

Chapter 2

Meaning in Life: Nature, Needs, and Myths

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Introduction

Living a meaningful and purposeful life has been shown to be one of the central factors associated with psychological well-being (Ryff and Singer 1998). Conversely, a lack of meaning in life is associated with a variety of negative outcomes (e.g., Mascaro and Rosen 2005, 2006). Given the importance of living a meaningful life, it would not be an overstatement to suggest that people need meaning in life. Viktor Frankl was one of the first thinkers to suggest that people do have a need for meaning in life. Frankl is widely regarded as a pioneer in the study of meaning. His early work (1959/2006) stressed the importance of value as part of living a meaningful life. Later, thinkers and researchers have also acknowledged the need to find meaning in life (e.g., Baumesiter 1991; Heine et al. 2006; Maslow 1968). Meaning pervades human life and is an important feature in a range of life experiences.

In this chapter we discuss some important features of meaning in life and highlight specific areas where the existential and positive psychology perspectives on meaning could be integrated. We begin by providing an outline of important characteristics of meaning including definitions, main functions of meaning, and the dynamics between different levels of meaning. Next, we discuss the need for meaning and review four basic needs for meaning as proposed by Baumesiter (1991). Last, some inherent deceptions and distortions associated with living a meaningful life are addressed and their relationships to existential and positive psychology are briefly discussed.

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Nature of Meaning

Meaning is that which connects ideas and objects to each other in a predictable and relatively stable way. The term meaning will be used in its conventional, everyday sense, as when one discusses the meaning of a poem or a sentence. At the most basic level, meaning is about the shared association and distinctions of particular pieces of information. One definition could be that meaning is a shared mental representation of possible relationships among things, relationships, and events. Thus, meaning is the basis of a collective, organized network of concepts. A good example of this shared network of meaning is language, which requires at least two people who use and understand a common meaning for a given word or sentence.

Meanings of life are not completely different to the meaning of a sentences, although there are some distinctions, in that the only purpose and function of a sentence is to convey meaning, and in this way a sentence could not exist without meaning, whereas life can exist without meaning. Meanings of life have the same kind of meaning as the meaning of a sentence in a few important ways: the parts fit together in a coherent pattern and into a broader context and both are capable of being understood by others and invoke shared assumptions. A meaning of life is a special usage of meaning that superimposes meaning onto one's life.

Meaning is fundamentally social and cultural. It is primarily acquired via interactions and relationships with other people in the context of culture. Culture offers an assortment of meanings of life from which an individual can choose. Ideologies are prominent types of meaning systems presented by cultures, and a given culture can subsume an array of different ideologies. An ideology is a system of values and beliefs that inform people in how to think about, interpret, and evaluate various life events. Some cultures force a particular ideology more strongly than others. Modern western cultures are typically less forceful in that they provide a selection of ideologies. Ultimately, individuals do not create their own meaning; rather, they select and use any floating bits and pieces of meaning, and/or preassembled frameworks of meaning (e.g., ideologies) that society and culture have to offer.

Relationships with others are a necessary and central aspect of human existence and well-being (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Given this, it would make sense that interpersonal relationships can provide a great deal of meaning in life (Zadro et al. 2004). Recent empirical research has provided strong evidence for a close tie between meaning in life and interpersonal relationships. Data suggests that social relationships are the most frequently reported source of meaning in life (Debats 1999). Lambert et al. (2010) asked study participants to rank the most important sources of meaning in their lives, and found that 68 % ranked family as their primary source of meaning in life and another 14 % ranked friends as the primary source, so that for 82 % of participants, personal relationships were the primary source of meaning. Williams (2002) has suggested that social rejection can thwart several psychological needs including the need for meaning in life, and several studies have provided evidence to support this claim (van Beest and Williams 2006; Zadro et al. 2006). Another study by Stillman et al.

(2009) found that those led to believe they were not wanted as social partners were more likely to believe that life was meaningless compared to those who believed they were wanted as social partners. It has also been found that those with more meaning in life, were rated as more desirable social interactants, more likable, and better potential friends at zero acquaintance by others, compared to those with less meaning in life (Stillman et al. 2011). This influence of meaning in life went beyond other positive variables such as self-esteem, extraversion, and happiness. In short, close relationships provide a substantial amount of meaning in life, and the lack of such relationships can produce deficits in meaning.

Functions of Meaning

Meanings of life may serve several different functions for different individuals, but we suggest that they can be reduced to three main broad functions or adaptations. The first function of meaning is to help people recognize and discern signals and patterns in the environment. From an evolutionary perspective, having the ability to discern patterns in the environment by association and distinction of information should be beneficial. For example, if people are able to recognize certain weather patterns, it helps them deal with upcoming weather (e.g., seek shelter if a storm is coming, or prepare to hunt if weather will be mild). When a creature has this ability, a particular state of weather takes on meaning in some crude sense. Using language also requires one to discern and understand a variety of different patterns and be aware of subtle contextual nuances. Beyond simply aiding in exploitation of the physical environment, discerning patterns also extends to the social environment. An intelligent organism can retrieve meaningful information about other members of its species by detecting patterns of behavior or discerning how certain individuals react to certain things.

A second function is communication. People use meaning actively to share information and coordinate their actions. Knowledge can be stored in the group rather than being confined to individual minds.

The third main function of meaning involves controlling oneself. This includes regulating one's behavior and affect. Meaning enables one to consider possibilities, refer to cultural standards, and think about long-range goals. Without meaning, an individual's actions would be based on impulsive and instinctual factors. With the ability to regulate behavior in this way, an organism transcends the present moment, and is now able to reminisce and plan, which permits behavior to be guided by factors beyond the immediate situation. The two-factor theory of emotion (Schachter and Singer 1962), states that people search for relevant environmental cues in order to label and interpret a state of arousal. Once a state of arousal is labeled it becomes an emotion. Without such a label, and without the meaning attached to that label, emotions would be diminished simply to pleasant or unpleasant physiological states. Thus, meaning obtained from culture can greatly enrich the intrapersonal dynamics of an individual. If a species has the capability to use a

complex, interconnected web of meaning for their internal states, it allows them to go beyond living for the simple avoidance of physical pain and seeking of pleasure. Emotional states and the meaning attached to them can work with cultural or ideological values and override the more primitive, impulsive modes of living. Thus, behavior can be guided by regulating one's emotions. A person may eat only one cookie instead of seven, not because this is more pleasurable, but because one may feel shame if seven are eaten or if losing weight is a long-term goal.

The first broad function of meaning helps people to discern patterns in their environment. The second function is communication. The third function of meaning involves enhancing the ability for self-control: people can use meaning to help guide their actions, make decisions, and regulate their emotion.

Levels of Meaning

Another important facet of meaning is that it has multiple levels. Vallacher and Wegner (1985, 1987) discussed how behavior and experiences are altered by shifting levels of meaning. High levels of meaning typically involve complex and abstract relationships along with relatively long time frames. Lower levels of meaning are concrete and involve the immediate time frame. Most situations have multiple levels of meaning embedded within them. Cooking to create a meal to celebrate an anniversary is a good example. At a lower level of meaning, this can be interpreted as merely following instructions, measuring, and using the proper ingredients. The higher level of meaning would be the recognition and celebration of the cultural institution of marriage. Often, the higher level of meaning puts the lower level components of meaning in a particular context. However, several lower level pieces of meaning do not necessarily combine to form a higher level of meaning.

Movement between different levels of meaning is also possible (Vallacher and Wegner 1985, 1987). Shifting from a low to a high level of meaning is often a significant and positive experience: one is making connections, broadening one's perspective, and thus increasing and enhancing meaning in life. Downward shifts, and moving from high to low levels of meaning, deconstruct the broad, complex meanings involved with the high levels. This deconstruction strips the components of the particular high level meaning construct of their context, isolates them, and thus reduces their meaning. Downward shifts in meaning can, in some situations, serve a defensive function. Particularly, situations wherein one behaves immorally can provide reasons to shift meaning and deconstruct that behavior to make it seem like an isolated, meaningless event. Shifting levels of meaning can also serve as a useful way to regulate emotion. As mentioned earlier, emotions involve meaningful labels and contexts, and by shifting to a lower level of meaning one can avoid feeling aversion emotions (Baumeister 1990).

Different levels of meaning and the dynamics between them may be a topic on which existential and positive psychology can offer different perspectives. Positive psychology is more likely to focus on the upward shifts in meaning that engender

positive, pleasant, and enjoyable experiences. The existential perspective, on the other hand, tends to deconstruct meaning as a way to demonstrate that life ultimately has no objective meaning. These two viewpoints are not necessarily wrong, but each only focuses on one side of the issue. This particular topic is one in which existential psychology and positive psychology may complement each other. Constructing meaning by shifting to higher levels and deconstructing meaning by shifting to lower levels are both important for understanding meaning in life and how it operates.

Summary on Nature of Meaning

Meaning, then, is essentially about ideas that connect things together. Meaning starts with the basic association and distinction of events in the environment. With intelligent species like humans, the possibilities for meaning become much more complex and robust compared to less intelligent species. Meaning can involve vast networks of relationships with several different contexts and multiple levels. Meaning most likely developed to serve three main functions. The first one is learning by association and distinction: using meaning helps people learn about, and distinguish between, vast numbers of possible patterns. Second, people use meaning to share information and organize their actions. The third function is facilitation of self-control: using meaning assists people in regulating their emotions and behaviors. Meaning can exist on multiple levels. High levels of meaning usually involve complex and abstract relationships that span across long time frames. Low levels of meaning are in the moment, isolated pieces of meaning. Movement between levels of meaning has significant implications for human life. Downward shifts in meaning are deconstructive: they strip meaningful contents of their contexts. Upward shifts are constructive: they build and enhance meaning by increasing connections between ideas and relationships.

Four Needs for Meaning

The first and most prominent thinker to suggest that people have a drive to find meaning in life was Frankl (1959/2006, 1969) and he referred to this motivation as the will to meaning. Several subsequent thinkers also suggest that people have a need to find meaning in life (Baumesiter 1991; Berger 1967; Heine et al. 2006; Klinger 2012; Maslow 1968). Our analysis and interpretation of the need for meaning in life will primarily be based on Baumeister's (1991) empirically driven work on meaning.

In the strictest sense, a need is considered something required to survive physically. Food and water are prime examples of this type of need. A need for meaning, however, should be distinguished from this strict interpretation. A need for

meaning broadly refers to a motivation to find answers and explanations for life events. It is a desire for life to make sense of things and to have a purpose. One will not necessarily cease living if meaning is continuously missing, but one will be in an aversive state. Prior research has indicated that increased meaning in life is associated with lower levels of a variety of distressful or unhealthy variables such as, thoughts of suicide (Harlow et al. 1986; Heisel and Flett 2004), loneliness (Stillman et al. 2009), smoking cigarettes (Konkoly Thege et al. 2009), using alcohol (Waisberg and Porter 1994), depressive symptoms (Mascaro and Rosen 2005), and stress (Mascaro and Rosen 2006). Overall, research has consistently demonstrated that perceiving life to be meaningful is positively related to well-being (Reker et al. 1987; Ryff and Singer 1998; Zika and Chamberlain 1992).

Following Baumeister's (1991) review of empirical findings on a broad range of topics related to meaning in life, we suggest that the general need for meaning in life can be broken down into four basic needs: purpose, values, efficacy, and self-worth. These four needs can be characterized as different motivational patterns that help people make sense of and find meaning in life. Each need is unique in its own way, but there can be some overlap and certain sources of meaning can satisfy more than one of the needs. Together, the four needs, when satisfied, cover a sufficient amount of conceptual territory to engender a sense of meaning in life. If one or more of the needs goes unsatisfied, it will be experienced as a problem for the individual. Therefore, the person will be motivated to adjust their life in such a way as to ensure that all four needs are fulfilled.

Purpose

The first need is for purpose. The nature of this need involves an individual's perception that current life activities are related and connected to future events. Purposes can be divided into two broad categories: goals and fulfillments. Goals are ideas of desired, potential future situations. If one is living with a sense of purpose, present activities are organized and engaged in so as to ultimately reach a goal. The activities themselves are not necessarily enjoyable just because they are purposeful. If the goal is to lose weight, exercising may still be an unpleasant activity. It is still meaningful, however, because it is a purpose toward accomplishing a goal. Goals can range from long-term to short-term. Major long-term goals can serve as a significant framework and offer guidance to help someone live a meaningful life. They can provide a great amount of direction in life. Often, long-term goals can be broken down into a series of short-term goals. This is typically the most practical and often the most ideal way to achieve a long-term goal. Those who have only one major long-term goal often become frustrated, discouraged, or end up failing (Bandura and Schunk 1981).

The other kind of purpose is fulfillment. A fulfillment is an idea of some desired, present, or possibly future subjective state. Fulfillments are difficult to define, but they usually consist of a feeling of positive affect as well as an attainment of some

goal. People believe that when they become fulfilled, they will be happier than they are now. Thus, fulfillment is an abstract idea about some idealized future subjective state that may one day be achieved if a particular goal is reached. Goals and fulfillments are two types of purpose. A person can be guided by one or both to satisfy the need for purpose. It also should be mentioned that it is not necessary to ultimately achieve a goal or feel the sense of fulfillment for purposes to be meaningful. What is most important is that the current activities involved with one's life are related and connected to possible future events, outcomes, and subjective states.

Value (Justification)

The second need is for values. Frankl (1959/2006), in his important work on meaning, placed primary emphasis on values as a source of meaning. The need for value, we suggest, refers to people's motivation to feel that their thoughts and behaviors are good, right, and justifiable.

Values are typically structured in a hierarchical fashion. A particular action is deemed right or wrong by appealing to some more general rule, which in turn is based in some broader system of principles and so on. This ends at some point where there is no further need for justification and the value is good in and of itself. Religion offers a good example of this by appealing to god's word as the ultimate truth. We refer to these as value bases. A value base can justify things without itself needing to be justified. Culture and society are the ultimate providers of value and value bases. Humans probably have a disposition to acquire value and morality rather easily; however, they are still dependent upon their culture to provide them with the choices. No one is born knowing the doctrines of a particular religion, or knowing the legal circumstances that permit killing others. As mentioned earlier, cultures typically offer a selection of ideologies, and ideologies usually provide particular values. A solid value base is an important aspect of ideologies; without a strong value base, an ideology becomes weaker and less effective. Values allow people to decide whether certain acts are right or wrong. By using values to guide their actions, people can justify those actions in such a way as to increase positive feeling about the self and decrease distressing feelings such as guilt or anxiety.

Efficacy

The third need is for a sense of efficacy. People need to feel that they have some control over events. This often takes form as a need to believe that one is making a difference. Finding meaning in life is more than just having a purpose and values, people must also feel that they have the ability to reach such goals and realize such values.

The sense of efficacy is commonly experienced by meeting challenges and reaching somewhat difficult goals. If a task is too easy, there is little satisfaction involved, but if it is too difficult it may only lead to frustration and failure. Research into peak experiences provides a similar point. It suggests that people must find a middle area between tasks that are too easy and produce boredom, and those which are too difficult and produce anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2009). When this middle ground is reached, the probability of entering a state of flow is greatly increased. In this state a great deal of efficacy and meaningfulness can be experienced.

Efficacy has some conceptual overlap with control. Controlling the environment is an important way of securing oneself with a sense of efficacy. A notable distinction between efficacy and control, however, is that efficacy refers to a subjective perception, whereas control has more objective connotations. Efficacy is the belief that one has control. It is possible for people to believe they have control when really they do not and still feel a sense of efficacy.

Self-worth

The final need is for self-worth. This can be described as a desire to feel positive, through finding a basis for that positive self-worth. This can typically take the form of a motivation to find ways that one is superior to others. One effective strategy used by individuals to increase self-worth is downward social comparison (Wills 1981). Downward social comparison entails comparing oneself to others who are worse off in some way, and this increases one's feeling of superiority. Another effective and pervasive strategy that helps people secure a sense of self-worth is the self-serving bias (Bradley 1978). This is a general tendency for people to take credit for their successes and blame external circumstances for failures, regardless of the actual factors responsible. A meta-analysis by Campbell and Sedikides (1999) found that when self-concept was strongly threatened, people engage in self-serving bias significantly more than those under a low threat to their self-concept. In other words, when people feel less positive about themselves, they are more likely to use a self-serving mode of thinking. Thus, the self-serving bias helps maintain or restore the sense that one is a good person and it increases positive feelings about the self.

Summary of Four Needs for Meaning

This section argues that there are four basic needs people must fulfill in order for life to make sense and be meaningful. The first need is for purpose. Purpose enables people to find meaning in present events from their relationship to possible future events. The two main types of purpose are goals and fulfillments. The

second need is for values, or justification for one's actions. People want to justify their past, present, and future actions and values offer a way to do this. A particular value is usually connected to a broader, more fundamental value base. Value bases are perceived as good in and of themselves and do not require any further justification. The third need is for efficacy. Efficacy gives people a sense of being in control and being capable of making a difference. The fourth and final need is a basis for self-worth. People generally like to feel that they are good and worthwhile and this is commonly accomplished by feeling superior to others. The four needs for meaning provide a framework for understanding how people make sense of their lives, and how the meaning of life can be examined.

The Expectation of Meaningfulness

This section will discuss another important idea for understanding meaning in life: that people typically have unrealistic assumptions and expectations about the extent to which life will be meaningful, make sense, and thus be orderly and stable. Camus (1955) suggested that there is a powerful drive to perceive all of one's life as a cohesive, unified framework of meaningful relationships. Baumeister (1991) articulated a similar idea and referred to it as the myth of higher meaning. That is, the assumption or expectation that everything in the world ultimately makes sense and has a reason, or at least a logical explanation.

The two central components of the myth of higher meaning, borrowed from symbolic logic, are completeness and consistency. Completeness refers to the assumption that everything makes sense, that every question has an answer, and every problem can be resolved. It is not that people believe that they themselves can answer every question or resolve any issue, but merely that they believe the answers are out there somewhere and can in principle be found. This occurs in both religious and scientific frameworks: the master plan could be natural law or divine providence. Consistency refers to a desire to believe that there are no contradictions in the world or within oneself. The idea is that it is possible to explain everything in the universe without these different explanations contradicting each other. People typically do not like conflicting feelings, or contradictions between their attitudes, values, and behavior (see Festinger 1957). Any discrepancies or inconsistencies that do turn up are swiftly dealt with. With regard to meaning in life, inconsistency (or the avoidance or denial of it) can appear when people construe their life stories. For example, some research has shown that when people alter their opinions they somehow manage to forget the initial opinion they had, and in effect believe they had the final opinion all along (Bem and McConnell 1970). People are motivated to maintain their belief in completeness and consistency, and they are apprehensive about accepting the possibility that some issues have no solutions and that life has some contradictions.

Another aspect of the myth of higher meaning is stability: people tend to expect rules, patterns, and relationships to remain stable and constant. Using meaning

is about putting ideas together to make sense of life. But ideas do not always match with reality as such; some ideas are generalizations, idealizations, or illusions. Therefore, ideas tend to inflate the stability of the phenomena to which they refer. Meaning in this way exhibits false permanence. Life is a process of continual change at the biological, environmental, and social levels. Meaning, on the other hand, imposes stable ideas and concepts onto these constantly changing phenomena. Although life involves constant changes, living things want stability and constancy. People generally want stable interpersonal relationships and stable, reliable sources of food, shelter, money, and sex. Marriage is a good example of the conflict between stable meanings and changing reality. Marriage is symbolic of a permanent, fixed, and unconditionally loving relationship. But the reality of relationships and mating are quite different, they consist of growth, evolution, and a complex dynamic of positive and negative feelings and experiences. Marriage is thus the imposition of stable and permanent ideas onto continually changing phenomena.. In short, people desire stability, and meaning as a useful tool for imposing stability and permanence onto life's events.

The final piece of the myth of higher meaning is the myth of fulfillment. This refers to the concept that some people have about fulfillment: that to be fulfilled will result in feeling good all the time and never feeling bad. The myth of fulfillment in this regard tends to offer an unrealistic but appealing promise of permanence. Love is an example that is prevalent in popular culture. Romantic love is often presented in media as a blissful, eternal, unchanging state. In reality, love and intimate relationships are never quite so simple. The passion of intimate love is of limited duration, and although some manage to live fairly contently most of the time, no one really ever lives as happily ever after (Sternberg 1986), as an idealized fulfillment myth would suggest. A similar argument can be made for the desire to become rich. Some people believe that becoming rich would solve all their problems. Research on lottery winners shows that they do not live in never ending bliss but soon encounter new types of problems (Brickman et al. 1978). There is conflict between what people believe fulfillment entails and what it actually entails in practice. Adaptation-level theory (Helson 1964) suggests that a person's subjective judgments about a particular, current situation are made in reference to a recent prior situation. However, in time they become acquainted with and adapted to the new situation, and if the current situation remains stable it gradually becomes the new reference point. Therefore, lottery winners, passionate lovers, and newly promoted bosses will probably experience a great sense of excitement and joy at first, but with time, the new exciting situation becomes commonplace. Fulfillment, then, is a myth in the sense that when it is attained the results are not as everlasting as one may think.

Overall, the myth of higher meaning is a general belief that everything either does or will make sense. It is a hope or expectation that one's life is or will be meaningful. Completeness and consistency are important features of the myth of higher meaning. They involve a belief that everything can be answered and contradictions or inconsistencies are but temporary blips that are easily solvable or never acknowledged in the first place. Life involves interminable change but living

organisms desire stability. Meaning can impose a sense of stability and permanence onto things which are inherently unstable and ephemeral. Thus, meaning can provide a reliable sense of stability, but not necessarily a valid one.

Conclusion

Humans have a need for life to make sense and be meaningful. Meaning is, in essence, a shared mental web of connections between ideas, objects, and relationships. The need for meaning can best be understood in terms of a subset of four unique but sometimes partially overlapping needs: purpose, values, efficacy, and self-worth. When all four needs are satisfied, a sense of meaningfulness in life will be experienced. However, if one or more of the needs remains unsatisfied it will be experienced as a problem or deficit. The person will be motivated to find a new source of meaning or, perhaps more commonly to enhance previously existing meaning to fill the meaning vacuum in their life. The quest for a meaningful life extends beyond just a desire to quell some inner drive. Meaning has several practical applications as well: it helps people discern patterns in the environment, it greatly enhances communication, and facilitates self-control. Indeed, it seems clear why such an inner drive for meaning would be evolutionarily adaptive and naturally selected.

Psychological research has clearly demonstrated that human thinking is full of various types of biases, deceptions, and distortions (for a review see Taylor and Brown 1988). The better-than-average effect (Alicke 1985; Brown 1986) is one example of such a bias. Most people believe they are more intelligent, more honest, and more competent than other people (Brown 2007, 2012). We argued in the section on the myth of fulfillment that meaning is, to some extent, inherently a distorted view of reality. People engage in distorted and illusory thinking as a way to make life seem stable and to make themselves feel better. People also have unrealistic hope about the future and about the joy they will experience upon accomplishing long-term goals. Furthermore, individuals with moderate depression or low self-esteem typically lack such self-enhancing biases and positive illusions about the future (Taylor and Brown 1988).

These issues offer another opportunity for existential and positive psychology to integrate. Should we encourage people to live by what makes them happy and promotes stability and solidarity—even if it is partially based on illusory and distorted thinking? Positive psychology is likely to focus on searching for meaning and the positive aspects associated with unrealistic and biased thinking; so long as such biases and illusions help one become happy, motivated to succeed, and have loving relationships. The existential perspective seems more focused on the notion that meanings in life are no more than biased subjective constructions. An important future step may be integrating these two viewpoints in a way that brings about a recognition of the biases and subjectivity inherent in the meanings of life and also emphasizes the vital importance and benefits of living a meaningful life.

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