



Meaning in Life as a Subjective Judgment and a Lived Experience

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Abstract

Meaning in life has long been recognized as a central dilemma of human life. In this article, we review some of the challenges of studying meaning in life from the perspective of social psychology. We draw on the diary of Etty Hillesum, a young woman who was killed in Auschwitz, to argue for the relevance of current empirical approaches to meaning in life. We review evidence suggesting that meaning in life is an important variable in the psychology of human functioning while also acknowledging that there is no consensus definition for the construct. Drawing on Hillesum's diary and our research, we argue for the importance of considering meaning in life as the outcome of a subjective judgment process. We then review research showing the strong relationship between positive mood and meaning in life and suggest that such a relationship is born out in the phenomenology of meaning in life.

... mysteries don't lose their poetry because they are solved. Quite the contrary. The solution often turns out more beautiful than the puzzle, and anyway the solution uncovers deeper mystery. Richard Dawkins

Few mysteries have captured the human imagination as persistently as meaning in life. Whether and how human life has meaning is a dilemma that has occupied great minds since ancient times. For philosophers, the question of interest is the meaning *of* life and approaches to answering this dilemma focus on the central importance of objective (vs. subjective) evidence (Klemke, 2001; Metz, 2002, 2007). Psychologists have primarily focused on the experience of meaning *in* life, its functions and correlates. The importance of meaning in life to people, in general, is evidenced in the most casual perusal of best seller lists. Just one volume promising to uncover the secrets to a *Purpose Driven Life* has generated over \$400 million in sales.

Meaning in life, then, would seem to be of great importance. Yet, this construct has not received particularly widespread attention in empirical research.¹ A cursory search of the PsychINFO database (beginning in 1967) shows that the sheer number of studies of life satisfaction (6614 hits), optimism (4622), happiness (5853), and hope (12,780) dwarfs the number

of studies on meaning in life (just 502 hits). Within these studies of meaning in life, only a small fraction have been conducted by social psychologists and even fewer have involved experimental methods. For some, this situation might seem appropriate. Meaning in life is such a vast mystery, if it is turned over to social psychologists, what damage might we do to it? In reducing meaning in life to an empirically studied (not to even mentioned experimentally manipulated) phenomenon, won't we just wreck it, as some might say we have done to other great mysteries, such as love or altruism? In this essay, we hope to demonstrate that the mystery of meaning in life has not been harmed by psychological investigation. Instead, even within the confines of mainstream empirical research, psychologists have come to the study of meaning in life with a tendency to 'let the mystery be.' We hope to demonstrate that while the research we present involves such mundane trappings as self-report questionnaires and even experimental manipulations that influence meaning in life itself, the psychological approach to meaning in life reflects the lived experience of meaning in life surprisingly well. Throughout, we draw upon one particular life, that of Etty Hillesum, to forge a link between empirical data and the phenomenology of meaning in life.

What Is Meaning in Life?

Arriving at a satisfactory definition of meaning in life presents a conundrum. In anticipation of some skepticism about the extent to which empirical research on meaning in life truly captures the essence of this construct, we begin by considering meaning in life as it is represented in autobiographical documents. Victor Frankl's (1963/1984) classic work *Man's Search for Meaning* provides ample evidence that meaning in life is often a salient theme when human beings are thrust into potentially meaningless situations. Frankl argued cogently for the central role of meaning in life in the capacity of individuals to survive horrific acts of evil. Even among those who did not survive the Holocaust, meaning in life was an important source of inspiration. Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jew (and mystic and scholar) who was killed in Auschwitz at the age of 29, kept a personal journal from the time she was forced to don a gold Star of David in 1941, until she was interned in Auschwitz in 1943.

Living in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam, Hillesum traveled back and forth to the Westbork work camp, helping the Jews there as a part of the Jewish Council. Her work was grim, painful, and challenging, helping others prepare for internment. She, at first, took on these duties with great reluctance but eventually came to view them as important and meaningful to those she was helping. Her diary conveys the sense of impending doom under the occupation and her growing realization that she herself would ultimately face the same horrible fate. She vividly describes a range of experiences, including her deep anguish and sorrow. She writes of her

struggle to endure, of the heart-breaking losses all around her, of parents losing their children, and of moments of extreme despair. We can by no means do justice to her diary in this brief essay. Instead, we draw upon statements that convey the specific insights that she brought to bear on the central dilemma of her existence: its meaning. Indeed, Hillesum's journal (which was turned over to a friend before she was taken to Auschwitz with a request that it be published in the event that she did not return)² provides a striking formulation of the very issues that occupy contemporary scholars of meaning in life.

A beautiful and meaningful life

Perhaps the most notable aspect of Hillesum's writings is her frequent assertion that despite her conditions, her life was 'beautiful and meaningful'. Even confronted with horrific injustice and inhumanity, even when her own death became inevitable to her, she remained steadfast in her belief that her life was meaningful:

I shall not be bitter if others fail to grasp what is happening to us Jews. I work and continue to live with the same conviction and I find life meaningful—yes meaningful. (Hillesum, 2002; p. 461)

Not unlike a social psychologist, she was ever aware of the potential for some to view her assessment of the meaning of her life as a potential illusion: 'I can bear these times. I can even understand them a little. If I should survive and keep saying "life is beautiful and meaningful" they will have to believe me' (Hillesum, 2002; p. 198). Etty's journal is filled with themes of commitment to purpose and to the value of her personal existence.

Etty Hillesum's account attests to the power of belief in meaning in life in even the most horrible of human conditions. If this sense of meaning in life is a psychological resource during such difficult times, it might also serve functions in more quotidian circumstances (Baumeister, 1991), a context that is more typical of psychological research.

In considering psychological approaches to meaning in life, one is struck by two clear realities. First, we know that meaning in life is important. Second, we don't necessarily know precisely what it is. To be sure, research has clearly shown that meaning in life is associated with many important outcomes such as life satisfaction (Steger & Kashdan, 2007; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), quality of life (e.g., Krause, 2007), depression (e.g., Mascaro & Rosen, 2005), hope (Feldman & Snyder, 2005), alcohol and drug use (e.g., Lecci, MacLean, & Croteau, 2002), coping with physical illness (Jim & Anderson, 2007), suicidal ideation (e.g., Heisel & Flett, 2004), and many other aspects of physical and psychological health (Steger, in press). As noted by Wong and Fry (1998) in the preface to their seminal volume published a decade ago, 'There is now a critical mass

of empirical evidence and a convergence of expert opinions that personal meaning is important not only for survival but also for health and well-being' (p. xvii). Given this bold statement, it may be surprising that there is no consensus definition of meaning in life.

Generally, the psychological definitions of meaning in life that have been proffered take into account either motivational or cognitive components of the construct. For example, many theorists have argued that a meaningful life is a life that is imbued with satisfying goals or purposes (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Emmons, 2003; Frankl, 1963/1984; Klinger, 1977; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Steger, in press). This aspect of meaning in life is well represented in Etty Hillesum's frequent statements that she continued to live 'with conviction' and 'purpose'.

Other theorists have strictly referred to the cognitive component of meaning suggesting that a meaningful life is one that makes sense to the individual (Baumeister, 1991; Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). From this perspective, the experience of meaning in life implies that one has made connections among different aspects of life and experiences that life as a coherent whole (Antonovsky, 1988, 1993). Here, as well, Etty Hillesum's journal speaks to the importance of this sense of coherence: '... for I know now that life and death make a meaningful whole' (Hillesum, 2002; p. 508).

In our research, we have offered the following expansive conceptual definition: 'Lives may be experienced as meaningful when they are felt to have significance beyond the trivial or momentary, to have purpose, or to have a coherence that transcends chaos' (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006; p. 180). Developing an operational definition for this lofty construct poses a considerable challenge – one that has been met in a remarkably *unremarkable* way, by simply asking people.

Letting the mystery be

One might well wonder how research on meaning in life has managed to progress in the absence of a widely shared definition. Quite simply, researchers have asked people whether they feel their lives are meaningful. In this work, the meaning of 'meaning in life' is largely left to the intuition of respondents. For instance, researchers routinely ask individuals to rate themselves on items such as 'I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful' (from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), 'My life is very purposeful and meaningful' (from the Purpose in Life test; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), 'How often have you thought that there is little meaning in the things you do in your daily life?' (a reverse-keyed item from the Sense of Coherence scale; Antonovsky, 1993) or 'I feel I have found a really significant meaning in my life' (Krause, 2007).

The philosophically minded might object to the notion that meaning in life should ever be assessed using such homely wholly subjective

self-report questionnaires. Philosophers as a rule have taken a dim view of subjective mental states, particularly as they apply to the question the good or meaningful life. For psychologists, of course, mental states are certainly an appropriate venue for study. Yet, even psychologists might scoff at the intuitive definitions of meaning in life on which these measures rely. Participants do not balk at rating such items and certainly these scales are highly internally consistent and correlate with each other in quite reasonable ways. At the very least, such measures allow us to study the experience of meaning in life in a way that is close to its phenomenological roots, as something that, whatever it is, humans know it when they feel it. Can there be any doubt that Etty Hillesum would have rated such items highly?

From research using these questionnaires, we know that individuals who rate their lives as meaningful (whatever they mean by that) are typically better off than those who rate their lives as meaningless. The subjectivity of these ratings is not unusual to the construct of meaning in life. Research on well-being generally has relied on subjective assessments. However, it is notable that even the most modest attempts to address whether subjective evaluations of meaning in life reflect something an outside observer might detect have not been made. In contrast, research has examined whether, for example, parent, peer, or romantic partner assessments of a person's well-being jibe with the individual's own ratings (they generally do). Why not examine observer ratings of meaning in life to provide an objective corroboration of these subjective ratings?

Meaning in life is a private experience

A key obstacle to such research on meaning in life immediately presents itself: A parent, friend, or romantic partner might readily recognize and report that a child, friend, or loved one is unhappy but meaning in life may not have any clear outward signs. This inherently private nature of meaning in life was recognized by Klinger (1977), who noted, 'Meaningfulness is something *very subjective*, a pervasive quality of a person's *inner life*. It is experienced both as ideas and as emotions. It is clear, then, that when we ask about the meaningfulness of someone's life we are asking about the qualities of his or her *inner experience*' (p. 10, emphasis added). If suicide is the ultimate surrender to meaninglessness, we have only to note that this tragic act is often intensely shocking (e.g., Dunne & Dunne-Maxim, 2004) to recognize that meaningless lives are sometimes lived in particularly quiet desperation. Even very close others may find that they simply did not recognize 'the signs' that a loved one experienced his or her own life as meaningless.

Surely, a reader comes away from Hillesum's diary convinced that her life was meaningful, if only because she stated explicitly and repeatedly that *she* experienced it as such. Just as Klinger noted, her external circumstances

were irrelevant to her sense of meaning. Her commentary on her inner life convinces the reader that she certainly experienced life as meaningful.

Etty Hillesum described the experience of meaning in life as something that emerges within one's inner conscious experience, often in defiance of external circumstances:

... we carry everything within us, God and Heaven and Hell and Earth and Life and Death and all of history. The externals are simply so many props; everything we need is within us. (Hillesum, 2002; p. 495)

In these diary entries, meaning in life is clearly a lived experience but perhaps most poignantly and heroically, a subjective judgment. Hillesum *decided* that, even in the face of dire indications to the contrary, her life mattered. Meaning in life was not simply an experience that happened to her, it was a judgment:

I would like to fold my hands and say, 'Friends, I am happy and grateful and I find life very beautiful and meaningful. Even as I stand here by the body of my dead companion' (Hillesum, 2002; p. 550).

Meaning in life is a judgment

Explicit in Etty Hillesum's diary but often implicit in the empirical research on meaning in life, then, is this essential truth: Meaning in life is a *subjective judgment*. Whether a person is sitting alone writing a journal amidst extreme persecution or completing a questionnaire in a psychology lab, endorsing the statement that life has meaning is a judgment. Acknowledging that meaning in life as psychologists have studied it is indeed the outcome of a subjective judgment process allows us to ask the important question of what it is that contributes to this judgment. Such a perspective also leads to the potential conclusion that, like other subjective judgments of well-being (e.g., Schimmack & Oishi, 2005; Schwarz & Strack, 1991), judgments of meaning in life are likely influenced by a multitude of factors, including transient biases and mood. Acknowledging that meaning in life is an outcome of a (potentially biased) judgment process in no way demeans this lofty construct. Rather identifying the dynamic ways that human beings come to judge their lives as meaningful promises to help us understand how to enhance this important quality in human lives and to, perhaps, come to a better sense of what Etty Hillesum meant and what our participants mean when they tell us that their lives are meaningful.

Sources of meaning in life judgments

What aspects of life contribute to judgments of its meaning? Many scholars have suggested that there are primary or fundamental sources of meaning in life. Frankl (1963/1984) discussed the idea that people have an innate

'will to meaning,' or a need to possess a higher level purpose in life. In his writings, it is clear that Frankl was arguing that people need to find an overarching source of meaning in life that provides them with a clear guide for their existence. Similarly, Yalom (1980) proposed that people's understanding of the meaningfulness of their lives is often derived from specific sources of meaning (e.g., dedication to an important cause) that provide the individual with a definitive answer to why his or her life is meaningful.

Other theorists have postulated a host of specific aspects of life, including social roles, identities, close relationships, religious faith, and cultural worldviews as sources of meaning in life (e.g., Emmons, 2003; Florian & Mikulincer, 2004; Florian, Mikulincer, & Hirschberger, 2001; Koltko-Rivera, 2004; Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2004; Silberman, 2005). Baumeister (1991) identified four fundamental 'needs' for meaning including, purpose, value, self-efficacy, and self-worth.

Of particular note, religion has long been recognized as a central source of meaning in life, providing individuals with core beliefs, expectations, and goals, and placing the individual's life into a larger, more ultimate context (Batson & Stocks, 2004; Emmons, 2005; Fletcher, 2004; Fry, 2000; Silberman, 2005). Religious faith is associated with self-reported meaning in life (e.g., George, Ellison, & Larson, 2002; Steger & Frazier, 2005) and religious conversion has been shown to relate to enhancement in meaning in life (Paloutzian, 1981). Importantly, research has shown that meaning in life mediates the relationship between religious faith and well-being (Steger & Frazier, 2005), suggesting that religious beliefs serve a meaning-relevant function.

Although Etty Hillesum struggled with religious faith, she ultimately emerged with a profound, if complex, religious devotion, as suggested in her most famous quote, 'God is not accountable to us, but we are accountable to Him. I know what may lie in wait for us' (Hillesum, 2002; p. 487).

Possessing such fundamental sources of meaning in life should, theoretically, be associated with judgments that life is meaningful. However, a person's judgment of meaning in life may not be wholly explained by such logically relevant sources of information. Meaning in life has long been recognized as a central human motivation (Frankl, 1963/1984; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006). For Hillesum, the experience of meaning in life was a central goal of existence, 'The main thing is that even as we die a terrible death, we are able to feel right up to the very last moment that life has meaning and beauty' (Hillesum, 2002; p. 506).

If judging one's life as meaningful is a goal, then it makes sense to think of this judgment process as potentially involving a confirmatory search for information suggesting that one's life *is* meaningful. One such source of information might be positive affect (PA). In our work, we have found that the relatively common experience of positive mood can serve as a source for the grand experience of meaning in life.

PA and judgments of meaning in life

PA can be defined as pleasant mood and measured using such terms as 'happy', 'pleased', or 'joyful'. Hierarchies of values typically place PA and meaning in life at very different ends of the spectrum, with pleasure at the lowest, most concrete level and meaning in life at a very high, abstract level (e.g., Crandall & Rasmussen, 1975; Rokeach, 1973). More recently, meaning in life and PA have been partitioned into separate sides of psychological well-being (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 2008). Based on Aristotle's (350 BCE/1998 CE) classic distinction between eudaimonia and hedonism, these scholars have suggested that well-being be divided into eudaimonic functioning (i.e., well-being that is based on the fulfillment of a one's potential) and hedonic functioning (i.e., how a person feels about his or her life). Meaning in life is generally included as an aspect of eudaimonic functioning (Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 1998, 2008), while PA is considered a central component of hedonic well-being (Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999).

Despite this conceptual distinction, research has shown that PA is a unique predictor of meaning in life even after controlling for a variety of theoretically more relevant variables, including goal pursuit and progress (King et al., 2006) religious faith (Hicks & King, 2008), depression, self-esteem, religious commitment, autonomy, competence, and social relatedness (Lambert et al., forthcoming). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that inducing PA (e.g., by having participants write about a positive experience or listen to happy music) increases meaning in life (e.g., Hicks & King, 2008). Simply, when we put people in a good mood their meaning in life ratings are higher than their counterparts in a control group.

If experience is any indicator, this is the moment where the patient reader of this essay, even one who has managed to suspend objections about drawing tenuous links between a remarkable autobiographical narrative and self-report questionnaires of meaning in life, is likely to balk. If a mood manipulation changes a person's meaning in life, then that measure of meaning in life cannot possibly be the real thing. Or can it?

In fact, the potential role of pleasurable feelings in the experience of meaning in life has been acknowledged for some time. In his essay, 'On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings', William James (1900) noted how the subtle appreciation of the simple pleasures in life can lead to the experience of meaning. Similarly, Yalom (1980) argued that one approach to finding meaning in life is 'simply to live fully, to retain one's astonishment at the miracle of life, to plunge oneself into the natural rhythm of life, to search for pleasure at the deepest possible sense.' (p. 437), suggesting, at least, that some kinds of PA (such as zest or vitality) might be valid sources of meaning in life (Nix, Ryan, Manly, & Deci, 1999; Russell, 1930/1958; Waterman, 1993). Finally, Klinger (1975) suggested that a form of incentives

that are ‘habituation resistant’ are those associated with innate pleasures (e.g., ‘benign surprises, seeing a familiar thing in a new way, exercising skills and capacities,’ etc.). Thus, it could be argued that PA is not simply a contributor to meaning judgments, but often a *primary* contributor to the experience of meaning in life itself.

Recent research supports the idea that PA provides (at least some) people with meaning in life. When asked to list what makes their lives meaningful, people often mention sources related to pleasure and happiness (Ebersole, 1998). In a recent study (Lambert et al., forthcoming), participants were asked to rank 12 different sources of meaning (e.g., ‘friends,’ ‘religious faith,’ ‘achievements,’ ‘self-worth,’ etc.) by their relevance to the experience of meaning in life. Although the highest ranked source was not specifically linked to PA (‘family’), the second highest ranked source was ‘happiness.’ Thus, it appears that people do consider their positive emotional states as relevant to their experience of meaning in life.

When people tell us their lives are meaningful, are they simply telling us they are happy? Research suggests a more nuanced conclusion. For example, religiosity moderates the relationship between both naturally occurring and induced PA. Specifically, highly religious individuals report high meaning in life regardless of PA (Hicks & King, 2008; Study 1). When Christians are primed with concepts related to heaven, they no longer rely on mood as information about meaning in life (Hicks & King, 2008; Study 2). Thus, a person can be unhappy and still judge life as meaningful. These results provide evidence that while PA is often a strong predictor of judgments of meaning in life, other more central variables may supersede mood as information.

All of this talk of happy moods might seem ill placed in a discussion that began with the tragic (if inspiring) journal of a woman killed in a concentration camp. Yet, if there is another theme, aside from life’s meaning and the reality of human suffering, in Etty Hillesum’s diary, it is her capacity for enthusiasm and even joy:

with all the destruction, with all my tiredness, suffering, and everything else, this is constant: my joy ... (Hillesum, 2002; p. 510)

I could fling my arms around this rainy day and hug it to death (Hillesum, 2002; p. 514).

Of course, one way to think of the influence of PA on meaning in life judgments is the well-established mood-as-information effect. Research has demonstrated that when individuals judge an abstract life domain, rather than consult all of the declarative information relevant to the judgment, they may instead consult mood to provide an answer (Diener, 1994; Schwarz, 2001; Schwarz & Clore, 1983, 1996). Mood-as-information effects are typically demonstrated when the influence of mood on judgments is wiped out by the presence of more relevant cues or by providing individuals with an attributional cue for their moods (rendering mood irrelevant to the

judgment at hand). Research has shown that mood-as-information may at least partially characterize the role of PA in meaning in life judgments (King, et al., 2006; Study 5). Importantly, however, mood-as-information effects are not always a function of unconscious misattribution processes (Schwarz & Strack, 1991). Sometimes, moods are consciously perceived as relevant to the judgment. For example, many people believe that ‘moods are an integrative function of all of the experiences [individuals] have’ (Schwarz & Strack, 1991; p. 37), suggesting that affective information is not always irrelevant to judgments of well-being.

When the outside world suggests that life is not meaningful, we can, nevertheless, draw on inner experience to maintain a sense that it is. Our positive feelings are themselves part of that subjective world, a part of our mental lives that may be profoundly linked to meaning in life. Even subliminal primes associated with PA (e.g., ‘happy’ ‘joyful’) lead to higher meaning in life judgments compared to primes associated with neutral words (e.g., ‘hubcap’ ‘violin’; King et al., 2006). In the absence of felt PA, subliminal reminders of pleasant affect enhance the experience of meaning in life. This connection between PA and meaning in life may be a learned association, forged by experiences with the co-occurrence of PA and meaningful activities.

Even as PA is a part of everyday existence, it is also a concomitant of many aspects of experience that have been considered highly meaningful. Aristotle (350 BCE/1998 CE), himself, described eudaimonia as not only the noblest but the *most pleasant* experience. Contemporary philosophers have argued that eudaimonia is always accompanied by pleasure (Telfer, 1980). Indeed, research has shown that when human beings are engaged in meaningful activity, PA is often there as well. Experience sampling studies have shown that flow (the optimal state of engagement with effortful rewarding activity, Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) is more likely to occur when people are experiencing positive mood (Csikszentmihalyi & Wong, 1991). Enjoyment is often used as a definitive characteristic of intrinsically motivated behavior (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1993; Ryan, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Waterman, 2007). Religious commitment, altruism and helping, and many aspects of eudaimonic well-being are related to the experience of PA (Batson & Powell, 2003; Kashdan et al., forthcoming; Nave, Sherman, & Funder, 2008). These findings further illustrate the strong (and likely reciprocal) link between PA and meaning in life.

In attempting to explain the adaptive nature of positive emotion, scholars have often looked beyond pleasure, to its attentional, motivational, and behavioral concomitants (e.g., Fredrickson, 1998; 2001; Isen, 2000). Yet, the contribution of PA to meaning in life may not derive from of its relation to cognitive or motivational consequences, but from its strong link to the experience of meaning in life. Given its association with meaningful activity, PA may come to serve as a cognitively accessible reminder that life has had meaning, and perhaps that it continues to do so. Such a connection

between positive emotion and meaning in life was not lost on Etty Hillesum: ‘... with a good deal of zest and joy and conviction and an inkling of all the connections there are and that ultimately still make life a meaningful whole’ (Hillesum, 2002; p. 661).

Clearly, even in the difficult circumstances of her life, Hillesum was able to identify pleasure as a route to the experience of meaning. Her diary suggests that feelings of pleasure are linked with meaning in life in ways that may ultimately be found to serve reciprocal functions:

Life is beautiful to me and worth living and full of meaning. Despite everything. That does not mean I am always filled with joy and exaltation. I am often dog tired. ... but I know that this too is part of life, and somewhere there is something inside me that will never desert me. (Hillesum, 2002; p. 493).

Just as positive emotional experiences feed into the judgment that life is meaningful, that judgment, once made, may become a resource that serves as a durable reminder that life is worth living. That resource, though (perhaps) hopelessly ineffable, is no less subjectively real:

There was simply one great meaningful whole. Will I be able to describe all that one day? So that others can feel too how lovely and worth living and just, yes just, life really is? Perhaps one day God will give me the few simple words I need (Hillesum, 2002; p. 559).

Some Closing Thoughts

In closing, we wish to first reiterate that PA is certainly not the only variable that contributes to meaning in life judgments. As Frankl noted, many times unhappy people often maintain (or develop) a strong sense of meaning in life. In fact, many theorists have argued that disregarding the objective circumstances of one’s life and basing one’s meaning in life solely on one’s current mood may ultimately lead to negative outcomes (especially if that mood is primarily derived from maladaptive behaviors such as alcohol and/or drugs; Frankl, 1963/1984; Maddi, 1967). After all, positive illusions are not always adaptive (e.g., Colvin & Block, 1994; Kurt & Paulhus, 2008). In addition, it has been suggested that the perception of meaninglessness can sometimes lead to an adaptive search for meaning (Janoff-Bulmann, 1992; Janoff-Bulman & Yopyk, 2004). Although this process may be associated with negative emotions, searching for meaning can lead to many positive outcomes such as personal growth, maturity, and the ultimate the reinstatement of meaning systems (e.g., Janoff-Bulman & Yopyk, 2004; King & Hicks, 2007; Steger et al., 2008). Perhaps, it was the sheer extremity of circumstances that led Etty Hillesum to the intense introspection that ultimately gave rise to her fervent conclusion that her existence was meaningful.

Clearly, we have much to learn about meaning in life. Indeed, we have yet to answer the question of what it is. Yet, one might, we hope, excuse

the definitional imprecision. Perhaps one day we will have the ‘few simple words’ we need to define this construct. But until then, scholars continue to examine meaning in life, with the Scilla of definitional ambiguity on the one side and the Charybdis of reductionism on the other. There can be no question that Etty Hillesum judged her own life to be meaningful (and beautiful) and that this sense of meaning was inextricably linked to her enduring capacity for vital engagement in her work, her faith, and her commitment to share in the suffering of ‘her people’. If such unlikely joy can facilitate a sense of meaning in life in Hillesum’s context, should we be surprised that in everyday life, the human capacity for pleasure might serve the same function?

Short Biographies

Laura A. King’s research has explored psychological approaches to The Good Life, using a variety of measures of well-being, narrative constructions of the self, stories of life transitions, and personality development. Before moving to the University of Missouri, Columbia where she is currently a professor in the Department of Psychological Sciences, she taught at Southern Methodist University. King received an AB in Psychology and English Literature from Kenyon College, an MA in psychology from Michigan State University, and a PhD in Psychology from the University of California, Davis. Joshua A. Hicks earned his BA from San Francisco State University, MS from Villanova University, and PhD from the University of Missouri. Beginning August 2009, Joshua will join the psychology department at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. In addition to examining the experience of meaning in life, Joshua is interested in the effects of mood and intuition on cognitive and behavioral processes, personality development, and the interface between personality and social psychological processes and the use and abuse of addictive substances.

Endnote

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¹ In this article, we focus specifically on studies that have examined the relations between self-reports of meaning in life and other important variables. Of course, many other scholars, who have not always administered self-reports of meaning in life, have greatly contributed to theory and research on this construct. For example, researchers who study life narratives have uncovered many revealing insights about what makes people’s lives meaningful (e.g., McAdams, 2006). However, because our primary goal is to describe variables that influence people’s subjective evaluations of their lives meaning, we limit our review to studies that have measured people’s explicit judgments of their lives meaning.

² The poignancy of Hillesum’s diary is particularly evident in that although it was begun as a therapeutic exercise, it eventually emerged, for her, as a passion in its own right, and a potential source of material for a novel she might write one day after the war. That she turned it over is a testament to her realization that her survival, itself, was unlikely.

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