

BRIEF REPORT

Meaning in life and seeing the big picture: Positive affect and global focus

Joshua A. Hicks and Laura A. King
University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA

Research has demonstrated that there is a strong relationship between positive affect (PA) and meaning in life. It has been suggested that this relationship may exist, in part, because PA facilitates a global cognitive focus, allowing a person to see “the big picture” of his or her life. Although it is possible global focus mediates the relationship between PA and meaning in life, it is also possible that global focus moderates this relationship by either enhancing or weakening the relationship. The present study tested these mediational and moderational hypotheses. In this study, participants completed measures of PA, meaning in life, and a global/local focus task. Results showed that global focus did not mediate the relationship between PA and meaning in life. Instead, global focus moderated the relationship, such that those who had higher global focus were actually less likely to base their meaning in life judgements on PA. Implications for understanding the relation of PA, global focus, and meaning in life are discussed.

The experience of meaning in life has been recognised as an important contributor to health and well-being (e.g., Ryff & Singer, 1998; Wong & Fry, 1998). Meaning in life is related to many important variables such as depression, anxiety, hope, and life satisfaction (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Reker, Peacock & Wong, 1987; Ryff, 1989; Steger & Frazier, 2005; Zika & Chamberlain, 1987, 1992). Although, generally speaking, research and theory has implied that meaning in life leads to enhanced feelings of

Correspondence should be addressed to: Josh Hicks, 210 McAlester Hall, Department of Psychological Sciences, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65201, USA.
E-mail: jahwb3@mizzou.edu

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happiness, recent research has demonstrated that the experience of positive affect (PA) enhances the feeling that life is meaningful (King, Hicks, Krull & Del Gaiso, 2006). In those studies, King and colleagues found correlational and experimental evidence for a strong relationship between positive affect (PA) and the experience of meaning in life in general, the experience of meaning in a day, and the experience of meaning in an activity.

One explanation for King and colleagues' (2006) findings is that individuals use their PA as a source of information when answering the question "Is my life meaningful?" According to the mood as information hypothesis, people sometimes use their current mood as a source of information when making evaluative judgements (see Schwarz & Clore, 1996, for a review). Essentially, when confronted with a question about a very abstract quality of their lives, rather than taking all possible information into account, individuals might instead interpret their current feelings as relevant to the target (Schwarz & Clore, 1996; Schwarz & Strack, 1999). Positive moods, therefore, may lead to more favourable evaluations of the target, and negative moods may lead to less favourable evaluations (e.g., Schwarz & Clore, 1983).

Although mood as information effects may partially account for the relationship between PA and meaning in life judgements, research and theory on the cognitive consequences of PA offers an appealing alternative explanation for King et al.'s (2006) findings. Research on affect and cognition has demonstrated that PA fosters a broader or global focus (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2004; Gasper & Clore, 2002). Indeed, in her broaden and build model of positive emotions, Fredrickson (1998, 2001) has suggested that this broadening is crucial to the adaptive function of positive emotions. In a broader mindset, individuals are more likely to see the forest rather than the trees. This global focus may play a role in the experience of meaning in life. When people think broadly, they may be more likely to see how their daily existence is connected to a larger system of meaning (King et al., 2006). If meaning in life is found when one sees "the big picture" or recognises one's place in a grand scheme, it is clear that PA may play a substantive role in the experience of meaning in life.

This study examined how global attentional focus related to PA and the experience of meaning in life. Two sets of predictions were evaluated. First, the *mediational* prediction would assert that the global focus afforded by PA accounts for its relation to meaning in life. Thus, we should expect to observe positive relationships among PA, global focus, and meaning in life. Furthermore, we would expect the relationship between PA and meaning in life to diminish considerably after controlling for global focus.

A second set of predictions is also possible. Although research has shown that PA does relate to global focus, this relationship is of course,

probabilistic. If not all positive moods enhance global focus, then we can evaluate whether PA, in the presence or absence of global focus, relates to meaning in life. In order to examine potential *moderation* of the relationship between PA and meaning in life by global focus, the interaction of PA and global focus was tested. If that interaction were to contribute positively to the experience of meaning in life, those results would suggest an “upward spiral” effect. From this perspective, it might be that, for a person whose positive mood fosters a particularly high level of global focus, these two factors synthesise to produce an expansive understanding of one’s place in the grand scheme of life.

Alternatively, a negative interaction would seem to support the notion that global focus allows information beyond mood to take centre stage in meaning in life judgements. That is, although PA may be one cue to meaning in life, other cues might also be present, such as a person’s religious faith, personal goals, or social relationships. This moderational hypothesis would assert that a global focus might actually “turn off” the tendency to rely on mood to judge one’s meaning in life—the global mindset might allow a person to ignore the relatively weak cue of mood in favour of other broader concerns, perhaps leading to a more accurate judgement of the perceived meaningfulness of one’s life.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred seventy-two undergraduate students (57% women) completed a questionnaire packet for extra credit in a psychology class. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 33 years old ($M = 20.03$, $SD = 1.53$). Represented ethnicities were 86% White/European American, 7% African American, 2% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 3% “other”.

Materials and procedure

Affect. First, participants rated 6 positive-mood adjectives to provide a measure of PA. The adjectives chosen included “happy”, “joy”, “self-confident”, “pleased”, “satisfied”, and “enjoyment/fun” (cf. Diener & Emmons, 1984). For this study, participants were instructed to rate how much they were experiencing the particular emotion “right now.” Items were rated on a scale from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*; $M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.87$, $\alpha = .88$).

Global/local focus. A measure adapted from Kimchi and Palmer (1982) was used to assess biases in perceptual scope of attention. In their study,

Kimchi and Palmer (1982) showed participants a set of geometric shapes (target set) and asked them to choose from two other sets of geometric shapes the set that was most similar to the target set. One of the participants' choices had the same local properties as the target (i.e., it was composed of the same types of shapes), and the other choice had the same global properties as the target shape (i.e., it had the same global form). Research has shown that people in negative and neutral moods are biased toward the local properties of the shapes (i.e., they would choose the set that has the same types of shapes as the target set as being most similar), and people in positive moods are biased toward the global properties of the shapes (i.e., they would choose the set that has the same global properties as the target set as being most similar; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Gasper & Clore, 2002; see also Basso, Schefft, Ris, & Dember, 1996). In the current study, participants were shown 9 different sets of shapes similar to those used by Kimchi and Palmer (1982; $\alpha = .86$).

Meaning in life. After completing the cognitive broadening measure, participants completed 4 items from the Purpose in Life Test (PIL; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). The PIL is a 20-item scale assessing the degree to which a person experiences a sense of meaning and purpose in life. The PIL was factor analysed by McGregor and Little (1998) and the items that pertained specifically to the experience of meaning in life (and not happiness or general well-being) were identified. Four items adapted from the items identified by McGregor and Little were used in the present study. Items were rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). These items were, "In life, I have very clear goals and aims", "My personal existence is very purposeful and meaningful", "I have clear goals and a satisfying purpose in life", and "I regard my ability to find a meaning, purpose, or mission in life as being very great" ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.35$, $\alpha = .87$).

RESULTS

PA, global focus, and meaning in life

First, zero-order correlations were computed among the three measures of interest. In keeping with past research, PA was related to global focus ($r = .27$, $p < .01$) as well as meaning in life ($r = .31$, $p < .01$). However, global focus and meaning in life were not related ($r = .01$). Clearly, the lack of relation of global focus with meaning in life precludes the possibility that global cognitive focus underlies the relationship between PA and meaning in life. Accordingly, we examined the potential moderation of the relation between PA and meaning in life by cognitive broadening.

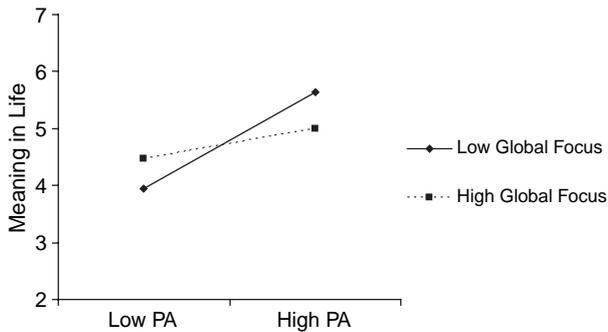


Figure 1. Meaning in life as a function of PA and global attentional focus.

In order to examine the interaction of PA and global focus on meaning in life ratings, a hierarchical regression equation was computed. Both PA and broadening scores were converted to mean deviation scores to represent the main effects. Then, the product of these scores was used as the interaction term (Aiken & West, 1993). The main effects were entered on the first step. As might be expected from the bivariate relations, the main effects contributed to a significant change in R^2 (R^2 change = .16, $p < .0001$); with PA ($\beta = .40$, $p < .001$), but not global focus, predicting enhanced meaning in life. However, this main effect was qualified by a significant two-way interaction, entered on the second step (R^2 change = .04, $p < .01$; $\beta = -.19$, $p < .01$).¹

Figure 1 shows the predicted values for individuals one standard deviation above and below the mean on the predictor variables. At low levels of global focus, PA was related to enhanced meaning in life ($\beta = .59$, $p < .001$), while at high levels of global focus, PA was relatively less related to meaning in life ($\beta = .22$, $p < .05$). These results suggest that a global focus does not explain the relation of PA to meaning in life. Rather, when taking such a global perspective, meaning in life is less dependent on the effects of positive mood.

DISCUSSION

In addressing the relationship between PA and meaning in life, the notion that this strong relationship is explained by the cognitive effects of PA is an appealing and parsimonious one. It would seem to make sense that the capacity for PA to promote a broadened mind would allow an individual to experience a sense of meaning in life. However, the present data offer no

¹ Because this was a correlational study, we also ran an analysis using meaning in life, global focus, and the interaction between the two variables to predict PA. The results revealed that, as expected, meaning in life predicted PA; however, the cognitive broadening \times meaning in life interaction was not significant ($p = .18$).

support for this intuitively appealing account. Instead, PA interacted with global focus to predict meaning in life such that PA predicted enhanced meaning in life for those for whom that positive mood was not particularly broadening. For those who scored highly on the global focus measure, meaning in life was less related to PA. How might we explain these provocative results?

One possibility is that when making judgements of meaning in life, individuals draw upon a variety of cues. We suggest that which cues are used in evaluating life's meaning is based on two important attributes of the cues, their self-relevance and the likelihood of producing an affirmative answer (Hicks & King, 2007). As such, it may be that the global mindset, induced by positive moods, may serve to make a variety of self-relevant cues more salient, drawing one's attention to sources of meaning beyond mood. Thus, ironically, the global focus afforded by positive mood may make mood a less relevant cue to one's meaning in life.

The content of the broadened mind would be of interest in future work examining affect and the experience of meaning in life. Perhaps when confronted with the question of life's meaningfulness, participants who are in a broadened mindset are moved to consult a broader array of indicators than simply their current mood. Indeed the interaction found here is similar to the results of a previous investigation in which PA did not predict meaning in life for those who were given a warning about the effects of mood on meaning in life judgements (King et al., 2006, Study 5). In effect, global focus appears to have the same influence, perhaps leading to a discounting of mood as information about the meaning in one's life.

The present findings raise many interesting questions concerning the relationship between PA, global focus, and meaning in life. For example, recent research suggests approach-related positive emotions may actually *decrease* global attentional focus (Gable & Harmon-Jones, 2007). Is it possible, therefore, that global focus only moderates the relationship between specific positive emotions (i.e., non-approach-related positive emotions) and meaning in life? In addition, personality (e.g., mindfulness; cf. Fredrickson, 2007) and situational variables may lead to global focus independent of PA (e.g., Forster, Friedman, Ozelsel, & Denzler, 2006). It is unclear, then, whether it is necessary for PA to engender the broadened mindset in order for such a mindset to attenuate the relationship between PA and meaning in life. Future research examining these types of questions will lead to a better understanding of the relationship between positive affect, global focus, and the experience of meaning in life.

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