel to a meaning oriented approach. Building on such parallels suggest that despite distinctive theoretical underpinnings between different disciplines (management, organizational behaviour and psychology), similar and analogous concepts can be found at both the individual-level and organizational levels.

Given the exploratory nature of the paper, arranging a comprehensive list of theoretical foundations was not the primary goal of the study. The theoretical propositions identified here however provide impetus as to how the exploratory model can be shaped as it addresses the conflicting challenges of applying meaning to a workplace based on numerous stakeholder needs and dynamic market environments. Section 2 provides the literature review. Section 3 introduces the exploratory model in detail. Section 4 concludes with emphasis on practical implications, limitations of the study and future recommendations.

Literature Review

Research studies pertaining to meaning in the workplace has primarily come from a clinical psychology perspective (Burger, Crous & Roodt, 2012a), while management theories pay less attention to personal meaning. This observation may be due to business studies' emphasis on quantitative research and data driven management. As the current study is a theoretical and exploratory paper in applying meaning to work, it is then critical to utilize both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Stakeholder Theory. Utilizing stakeholder perspective is an essential component of the model as it can foster effective communication between employees, managers, clients as well as primary, secondary and even tertiary stakeholders. The initial stakeholder theory model as conceptualized by Freeman (1984) surmised that there were 6 agent perspectives that should dictate and guide firm planning, strategy and communication. These agents comprised of the management, owners, suppliers, local community, employees and customers. According to Freeman, agentic actions and stakes within the model imply variable reciprocal relationships as each agents can unquestionably influence other agents, whether their actions will have advantageous or disadvantageous implications. Through further model refinement over time and research studies, other agents have been added such as judicial/legal systems, financial institutions (banks), interest groups (e.g., NGOs, lobbyists, etc.), media (e.g., Rising social media power, traditional media, new media), scientific/academic community and shareholders (Polonsky, 1995).

The addition of stakeholder perspectives to the exploratory model strongly suggest that both leaders and followers should not only focus on their narrowed, experiential mindset but also on the numerous and diverse perspectives which emphasize balancing paradoxical competing interests inherent within agents. As such, applying meaning at work
successfully necessitates that firm leaders and followers avoid a monolithic rigid approach in stakeholder sensitive areas, such as project/operational communication, business processes, accounting information management and innovation management to name a few. Successful firms are comprised of leaders and followers who balance between big-picture thinking (macro-level processes), detail-focused orientation (micro-level processes) with meaningful identity (both collective and individual). Concurrent with this line of reasoning, Bundy, Shropshire and Buchholtz (2013) assert the importance of recognizing stakeholder concerns via strategic cognition especially in the key areas of stakeholder agent issues, needs and goals. In the authors' study, strategic cognition (related to big-picture thinking and detail-focused orientation) plays a mediating role in regards to business issue salience (how stakeholder issues are perceived and understood) due to the 'importance of organizational identity and strategic framing' (Bundy, Shropshire & Buchholtz, 2013).

Through identification, perception, meaning making processes, leaders and managers can appropriately justify issue prioritization based on the organization's intention and willingness to address the issue. This in turn may be contingent not just in gathering as much information or data in relation to a certain business issue but also in gathering the relevant information which can contribute to optimal decision-making towards account portfolio management issues. Micro-level processes within stakeholder theory which emphasize 'best practices' must be balanced with individual-level approaches which signify unique styles and problem solving attributed to differentiated phenomenological work experiences.

How does one find the balance between micro-level and macro-level processes? It may ultimately depend on how well leaders and followers effectively identify different stakeholder resource availability and resource accessibility (Adams, 1997). In summary, through an understanding of stakeholder theory and strategic cognitive framing, the essential components of issue identification, perception, sense-making and meaning-making processes become important cognitive tools that directly contribute to the exploratory model of work meaning. Since issue resolution is integral in the workplace, the following section will explicate why differentiated stakeholder issues arise in the first place. One theory which can account for this management phenomena is Hunt and Morgan's (1996) Resource Advantage Theory.

**Resource-Advantage Theory.** The development of Resource Advantage Theory (R-A) can be best described as a theoretical model which has garnered a multidisciplinary approach ranging from marketing literature, management, economics, ethics and general business literature (Hunt & Madhavaram, 2012). R-A Theory basically proposes that marketplace hierarchy arises from both comparative advantages or disadvantages (Hunt, 1997; Hunt & Morgan, 1995). According to Hunt (1997) and Hunt and Morgan (1995), there are 8 main components that primarily comprise the theoretical model: (1) heterogeneous demand across industries, (2) imperfect and expensive consumer information, (3) constrained human motivations, (4) imperfect and expensive organizational information, (5) wide variety of firm resources, (6) heterogeneous and imperfectly mobile resource characteristics, (7) strategic management roles, and (8) innovation endogenous and disequilibrium provoking competitive dynamics.

Firms and individuals make decisions according to what is meaningful. Resources may influence firm and individual perception of what is meaningful and relevant. Amount, availability and accessibility of resources influence perception of meaning because it determines what can or cannot be done (output). Firstly, firms and individuals think of the end result of a business process. Thus, evaluating needed resources is an essential component of meaning-making. If there are some resources that are deficient, this can affect the output, products and services by different stakeholders in the supply chain. Secondly, the urgency of market survival drives reactive actions. How do desperate individuals (firms) perceive threats? Does this perception drive desperate actions? Being desperate may be a sign of deficiency and demonstrates lack of security. As such during difficult transitions and organizational changes, firms can become polarized and monolithic in response to perception of a firm struggling. Instead of seeking alternative options, decisions may become embedded in static principles which may emphasize rule-based decisions rather than adaptation to market reality. Lastly, R-A theory emphasizes that there are temporal constraints. There are certain time frames which may be optimal (or detrimental) for the release of projects, operations, products and services.

**R-A Theory for managerial action.** In the same thematic vein, Hunt and Madhavaram (2012) developed a robust conceptual framework of R-A Theory, which aimed to facilitate and provide an impetus for managerial action. The authors asserted that resources especially higher-order resources are based on individual (managerial) competencies and capabilities which may be then classified into tangibility (socially complex and interconnected) and intangibility (procedural knowledge, experience level of different stakeholders specifically managers and employees) (Hunt & Madhavaram, 2012). Moreover, individual higher-order resources can also provide a “reference to the firm's overall marketing strategy” particularly in the areas of market knowledge competence, market sensing capability, market planning capability and marketing strategy making capability (Hunt & Madhavaram, 2012, pg.587). This in turn leads to facilitation of managerial action in the domains of absorptive capacity (acquisition, transformation and internalization of external knowledge),
market-focused strategic flexibility (generation of reality based options for optimal customer value proposition), learning platform capability (commitment to learning, information transparency and receptivity) and lastly organizational learning capability (overall organizational capability for processing knowledge) (Hunt & Madhavaram, 2012).

Fundamentally, R-A Theory is a theory about resources and this sphere encompasses the areas of interpersonal and intrapersonal resources. Resources, perceived from this approach, can also be seen as ultimately relational and runs the same thematic parallel with a meaning-making theoretical perspective. In this regard, the exploratory model asserts that this relational aspect can also be extrapolated for organizational assessment, business planning interventions and collaborative actions with other organizations. Organizational assessment refers to the identification of both external and internal threats (similar to a SWOT analysis) and a deep understanding of how these threats interact with each other in multiple levels and with different stakeholders. More specifically, individual threats (such as rising industry competition, operational losses, etc.) to organizations may be somewhat manageable as they are addressed by standardized procedures. However as these threats proliferate, the likelihood for multiple threat interactions also increases which can result in significant losses to the organization which affects the stakeholders in the organization.

Creating Value Propositions. First, leaders and followers should take into consideration the importance of creating unique value propositions. Examination of value propositions requires a holistic meaning model of work and this implies a constant endeavour for continual development of both small (micro-level) and large (macro-level) advantages (Clark, Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2012). Value propositions may be simplified as basically asking the question: How does my company make money and earn a livelihood? However, a deeper investigation into firm value propositions present a more complicated task because the market environment like biological systems are inherently systemic, efficiency-oriented, nonlinear and dynamic. Furthermore, different niches exist within the market environment which allows for further differentiation among competitor interests, abilities, assets and innovations. In a study of competitive environments by Slater and Narver (1994), the authors assert that although their results provide limited support for competitive environment role on the market-orientation performance relationship, it is essential for firms to be ‘market-oriented’ as it provides maximum cost-effectiveness in the long term despite short-term market environmental effects. Using Samsung as an example, Samsung has been aggressively finding different niches which their diversified strength can be applied to complement their core business strength. In 2012, Samsung achieved No. 1 market share results in their mobile business niche by outpacing competitors (Apple, Nokia, LG) in hardware and software (Android) technology. The creation of inimitable advantages within Samsung has come from the realization that market advantages can shift to different competitors given enough time and resources.

Second, there is value in understanding the application of meaning-based processes (particularly in the exploratory meaning of work model) and its relationship to the larger market environment whose nature hinges on extensive competition, network-like systems and nonlinear behaviour. On a cursory glance, it may seem that the larger market environment tends to be predisposed towards an alienation of the individual whether one is a leader or follower as observed by Sarros, et al., (2003). However, past and current research scholars like Ashkanasy, Ashton-James, Jordan (2003). Burger et al.,(2012a), Levy (2005), Luthans (2002), Philp, Egan, Kane (2012), Wong (2007) and many others define a new conceptual dissemination that seeks to explore how individual meaning-making processes within organizations interact with exogenous factors such as level of market environmental competition and how these interactions provide a foundational basis for theory of meaning within organizations.

As an example, Luthans (2002) encouraged new theory building that effectively integrates positive psychology with organizational behaviour research to produce theory and research driven criteria that can be validly measured. Concepts such as “confidence, hope and resiliency” (Luthans, 2002, p.695) were identified as possible state-like psychological capacities that can meet positive organizational inclusion criteria. Given the complexity of interactions between a meaning-based approach towards work and the dynamic business environment, it is essential to construct exploratory models of work meaning that provide a conceptual basis of organizational behaviour, psychology and management in the current business and economic milieu.

One of the consequent aspects of the nature of competition in business is that it may predicate meaning in leadership towards making opaque choices due to stakeholder pressure and high emphasis in profitability orientation which neglects stakeholder transparency and corporate social responsibility. In this regard, further research into the meaning of stakeholder pressure and its relationship to corporate social responsibility may prove to be a fruitful avenue for scholars. Leverage effects of stakeholder pressure may pose as varied and critical thresholds of meaning towards both followers and leaders in which organizational and individual factors are largely interdependent. For example, in terms of organizational factors, González-Benito and González-Benito (2006) have identified two dimensions of stakeholder pressure that can be
identified: governmental and non-governmental stakeholder pressures. Does stakeholder pressure stemming from market environments shape the way meaning is perceived by different stakeholders? If so, what is the extent of their influence on leaders and on followers? Conclusively, the purpose of this essay hinges on whether certain presuppositions regarding management theoretical phenomena, psychological meaning and organizational behaviour are interrelated.

Organizational Behaviour and Psychological Models of Work Meaning

Previous scholarship within organizational behaviour and positive psychology has yielded several insights in confirming the relevance of meaning within work (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Wrzesniewski, 2003). From an organizational behaviour viewpoint, Wrzesniewski (2003) argues that there are three basic orientations that influence predisposition in finding meaning in work: (1) job orientation - work as a sole source of tangible resources necessary for basic survival, (2) career orientation – work as a source of career advancement, status and honor, and (3) calling orientation – perspective of work as a goal in itself and associated with the virtues of contribution, higher calling and personal growth.

In contrast to a positive psychology perspective, Pratt and Ashforth (2003) differentiates meaning within work as stemming from two distinct sources: (1) meaning in the work – refers to the idea that what one does (job, task, role) is inherently good and contributes to stakeholders outside the organization positively (i.e., pleasure in the firm's mission and vision), and (2) meaning at work – refers to the idea that what one does is inherently satisfying (i.e., enjoyment of functional tasks), meaningful and contributes to stakeholders within the company. Aside from these two sources, Pratt and Ashforth (2003) add that individuals usually find a sense of work purpose by combining the two sources. A matrix table is provided to observe the different interactions the two distinct sources create.

Consequently, these models provide a broad outline of work meaning that is based on a bottom-up approach which is within the context of individual level perception. These models suggest that individual level perception is strongly associated with work meaning. Moreover, these models also contain similar thematic attributes to Freeman's Stakeholder Theory such as the consideration of multiple stakeholder needs which is highly relevant in explaining leader behaviours contingent on typology of industry need.

Towards an Exploratory Model of Work Meaning

The fundamental driver for the promotion of an exploratory model of work meaning in this paper is intrinsically interconnected to previous attempts by Wong (2007) and Burger, et al., (2012a, 2012b) in addressing the broader environmental, societal, organizational and individual-level concerns currently facing the disciplines of management research, organizational psychology and leadership studies. As Wong elucidates (2007), business research must transcend the mechanistic understanding of personnel as mere numbers/resources to be consumed. Rather, consideration for stakeholders’ need for meaning particularly in the realms of phenomenological, spiritual and noetic experiences must also be accounted for. This important facet in Wong's conceptual framework is strongly associated with the foundational premises for the development of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) as “more and more companies are embracing spiritual values” (Wong, 2007), which transcend mere profit maximization behaviour. The link between CSR and profitability remains inconclusive in current management research as some studies suggest a positive relationship (see Carroll & Shabana, 2010; McPeak & Tooley, 2008), while other studies dispute the relevance of serving multiple stakeholders (Jensen, 2011) which strengthens the premise that little or no relationship exists between CSR and financial performance (see Henderson, 2009). While Wong's model focuses on the emphasis of noetic and spiritual values of organizations, Burger, Crous and Roodt's (2012a, 2012b) model emphasizes the role of how logotherapy (an important corollary of a meaning-based approach) can facilitate positive organizational changes. The authors found the importance of framing using the 'application of logotherapy as an organization development intervention' (Burger, et al., 2012a, p.2). Figure 2 explicates the role of framing in facilitating organizational changes. As such, the exploratory model of work meaning in this paper connects the strengths of psychological research with management studies to mitigate inherent weaknesses such as the myopic view of work meaning as mere individual-level or mere organizational level processes.

Call To New Models of Work Meaning. The current exploratory model in this article adds to Wong's call to new models of work meaning by introducing two management theories (Resource-Advantage Theory and Stakeholder Theory) that were only indirectly addressed in Burger, Crous and Roodt's conceptual framework. The resource-advantage theory contributes specifically to the second component (the model perceives time as a relevant intangible and heterogeneous resource) and fifth component of the exploratory model (the model perceives absorptive capacity, learning capabilities and
competencies are important resources). The stakeholder theory contributes to the exploratory model through its consideration of multiple stakeholder pressures. Consequentially, this concept was further combined with Wong's emphasis on compassion as an important virtue within the workplace. In this aspect, the virtue of compassion becomes relevant as this paper strongly argues that is associated with how most companies perceive organizational citizenship behaviour and corporate social responsibility. In support of this assertion, a recent study by Moon, Hur, Ko, Kim and Yoon (2014) found that employee perception of corporate social responsibility correlate positively to compassion at work via the sequential process of organizational justice perceptions and affective organizational commitment.

There is an inherent difficulty in integrating value/virtue theories with management theories to form exploratory meaning-based models of work as most management theories. By large, academic scholarship remains averse in integrating the seemingly dialectical viewpoints as it demands an honest commitment and rigorous investment in analyzing both individual-level and cultural-level approaches which seems quixotic in both organizational psychology and in leadership studies. In response to this difficulty, this paper provides an initial, exploratory and conceptual model that attempts a 'holistic' perspective. The five propositions/components in the exploratory model cover a broad range of concepts necessary in addressing the two-fold need of any organization: (1) providing long term value to customer-stakeholders through firm performance while also (2) delivering value maximization (i.e., ROI profitability), which increases the likelihood of organizational survival.

The exploratory model suggests that a monolithic perspective to work is inherently deficient in addressing individual and organizational needs. Rather, the model suggests that leaders need to take into consideration synergistic interactions between micro, individual-level and macro-level, cultural processes. Consequently, this means that both leaders and followers should be trained in competently alternating between behaviours suited to different contexts, needs and situations. This adaptive flexibility was defined by Bledow, Frese, and Mueller (2011) as ambidextrous leadership.

Components of the Exploratory Model

**Responsibility.** The first component is directly related to Wong's study on meaning specifically borrowing 'Responsibility' from the PURE model (Wong, 2011a). By placing responsibility for one's actions, leaders as well as employees effectively place their locus of control internally, leading to self-efficacious behaviour and conscientious work performance. Freedom of the Will hypothesis states that 'people who believe in the inherent human capacity for freedom and responsibility, regardless of circumstances, will show higher autonomy and authenticity than those without such beliefs' (Wong, 2014, p.1). As organizations grow, there is a propensity that they will become bureaucratic structures with rigid hierarchy and entirely dependent on command-and-control type processes. There are two primary reasons as to why responsibility should be an essential component of an exploratory model of work meaning.

First, the likelihood of placing responsibility outside of oneself can increase within organizations due to simultaneous increase of task-dependencies inherent within complex, hierarchical organizational systems that normally undertake large projects and operations (Adams, 1997). To address this issue, reducing hierarchical levels may be undertaken. However this decision can only be made by senior management without prior input to mid and lower level employee stakeholders. As a result of this perceived powerlessness, work locus of control (WLOC) may decrease within the organization. Work locus of control refers to an individual's belief in the extent that work events can be controlled (Ng, Raymond & Ke, 2014; Rotter, 1954). The authors add that work locus of control is also strongly associated with decision-making (Ng, Raymond & Ke, 2014). The component of responsibility addresses this issue as it empowers both leaders and followers into active and assertive decision-making without crossing the boundary of leader-follower protocols. Moreover, responsibility entails leaders and followers to articulate expectations necessary in achieving operational and project success. Responsibility does not just lie within the sphere of action within the leadership but also within the followers as attempts in defining what constitutes appropriate actions will occur during the course of the business operation and/or project.

Second, individual responsibility paves the way for individual self-efficacy and by association the overall collective efficacy within the organization. A responsible culture within the organization orients both leaders and followers towards high meaning at and in work (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). In support of this argument, Walumbwa, Wang, Lawler and Shi (2004) found two important findings in their study of banking employees within China and India. Firstly, the authors found that “transformational leadership is positively related to organizational commitment and job satisfaction and negatively related to job and work withdrawal” (Walumbwa et al., 2004). Secondly, the authors found that collective efficacy contributes to job and work withdrawal, while also contributes to organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Walumbwa et al., 2004). These findings reveal that as leaders and employees place their locus of control internally, the
likelihood of self-efficacious behaviour and conscientious work performance increases. Thus, responsibility at both the individual and organizational level increases meaningful behaviour at work, while a lack of responsibility decreases individual and organizational accountability and purpose.

**Proactivity.** Meaning encourages us to be proactive in how we spend our time (both inside and outside of work) and by extension, our resources and assets. For example, current research has shown that time spent outside of work meaningfully will have a significant impact on how time is spent inside of work particularly as this time is indirectly influenced by individual differences in personality and life values (Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010). Proactivity was defined by Parker, Bindl and Strauss (2010) as the aspiration and endeavour in bringing an idealized goal into reality. Three attributes have also been identified with proactivity: (a) self-initiation, (b) oriented towards practical change, and (c) high future orientation (Parker et al., 2010). The first attribute (self-initiation) refers to consistent engagement by the individual to not just start tasks, projects and operations but rather have the persistence to see the task, operation or project through to completion. The second attribute refers to application of the plan towards a workable and feasible implementation. The last attribute refers to the vision of the future that the individual or organization seeks to bring into reality.

Furthermore, the current exploratory model identifies proactivity as an important facet of a meaning based approach to work as the component's central focus considers the dual endeavour in facing two important temporal data distinctions: historical-driven and future-oriented data. For the proactive individual and the organization, the possibility and potentiality of decision-making requires foresight development and timely execution of plans. In this regard, proactive individuals and organizations are then rarely caught off-guard as they have learned to anticipate not just future problems but also learned to use current obstacles as assets; working meaningfully under constraints. Timely execution is also critical as actions that appropriately fit one context may be inappropriate for a different situation. This involves a two-fold approach as the agent (either individual or organization) needs (1) sufficient background knowledge of the ascertained problems and issues, and (2) an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms that underlie the problems' processes.

Without sufficient background knowledge (what agents already know), ability in learning new information (external and internal) could be adversely affected. Broadness of background knowledge must also be integrated with an in-depth understanding. In-depth understanding of the mechanisms that underlie potential problems and issues is contingent upon achieving a certain mastery and consequent specialization of a specific body of knowledge. This masterful diving into the 'deep end' of a subject allows the agent to (1) identify facts and empirical data as the lower level aspects of experiential learning, (2) determine any patterns or relationships between the empirical data which can be utilized for crisis prevention at work, and (3) participate in abstracting workable models that systematically integrates all available empirical data meaningfully. Thus, it is predicted that proactivity at the individual level and organizational level increases meaningful experiences at work.

**Addressing External Stressors.** Third, it is essential to find meaningful ways to neutralize organizational and work-related stressors. Meaning provides one with the ability to identify and regulate emotions through constructive emotional intelligence (EI). According to Ashkanasy et al. (2003), 'emotional intelligence is a key moderating variable in mediating the impact of workplace stressors on individual and organizational performance outcomes.' Emotional intelligence within the work place has certainly been visited and revisited by several theorists (see Goleman, 1995; Law, Wong & Song, 2004; Ng, Raymond & Ke, 2014). The third component of the model emphasizes that appropriately applying meaning within the organization requires not just cognitive intelligence but also the ability to regulate, adapt and create positive changes through emotional intelligence. Changes from within and from outside the organization are an unavoidable facet in today's current milieu. In order to successfully deal with external stressors, healthy individuals and organizations must first come to the realization that internal needs and priorities must be met. The internal (substance) takes precedence over the external (form). The external aspect of organizational needs are usually comprised of several issues such as: (1) identification of stakeholder needs, (2) decision to either maintain, stay or expand into new business territories, and (3) establishment of stakeholder alliances. These aspects are usually the peripheral and most salient to the organization which reinforces the amount of time spent in dealing with these issues. The internal aspect, on the other hand, deals with reflexive blind spots which are inherently subjective for both the organization and the individual. The internal aspect is usually comprised of leadership development which ranges from recruitment, continuous learning, maintenance and development of individual competencies.

**Emotional Intelligence and Meaning.** The differential nature between the external and the internal aspects of organizational needs has befittingly raised important concerns in relation to the development of the exploratory meaning model. Two concerns are pertinent in this discussion: (1) the effectiveness of emotional intelligence in neutralizing external stressors, and (2) the extent of EI's relationship to a meaning-based approach. Establishing a definitive and comprehensive...
relationship between EI and meaning was not the primary intention of the exploratory model. A more pragmatic stance was undertaken which boldly asserts that emotional intelligence facilitates the neutralization of organizational stressors through (a) perceptive reorientation of stressors, (b) empathy and self-compassion for others' weaknesses or one's weaknesses, and (c) proactive problem-solving through networks and social support systems. This stance was echoed by Ng, Raymond and Ke's (2014) study of EI among nurses. The authors emphasize the importance of emotional intelligence as a critical leadership attribute as it can enable and empower nurses to deal with external stressors by accepting, coping and then transforming one's emotional energies (Ng, Raymond & Ke, 2014). Moreover, perceptive reorientation of stressors runs a thematic parallel to Wong's (2007, 2014) assertion that meaning requires a cognizance of meaning potentials in each situation. Perceptive reorientation, which is a significant component of EI, demands that right attitudinal orientation and appropriate actions be applied in situations particularly within an organization and within the workplace. Finding meaningful ways to neutralize organizational stressors requires the development and exercise of emotional intelligence at both the individual and collective levels.

**Humane Orientation.** Aside from responsibility, proactivity and development of emotional intelligence, efficacious leadership also requires humane orientation which encompasses virtuous qualities and by extension how these qualities are related to leadership (Wong, 2011a; Grant, 2012). Two theories here are pertinent in understanding humane orientation. First, stakeholder theory contributes to the development of humane orientation by suggesting that leaders and followers should focus on the numerous diverse perspectives while balancing seemingly paradoxical competing interests. Second, resource-advantage theory contributes to humane orientation development by its emphasis on adaptive actions in addressing heterogeneous aspects of work at both the macro and micro-level.

A corollary of humane orientation, compassion, which was previously studied by scholars within management studies (see Biberman & Tischler, 2008; Lantos, 2002; Lips-Wiersma & Nilakant, 2007; Solomon, 1998) remains an intriguing aspect of the exploratory model because it seems to flow against the bulk of management studies which adheres to strict rational decision-making aimed at achieving maximum shareholder value. Indeed, the rational approach has culminated in one of the main arguments against CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) in that maximum harm will be done to both society, organizations and the vast majority of stakeholders if businesses do not conform to their main goal of maximizing shareholder value (Jensen, 2011). This argument however falls into a fallacious pitfall as it does not allow further distinctions between various kinds of CSR as proposed by Lantos (2002) and Carroll (2001). Carroll (2001) for example, classifies various types of responsibilities that underlie CSR: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibility while Lantos (2001) classifies CSR types as based on ethical, altruistic and strategic CSR. Essentially, CSR types may have different levels of influence in correspondence to stakeholder needs, and as such should account for other stakeholder relationship typologies aside from the normative transactional/contractual relationship.

In this aspect, humane orientation within management scholarship draws compatibility and association with altruistic corporate social responsibility particularly as it involves transcending the contractual relationship between different stakeholders. This is not to say that contractual relationships are non-essentials. They are essential especially as the foundation of business and capitalist philosophy hinges on the foundation of contractual obligations and the respect of individual property. A humane orientation transcends the contractual relationship between stakeholders because it recognizes that people within the organization and outside the organization operate as sensemaking and meaning-making agents in addition to agents that just “exist to consume.” A single-minded pursuit of profitability without consideration to the context and diverse attributes of CSR will ultimately drive organizations towards meaninglessness and leader-follower disillusionment. Additionally, humane orientation can facilitate beneficiary contact between different stakeholders that can drive linguistic perception from transactional to a relational design. As Grant (2012) has observed, “beneficiary contact interacts with leadership to influence perceptions of prosocial impact and performance.” The paradox of humane orientation was articulated by Bledow, Frese and Mueller (2011) in which it can hinder innovation by its overemphasis on harmony while it can increase “exploratory behaviour through trust and error tolerance.” Humane orientation, while inherently paradoxical, remains a complex component of work meaning not because it calls for social harmony as an end result of stakeholder interaction but because humane orientation attaches great value to the proposition that individuals as well as organizations are meaning-making entities in addition to being transactional agents. Thus, humane orientation perceives individuals and organizations as meaning-making entities that primarily value virtuous actions over non-virtuous actions within leadership.

**Adaptation and Growth.** Lastly, the fifth component associates meaning with adaptation, growth and learning. Finding meaning at work will not be a clear cut, formulaic process for all individuals and for organizations as growth needs, learning goals and development orientations will differ according. However, the main essence of the fifth component points
to growth and learning as necessary requirements to facilitate appropriate meaning-making processes within the workplace. According to Maurer (2002), continuous learning involvement orientation is posited to be a motivational state which depends to the extent learning and growth are relevant to the cognitive, affective and behavioural self. In this regard, both individual and organizational propensity levels for learning and growth may either contribute or vitiate meaning-making processes. For example, high propensity levels for learning and growth are positively correlated to firm performance while low propensity levels for learning are found to have a negative correlation with overall firm performance (Ellinger, Ellinger, Yang & Howton, 2002).

Work meaning must essentially cater to both followers and leaders in such a way that learning becomes second nature. Moreover, individual and organizational beliefs about learning should focus more intensively on self-development and organizational development rather than assessing the self (organization) against others to the point that any progress is downplayed. This is not to say that interpersonal and inter-organizational comparisons are irrelevant especially as quantitative comparisons between individuals and organizations illustrate key differences in strengths and weaknesses. Through adaptation and growth, employees can start to acquire beliefs that attributes and competencies are improvable (movement from an entity theory of the self towards an incremental implicit theory of the self) (Maurer, 2002). An entity theory of the self is static and not conducive to learning as the self attributes are perceived as crystallized and rigid (Maurer, 2002). In contrast, an incremental implicit theory of the self refers to the idea that “one's characteristics are conceptualized as malleable” and thus improvable (Maurer, 2002, p.13). The Adaptation and Growth component, with its strong association with an incremental implicit theory of the self, also has a direct (albeit untested) relationship with Wong's (2010) *meaning management theory* which emphasizes that meaning plays a central role in human adaptation especially in the overlapping areas of cognitive stress appraisal, attribution, decision-making and creativity (Wong, 2010). Adaptation and Growth are interrelated with Wong's *meaning management theory* as cognitive processes have a direct influence on organizational decision-making particularly as one's adaptation and growth beliefs reflect either a mature or immature understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses. A mature organization views adaptation and growth not just mandatory but essential to the intrinsic interests of the individual and the collective. These organizations (and individuals) have a high degree of self-determination which then influences levels of motivation and expected learning outcomes. The exploratory model's Adaptation and Growth Component and Wong's *meaning management theory* encourages that leaders and followers utilize the power of choice and freedom to learn as a way to understand the phenomenological and subjective meaning of work.

**Proposition 5.** Adaptation and growth beliefs are essential aspects of work meaning. A fluid approach to learning will be positively associated with a mature understanding of meaning management.

**Conclusion**

The proposed model advocates for willing partnerships and collaboration between different fields and disciplines as numerous stakeholders all stand to gain in bridging the theory/praxis divide. There are 5 components to the proposed model encompassing areas such as time management, decision-making, communication and learning. The model espouses: (1) Responsibility, (2) Proactive and conscious effort, (3) Finding meaningful ways, (4) Cultivation of Virtue, and (5) Association of meaning making with adaptation and growth. A working model of meaning within the contextual space of work and occupation is possible but it must stimulate a multidisciplinary discourse by distilling key insights from clinical psychology (Wong, 2011a & 2011b), management studies (Grant, 2012; Steger et al., 2012) and leadership literature (Leonard et al., 2013).

There are still theoretical and empirical gaps in understanding the value of meaning within the workplace. Firstly, organizational psychology has often distanced itself from meaning as if it was more related to counselling. Hence, organizational psychology tends to focus on work environments, behaviour, health, general well-being, human resources and work dynamics (Levy, 2005). Second, management studies locate meaning under the general umbrella of leadership literature which in itself is a valid claim. Lastly, the nature and applicability of meaning in organizational psychology is generally complex and multifaceted. Thus, building meaningful bridges between theory and action presents real challenges to organizational leaders, academics and workers.

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