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Reflections on the Scientific Study of Meaning in Life

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This article examines four questions central to the scientific study of meaning in life: First, what are some key challenges faced in the scientific study of meaning in life? Second, how might appropriate measures of meaning constructs be developed? Third, what are the fundamental processes related to meaning making and meaning seeking? Finally, are there individual differences in the need for meaning? We offer our thoughts and reflections in response to each of these questions.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE KEY CHALLENGES FACED IN THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF MEANING IN LIFE?

Empirical research on meaning in life has flourished in the last decade. Although we have made great progress in understanding this elusive construct, many key questions remain unanswered. Perhaps the most important of these questions revolves around the difference between subjective and objective meaning. The vast majority of research on meaning in life has simply used face-valid self-reports of meaning to assess the individual's subjective understanding of the meaningfulness of his or her life. This way of thinking about meaning in life is convenient for the researcher, because it allows the individual to provide his or her own evaluation. Moreover, many researchers and theorists have argued that this might be the best way to think about (and assess) meaning, because it is inherently a highly personalized judgment (Hick & King, 2009; Klinger, 1975). For instance, sometimes it is difficult to tell whether someone's life *feels* meaningful simply by looking at his or her situation (e.g., Tolstoy, 1996).

Despite the benefits of examining subjective judgments of meaning, others have argued that these evaluations may fail to capture real meaning. For example, Frankl and others have argued that, although people under the influence of LSD might temporarily report higher levels of meaning in life, their experience of meaning is fleeting and illusory (although, see Griffiths, Richard, McCann, & Jesse, 2006). In a similar vein, we (with Laura King) have published many articles demonstrating that positive affect (PA) contributes to subjective evaluations of meaning in life. Some people balk at the possibility that PA, especially when induced via "trivial" manipulations, bolsters a genuine perception of meaning in life. Although we acknowledge it is possible that not all positive illusions are indeed equally beneficial, there is currently no empirical

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research to support the idea that meaning in life is somehow less optimal if it is based on cues some may consider meaningless.

Instead of debating this important issue, we concede that only assessing one's subjective experience of meaning leads to an incomplete understanding of the construct. That is, we believe researchers (ourselves included) should do more than just assess self-reports of subjective evaluations of meaning in life. Next, we outline some possible ways to assess meaning in life that people might consider incorporating into their research in an effort to better advance our understanding of what it truly means to experience meaning.

HOW MIGHT APPROPRIATE MEASURES OF MEANING CONSTRUCTS BE DEVELOPED?

In his classic personality textbook, *The Personality Puzzle* (Funder, 2014), David Funder outlined four types of "clues" researchers can use to understand a person. These clues correspond to four types of data: self-reports, informant reports, behavioral data, and life outcome data. Funder emphasized that each of these clues is imperfect by itself but, taken together, they can help paint a clearer and more accurate picture of the individual. We agree with Funder, and believe that meaning-in-life researchers would benefit by incorporating more of these types of assessments in their research. Below we briefly discuss how each of these clues might relate to the experience of meaning in life.

SELF-REPORT

Researchers have relied primarily on self-reports to inform them about the meaning-in-life construct. As mentioned, most of these measures simply ask participants to provide an estimate of the meaningfulness of their lives by rating face valid items (e.g., "Is your life meaningful?") on a 1–7 scale. Although convenient, these types of measures clearly have a variety of disadvantages. For example, self-reports are often influenced by variables exogenous to the construct of interest (e.g., self-presentational motives, memory biases). Nonetheless, we certainly should not dismiss research that has used self-report. After all, we have learned so much about other constructs (satisfaction with life, optimism) using similar types of subjective measures. Moreover, the most widely used meaning-in-life scales have been shown to possess great discriminant validity and, most importantly, research has consistently shown that they often predict important outcomes over and above the effect of other variables (e.g., income). For instance, a recent study showed that self-reports of purpose in life predict mortality rates 10 years later (Hill & Turiano, 2014). Clearly, we have learned a lot about meaning using self-report measures.

INFORMANT REPORT

Informant (or observer) reports simply refer to a measure that asks someone who knows the participant (or even a stranger who observes the participant's behavior) to assess the participant. For example, instead of Joe evaluating his own level of meaning in life, his roommate, Jane, would rate the meaningfulness of Joe's life. Although it is true informants have far less information about

the individual than the individual, one of the great advantages of informant report measures is that observers are typically less biased in their evaluations compared to the individual. We can assume a degree of accuracy in the informants' assessments to the extent that their ratings are correlated with other informants' ratings.

A few studies have used informant reports to either validate scales or predict variables linked to meaning in life (e.g., Steger & Frazier, 2005), but this type of measurement is still greatly underutilized in the literature. This is unfortunate given that we could learn a lot about the construct, for example, by examining what types of cues people use to evaluate the meaningfulness of someone else's life. More studies using informant reports may also help researchers better clarify the utility of self-report measures of meaning in life. For example, if the individual's subjective judgments of the meaningfulness of his or her life predict outcomes (e.g., depression), over and above informant reports, it might give more credence for the importance of understanding (and assessing) the individual's subjective perception of existential meaning.

BEHAVIORAL DATA

Behavioral data represent any data examining what people actually do. In this case, behavior is defined broadly (e.g., physiological data is included in this category). For example, a researcher might code the individual's nonverbal behavior in the lab or "real-world," or examine the degree to which an individual demonstrates aggressive behavior after being ostracized, for example. This type of data is rich and unbiased in most cases, as it often captures the individual's automatic reaction to the situation. To our knowledge, research on meaning in life has rarely used behavioral data to assess the construct of meaning. The good news is that there are hundreds of fascinating questions future research can answer using this type of data. For example, what type of language do people with high meaning in life use? Do they talk less about themselves and more about other people? Are they more likely to help other people in need? Is their behavior in social situations actually different compared to those with low levels of meaning in life? What does the behavior of someone who experiences meaning in life look like in the work environment? These are clearly only a few questions, but we hope they highlight the importance of the need to expand our methodological toolkit.

Life Outcome Data Generally, life outcome data represents observable life outcomes such as occupation, socioeconomic status (SES), parental or health status, and arrest records, to name a few. There have been a few fascinating studies linking self-reports of meaning in life to some of these types of outcomes, primarily in the health domain, but there is certainly a dearth of research that has used life outcomes to indicate whether someone's life is meaningful. That is, what are some plausible indicators of a life full of meaning? And, perhaps even more intriguing, what types of life outcomes are less relevant to meaning? For instance, perhaps certain types of occupations (e.g., social worker) are indicators that an individual's life is meaningful, whereas other important outcomes (e.g., SES) are less relevant to whether an individual's life is meaningful.

In sum, there are likely many ways of assessing meaning in life. We believe future research should attempt to incorporate alternative measurements to complement the existing literature that has relied so heavily on self-reports. By providing converging evidence, we are likely to get a better understanding of what constitutes existential meaning. As they say, if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it is probably a duck.

WHAT ARE THE FUNDAMENTAL PROCESSES RELATED TO MEANING MAKING AND MEANING SEEKING?

In our research, we propose that self-knowledge is the fundamental “starting place” for meaning seeking, and that people use the true self like a compass to guide their decision making. For example, imagine someone trying to decide whether to make a career change. People will generally be motivated to make a career choice that feels meaningful. However, it is not necessarily clear what makes a career meaningful. For one person, being a journalist feels like a meaningful choice, whereas someone else cannot imagine feeling fulfilled in that career. So who is “right”? In modern society, there are no agreed upon, clear guidelines that suggest whether journalism is or is not a meaningful career. As such, the question of meaning becomes inherently personal. People have to decide for themselves whether a given career is meaningful to them. We believe they do so by consulting the contents of their true self-concept (i.e., their beliefs about who they really are). If they see an overlap between the choice (e.g., journalism) and who they believe they really are, that overlap makes the choice feel meaningful. The fact that the career will allow them to express their true self is enough to make it feel meaningful (Baumeister, 1991). This is why we believe the concept of meaning is, to at least some degree, inherently subjective. Everyone finds meaning in different places.

Even shared sources of meaning (e.g., relationships) are influenced by this process. After all, everybody has to decide *which* people in their environment will serve as meaningful relationship partners. Here, too, we think people are looking for others who understand their true selves, allow them the opportunity to express those true selves, and appreciate them for their true selves. Thus, the perceived degree of overlap between one’s true self and any specific relationship helps determine whether that particular relationship is meaningful.

As one final example, people even have to make these personal decisions when it comes to shared systems of meaning such as religion and culture. Although these meaning systems often provide answers to the questions about life’s meaning, people must make personal choices about whether they subscribe to those answers and the meaning systems that provide them.

As a consequence of these processes, we have continually found that the amount people feel they know about their true selves positively predicts decision satisfaction and judgments of meaning in life (e.g., Schlegel & Hicks, 2011).

ARE THERE INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN THE NEED FOR MEANING?

One issue that is often overlooked in the scientific study of meaning is whether there are individual differences in the need for meaning. Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler’s (2006) search-for-meaning subscale comes the closest to addressing this issue, but more work could be done in this area. Looking around in our own lives, we often wonder whether there are some individuals who are simply “existentially unconcerned.” That is, the question of whether life has meaning is not one they spend time or effort contemplating. In fact, they may even be confused by the question. All meaning researchers have likely had this experience when explaining their research to other people. It is not uncommon for people to say something like, “I’ve never really thought about whether life had meaning.” However, this response is not one that a traditional meaning-in-life measure would pick up on; there is no “never thought about it” response option. By necessity,

measures of meaning in life force people to consider the question of whether their lives have meaning. However, the answer they give is likely qualitatively different for someone who has pondered this question previously.

A second question related to individual differences is “when” meaning might matter most. That is, existential concerns are likely to vary across the lifespan. Certainly, toddlers are not yet concerned with meaning. The main point is that existential concerns are unlikely to be equally distributed across one’s life, that there are likely times when the need for meaning is more or less likely to “bubble up.” Of course people have examined meaning making during specific points in time, such as following a traumatic event (e.g., Park, 2010), but the literature on “everyday” meaning making sometimes loses sight of the fact that existential concerns may or may not be looming for everyone in the sample. Furthermore, even in the context of a specific event, there is at least some evidence that not everyone who experiences that event is similarly existentially concerned. Indeed, in a sample of breast cancer patients (Schlegel, Manning, & Bettencourt, 2013), we found there were individual differences in the search for meaning and that those individual differences were predicted by the feeling that one’s expectancies about life were violated. Those women who felt that life had gone as they expected reported relatively little need to search for meaning. This suggests that even the same experience (i.e., breast cancer) does not rouse existential concerns to the same extent across individuals.

A final question concerning differences in the need for meaning is “where” the needs may be more or less relevant. Given that most of the work on meaning (like all work in psychology) is done with “weird” samples (i.e., people from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic societies; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), a greater consideration of the role of culture seems warranted. Considering that culture is in some ways the “ultimate” system of meaning, it seems likely that cultures may differ in the extent to which they suggest that the members of the culture should even concern themselves with the question of whether life is meaningful. Perhaps in some cultures it would be counter-normative to even raise such a question. For whatever reason, there may be certain cultural features that would lead most if members to have the reaction, “I’ve never really thought about whether life had meaning.” For example, the greater degree of choice people perceive in their lives in Western versus non-Western nations may be more likely to spur existential concerns.

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