

Experiencing meaning in life: Optimal functioning at the nexus of well-being, psychopathology, and spirituality

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Abstract

Meaning in life has been a topic of fertile empirical inquiry for several decades. Over this span of time a large, loosely connected body of research findings has emerged. In this chapter, an integrative model of meaning is advanced and used to help bring together the disparate findings, with particular attention to relations between meaning in life and well-being, psychopathology, and spirituality. Meaning in life is characterized as being comprised of people's *comprehension* of the world around them and their investment in a self-concordant *purpose*. From a further articulation of this model, reasonable assumptions about the kinds of variables with which meaning in life should correlate are generated. A review of a large number of studies demonstrates that people who report greater meaning in their lives also report greater well-being, lesser psychopathology, and more beneficial experiencing of spirituality. The chapter ends with suggestions for a future research agenda to continue synthesizing and integrating meaning research and to continue to advance what we know about the benefits of having a sense of meaning in life.

The previous edition of *The Human Quest for Meaning* arrived at a watershed moment for meaning in life research. Appearing in the same year as Ryff & Singer's (1998) influential treatise on psychological well-being (they also contributed to *The Human Quest for Meaning*), the two contributions set the stage for innovative, rigorous, mainstreamed, and revitalized empirical inquiry into the nature, origins, and consequences of people's beliefs that their lives are meaningful. Exciting research now is building on a foundation of four decades of work. This body of foundational research is the focus of this chapter. Meaning, by its very nature, appears to be an integrating factor in people's lives, drawing together the threads of their efforts to achieve happiness, withstand distress, and attain transcendence beyond their solitary selves (Steger, in press). In a parallel fashion, this chapter focuses on providing an overview and a conceptual framework for viewing what the field has learned about the well-being, psychopathology, and spirituality correlates of meaning in life.

Meaning in Life

Plato observed that humans are beings in search of meaning; people automatically coax meaning from their experiences, including the experience of life itself. Meaning is the web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our experience and formulate plans directing our energies to the achievement of our desired future. Meaning provides us with the sense that our lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are more than the sum of our seconds, days, and years. Comprehending our experience in this way builds the cognitive component of meaning in life. The cognitive component of meaning in life thus refers to the understandings that we develop of who we are, what the world is like, and how we fit in with and relate to the grand scheme of things (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Steger, in press). If people grasp these qualities, their comprehension should give them a firm grounding in their life experiences. They will have a strong set of related memories that coalesce into a continuous narrative, defensible theories about how the world works, and the ability to test theories of how they are perceived by others (e.g., self-verification theory; Swann, Rentfrow, & Gunn, 2003). Because of this they should be able to forge links between familiar experiences and new ones, integrating new experiences into the web of associations bringing unity to their lives.

The cognitive component of meaning also may provide a foundation from which people develop the aspirations and identify the pursuits that provide their lives with a sense purpose and mission. This sense of purpose comprises the motivational component of meaning, which is the other half of the conceptual core of meaning in life. In some ways, this motivational component may be most familiar to readers. When a person talks about the meaning of her or his life, it often seems the question relates to what her or his life is for (what purpose does it serve?), or what she or he will accomplish (what are you going to do with your life?). The value of finding an overarching goal or mission to which one's life can be dedicated has led to the inclusion or purpose in the definition of psychological well-being proposed by Ryff and colleagues (e.g., Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 1998). Other prominent theories of well-being have similarly prioritized having goals and a sense of purpose (e.g., Emmons, 1986; Klinger, 1977). Others contend that it is important to develop a set of motivations that is closely aligned with one's authentic self (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000; McGregor & Little, 1998; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Waterman, 1993). I would argue that the goals people develop are most beneficial when they arise naturally from the unique ways they comprehend life; when the cognitive component of

meaning provides the springboard for the motivational component. Others in this volume provide greater insight into how goal pursuit, attainment, and disengagement foster meaning (Klinger, this volume; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, & Carver, this volume).

Together the cognitive (comprehension) and motivational (purpose) aspects of meaning in life distinguish meaning from other psychological constructs (Steger, in press). By binding together these two important dimensions of human psychological functioning, meaning in life is relevant to a broad range of quality of life issues. Although meaning in life derives from comprehension and purpose that are attained at a high level of abstraction, more specific and subsidiary processes are implicated. The cognitive component of meaning in life rests on understanding self, world, and niche, and thus people high in meaning would be expected to be high in those domains as well. From here we may be able to proceed logically down to lower levels of abstraction. For example, people's understanding of their niches implies they understand how they relate to others, how they perform under certain circumstances, and how they respond to certain contextual factors. Continuing this example, people high in meaning may have greater awareness that people sometimes interpret their shyness as aloofness, that they prefer to have clear guidelines and timelines for projects they're working on, and that they become moody on rainy days. It is easy to see why knowledge like this would be beneficial, as people would be able anticipate and regulate their behaviors in adaptive ways. These links have rarely been articulated in a coherent fashion, however, and they have not been tested empirically.

With What Should Meaning in Life Correlate?

A great deal of research has been conducted regarding meaning in life, and it is the purpose of this chapter to provide a review of the major domains of findings. Although some experimental research has been conducted on meaning in life, correlational research comprises the bulk of published meaning in life studies. Therefore, this chapter will focus primarily on correlational findings.

On the one hand, there is a wealth of information about how people who say their lives are meaningful characterize other aspects of themselves, their relationships, and their lives. On the other hand, this research can convey the appearance of a lot of activity with little thematic unity. Because of its sheer vastness, it can be difficult to know what has already been reported, and identify linkages across research programs and domains. Viewing meaning in terms of its cognitive and motivational aspects provides a framework for anticipating and understanding much of this research. Further, a useful starting point for bringing order to the mass of findings in the literature is provided by looking at some common, and sensible, families of related variables, namely well-being, psychological distress, and spirituality.

Both comprehension and purpose suggest ways in which meaning in life could help people foster well-being, resolve – and develop future resilience to – psychological distress, and cultivate a sense of spiritual connection with something larger than their momentary experiences. I will briefly discuss three of these: the sense that one's life matters, the articulation of valued and overarching goals, and the feeling that one's life makes sense, transcending the moment.

One of the theoretical characteristics of the comprehension component of meaning is the sense that one's life matters. A life that matters holds value, conceptually connecting meaning with well-being variables like life satisfaction and self-esteem, in which one's life or self is perceived to hold value in terms of satisfaction, esteem, or worth. Low self-worth is a diagnostic marker for several psychopathological syndromes, including depression. Thus, failure to develop

the sense that one's life matters, or losing that perspective, might play a role in the experience of psychological distress. It is possible that people might feel their lives matter in a restricted sense pertaining only to their immediate circumstances (e.g., I matter because I left a nice tip). Even this limited sense of "mattering" would often involve a connection with other people, and we might further expect that people also see their lives mattering in the bigger picture. This sense of mattering may help them see connections between their experience and more grandly encompassing circles of life – akin to what Allport (1961) called the mature self. As the circles expand to include romantic partners, family and friends, neighborhood, community, social causes, religious movements, humanity, and life, people may transcend the bounds of their momentary existence and gain a sense of spiritual connectedness (see also Aron's discussion of love, this volume).

The purpose aspect of meaning also links meaning in life with well-being. Frankl (1963) was a strong advocate for people's need to develop a clear vision of what they are trying to accomplish through their lives, and that this vision could answer questions about meaning in their lives. The development and pursuit of goals may be rooted in well-functioning appetitive motivational systems (also known as behavioral approach systems) (Carver, Sutton, & Scheier, 2000; Gray, 1987; Elliott & Thrash, 2002; Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2002; Wrosch et al., this volume). These systems facilitate the acquisition of sought-after environmental rewards, like new relationships, new sources of food, and opportunities for growth, which can lead to greater meaning in life (Kashdan & Steger, 2007). There is support for links between purpose and well-being on several levels, from immediate intentions to engage in a goal-supporting activity (Gollwitzer, 1999) to the ability to engage in long-term planning (e.g., Little, Salmela-Aro, & Phillips, 2006). A lack of interest and heightened indecisiveness is likewise part of the symptom profile of some psychopathological syndromes, such as depression. Such factors may decrease people's abilities to form and pursue goals. Viewed in a longer-term sense, goals can provide a trajectory for a person's life. The type of goal-orientation intended by the term purpose suggests a mission that can motivate a person for long periods of time, organizing their activity toward long-term, highly valued goals. Although such goals do not necessarily require that a mission-driven person is spiritual, they are consistent with a sense of spirituality and the transcendence of mundane daily distractions.

Making sense of one's life should be related to a sense of certainty and self-understanding (see also Peterson's discussion of character strengths and meaning, this volume). Some research indicates that having a clear view of one's self is related to well-being (Campbell, 1990). There may be a link between the sense a person makes of his or her life and the clarity they achieve in their self-understanding. This link may be achieved through people's life narratives (Baumeister, this volume; Beike & Crone, this volume; Reker, this volume). Psychiatric patients often complain of feeling disoriented, and some intriguing research suggests that even people who are suffering from schizophrenia benefit from the creation of coherent stories explaining their aberrant experiences. In this research, people with symptomatic schizophrenia reported higher meaning than did post-treatment people with schizophrenia whose delusional symptoms had receded (Roberts, 1991). The power of people's ability to make sense of their experience has inspired an approach to psychological distress known as narrative therapy. Narrative therapy regards clients' psychological problems as an opportunity for clients to rewrite their story, often working to transform their self-images from helpless victim of their disorder to empowered agent of change (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007). Finally, being able to make sense of one's life, discern a pattern across one's experiences, and expand awareness

beyond the immediate press of the moment should provide a person with a sense of transcendence about their experience. People's lives encompass more than what is happening now, and trace an arc of experience that links one's past and present circumstances to one's future prospects and pursuits. People's ability to make sense of their lives should facilitate this sort of transcendence, enabling them to find a meaningful place for the things that happen to them, and in the world around them.

The previous discussion attempted to lend some structure to the large number of variables that have been empirically linked with meaning in life. I focused on developing conceptual links between the theoretical elements of meaning in life, comprehension and purpose, as well as specific aspects of those elements (life matters, is endowed with purpose, and makes sense) and well-being, psychological distress, and spirituality. The fact that efforts to delineate the variables meaning should be related to, and the reasons why, (i.e., the nomological net; Cronbach & Meehl, 1955) have been rare is surprising. Meaning is, at its heart, an integrating factor for people. Meaning pulls together people's ideas about who they are, the kind of world they live in, and how they relate to the people and environments around them. Meaning incorporates these elements into people's aspirations and over-arching aims. This is the kind of meaning philosophers have argued helps sustain people through any adverse circumstance (see Frankl, 1963).

In the subsequent sections, I will review the literature linking meaning in life with well-being, psychological distress, and spirituality. In the past, it has been common to include the Sense of Coherence test (SOC; Antonovsky, 1987) among measures of meaning in life. Although there is some evidence that the SOC is strongly related to measures of meaning in life, and the SOC includes a subscale labeled "meaningfulness," it is somewhat misleading to refer to the SOC, or even the meaningfulness subscale, as a measure of meaning in life. The SOC was designed to assess a basic coping disposition in which people orient themselves to stressors and challenges in an effective and proactive manner (Antonovsky, 1987; Sammallahti, Holi, Komulainen, & Aalberg, 1996). Thus, the SOC is more similar to psychological concepts like hardiness (e.g., see Maddi, 2005).

Well-being

Contemporary meaning in life research often draws on psychological theories of well-being, particularly eudaimonic well-being (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006; Steger, Kasdan, & Oishi, 2008). Eudaimonic theories of well-being focus on fully flourishing and achieving one's potential as a human being. Given the focus of these theories on people achieving their optimal levels of functioning, it is no surprise that meaning in life appears in several accounts of eudaimonic well-being. In some theories, meaning or purpose in life is a definitional characteristic of well-being – that is, a person cannot be considered to have achieved well-being if he or she does not feel like they're life has meaning or purpose (e.g., Ryff & Singer, 1998). In other theories, meaning in life is one of several expected outcomes, or indicators, that are expected if a person has reached his or her potential (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2001). Even in much broader efforts to define well-being, meaning in life is regarded as a valuable indicator of positive functioning (e.g., Diener & Seligman, 2004). The components considered to be central to the experience of meaning – feeling that life matters, identifying a sense of purpose, and achieving an understanding of one's self and one's life – hold direct

implications for well-being (see Shek, this volume, for additional explorations of how meaning and purpose facilitate well-being).

Beginning with the most basic level of well-being, several studies have linked meaning in life with positive affect and emotions (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988; Kennedy, Kanthamani & Palmer, 1994; Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; King et al., 2006; Ryff, 1989; Steger et al., 2006; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, et al., 2008; Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, in press; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), including feelings of high morale (Ryff, 1989), love, joy, and vitality (Steger et al., 2006). Links with positive affect have been replicated among elderly American and Taiwanese respondents (Chang & Dodder, 1983). According to a recent meta-analysis the correlation between meaning in life and positive affect among older adults is .47 (Pinquart, 2002).

Meaning in life is also associated with positive personality traits such as Extraversion (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Pearson & Sheffield, 1974a; Schmutte & Ryff, 1997; Steger et al., 2006; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, et al., 2008), Agreeableness (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Schmutte & Ryff, 1997; Steger et al., 2006; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, et al., 2008), Conscientiousness (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Schmutte & Ryff, 1997; Steger et al., 2006; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, et al., 2008), and Openness to Experience (Schmutte & Ryff, 1997). These findings have been replicated in a German sample (Schnell & Becker, 2006).

Positive affect and personality traits delineate well-being on a basic level. So too do a variety of broadband measures of wellness. Several studies have reported link between meaning in life and various measures of global happiness in American (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), Dutch (e.g., Debats, 1996; Debats, van der Lubbe, & Wezeman, 1993; Steger, Oishi, et al., in press) and Japanese samples (Steger, Kawabata, Shimai, & Otake, in press), psychological adjustment (Thompson, Coker, Krause, & Henry, 2003), including adjustment among elderly nursing home residents (O'Conner & Vallerand, 1998), and general well-being in American college and adult samples (e.g., Bonebright, Clay, & Ankenmann, 2000; Garfield, 1973; Reker, 1990; Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987; Scannell, Allen, & Burton, 2002; Steger et al., 2008; Wong, 1998a; Zika & Chamberlain, 1987; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), as well as among Chinese adults (Shek, 1995), Korean adolescents (Shin, Lee, & Lee, 2005), community and institutional-dwelling older adults (Fry, 2000; Reker, 2002), and bereaved older adults (Fry, 2001). Finally, meaning in life is positively correlated with quality of life among cancer patients (Brady, Peterman, Fitchett, Mo, & Cella, 1999)

At a somewhat more specific level, several studies have reported a link between meaning in life and life satisfaction, which is the degree to which people positively evaluate their lives. (Bonebright et al., 2000; Chamberlain & Zika, 1988; Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Steger, 2006; Steger & Frazier, 2005; Steger et al., 2006; Steger & Kashdan, 2006; Steger, Kashdan, et al., 2008; Steger, Oishi, et al., in press; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), a finding which has been replicated among elderly nursing home residents (O'Conner & Vallerand, 1998)

Just as meaning in life should be related to satisfaction with life, it should be related to satisfaction with self. Indeed, several studies have reported a link between meaning in life and self-esteem in American (Ryff, 1989; Steger, 2006; Steger et al., 2006) and Dutch samples (Debats, 1996), self-acceptance (Garfield, 1973; Ryff, 1989; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, et al., 2008), self-actualization (Ebersole & Humphries, 1991; Phillips, Watkins, & Noll, 1974), and positive self-regard (Phillips et al., 1974) among general samples. This relation between meaning and self-worth has been found among prisoners (Reker, 1977), elderly nursing home residents (O'Conner & Vallerand, 1998), and Chinese students (Shek, 1992). Similar results have been

obtained with self-confidence among Dominican nuns in training (Crumbaugh, Raphael, & Shrader, 1970).

An interesting side branch of this work has reported positive relations between meaning in life and other positive, self-empowering traits. This list includes ego resiliency (Tryon & Radzin, 1972) and ego strength among Chinese students (Shek, 1992), internal locus of control (Phillips, 1980; Reker, 1977; Reker & Peacock, 1981; Ryff, 1989), internal health locus of control among people with spinal cord injuries (Thompson, Coker, Krause, & Henry, 2003), autonomy (Reid, 1996; Ryff, 1989; Steger et al., 2008), personal growth (Ryff, 1989; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, et al., 2008), self-control (Garfield, 1973), sense of control (Newcomb & Harlow, 1986), ambition in Dutch samples (Debats et al., 1993), personal responsibility among high school students (Furrow, King, & White, 2004), less chance and powerful other locus of control (Ryff, 1989), environmental mastery (Ryff, 1989; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, et al., 2008), and a sense of mastery among Chinese students (Shek, 2001).

Individuals who report high meaning in life also appear to report more desirable perspectives and outlooks. For example meaning in life is related to more positive perceptions of the world (Sharpe & Viney, 1973; Simon, Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1998), and toward life in general among retired academics (Acuff & Allen, 1970) and one's present and future life (Reker, 1977). High-meaning people also report greater future orientation (Reker & Peacock, 1981) as well as more positive future orientations (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, et al., 2008), including greater hope and optimism (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Mascaro & Rosen, 2006; Mascaro et al., 2004; Steger, 2006; Steger & Frazier, 2005; Steger et al., 2006). A greater number of present and future strivings have been reported among college students (Simmons, 1980) and cancer patients (Thompson & Pitts, 1993). Adults high in meaning in life enjoy their work more and report lesser workaholism (Bonebright et al., 2000).

Finally, there is some evidence that people high in meaning in life may be better equipped to manage life's challenges. They report more effective past coping in Dutch (Debats, Drost, & Hansen, 1995) and American samples (Jim, Richardson, Golden-Kreutz, & Anderson, 2006; Stevens, Pfof, & Wessels, 1987), less avoidance coping and more emotion-focused coping (Edwards & Holden, 2001), more positive emotional regulation in Korean adolescents (Shin et al., 2005).

In summary, there appear to be abundant links between meaning in life and a very wide range of other indicators of well-being. One might be tempted to conclude that life is as empty of suffering as it is full of happiness for people who feel their lives are meaningful. However, in light of rapidly accumulating evidence that positive and negative psychological processes constitute different systems (e.g., Ryff et al., 2006), it is perhaps reckless to assume that because meaning in life is related to more of what is good in life it is also related to less of what is bad. In the next section, I review the evidence regarding this latter idea.

Psychological Distress and Psychopathology

One of the most influential ideas to arise from Frankl's (1963) writings was that the attitude one takes toward suffering is a route to meaning. Some suffering may be unavoidable, and being able to endure such suffering in a manner that reduces its damage to the self, relationships, and life goals, while also using the suffering to challenge one's priorities, strengthen one's bonds with others, and develop a broader purpose should provide deep meaning for people. From a different perspective, some have argued that meaning in life may serve as a

resource in the face of suffering, providing a buffer from the negative impact of traumatic events, for example (e.g., Steger, Frazier, & Zacchanini, in press). The relation between meaning in life and the types of attributions, interpretations, and meaning people develop surrounding specific traumatic events has attracted considerable theoretical attention (e.g., Janoff-Bulman & Yopyk, 2004; Park & Folkman, 2003), as demonstrated by several contributions to this volume (see Park, this volume; Shmotkin & Shrira, this volume; Slattery & Park, this volume; but less empirical attention. Nonetheless, an enhanced sense of life's meaning is a commonly observed positive outcome of enduring difficult life events (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998), and the possibilities for testing models of how meaning in life and psychological suffering interact appear rich.

Aside from the possibility that successful coping with psychological distress may facilitate enhanced meaning in life, there are conceptual reasons to expect that people with more meaning in life would report less psychological distress and lower psychopathology. Valuing one's life, having a sense of direction and purpose, and being able to comprehend one's experience seem contradictory to many manifestations of psychological distress.

At a basic level of psychological distress is the experience of negative affect and emotions. Research indicates that meaning in life is inversely related to negative affect and emotions (e.g., Chamberlain & Zika, 1988; Kennedy et al., 1994; Keyes et al., 2002; Steger, Kashdan, et al., 2008; Steger, Oishi, et al., in press; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), including fear, anger, shame, and sadness (Steger et al., 2006), rumination (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, et al., 2008), stress (Flannery & Flannery, 1990; Flannery, Perry, Penk, & Flannery, 1994; Frenz, Carey, & Jorgensen, 1993), and general psychological distress among breast cancer survivors (Vickberg, Bovbjerg, DuHamel, Currie, & Redd, 2000).

Meaning in life is generally inversely related with negative personality traits like neuroticism among Americans (Addad, 1987; Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Pearson, & Sheffield, 1974a; Pearson & Sheffield, 1989; Steger et al., 2006; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, et al., 2008) and Germans (Schnell & Becker, 2006), as well as psychoticism (Pearson & Sheffield, 1989; Scheier & Newcomb, 1993).

Research also has been conducted on the relation between meaning in life and symptoms more closely associated with specific psychopathological syndromes. Meaning in life is inversely related to PTSD symptom severity in the United States (Edmonds & Hooker, 1992) and Spain (Steger, Frazier et al., in press). One of the most pervasive findings is that meaning in life is inversely related to depression in American (e.g., Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Flannery, & Flannery, 1990; Flannery et al., 1994; Harlow, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1986; Lester & Badro, 1991; Lewis, Lanigan, Joseph, & de Fockert, 1997; Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Mascaro & Rosen, 2006; Mascaro et al., 2004; Phillips, 1980; Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Scheier & Newcomb, 1993; Simon et al., 1998; Steger et al., 2006; Steger, Oishi, et al., in press; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992) and Dutch samples (Debats, 1990; Debats et al., 1993), as well as among cancer patients (Thompson & Pitts, 1993), individuals living with HIV (Lyon & Younger, 2001; Lyon & Younger, 2005), elderly nursing home residents (O'Conner & Vallerand, 1998), Chinese students (Shek, 1992), and "problem students" (Rahman & Khaleque, 1996). According to a recent meta-analysis, the correlation with depression is $-.46$ among older adults (Pinquart, 2002). Likewise, meaning in life is inversely related to anxiety among American (Flannery, & Flannery, 1990; Flannery et al., 1994; Frenz et al., 1993; Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Scheier & Newcomb, 1993; Thompson et al., 2003) and Dutch samples (Debats, 1990; Debats et al., 1993), among Chinese students (Shek, 1992), Dominican nuns in training (Crumbaugh et al., 1970), and people

with spinal cord injuries (Thompson, Coker, Krause, & Henry, 2003). Meaning in life also is inversely related to hostility, antisociality, and aggression in American (Mascaro et al., 2004; Scheier & Newcomb, 1993; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2003) and Dutch samples (Debats, 1990; Debats et al., 1993), and aggression among Chinese secondary school students (Shek, Ma, & Cheung, 1994).

Those who report greater meaning in life report less hopelessness in a wide variety of samples (Edwards & Holden, 2001; Gomez & Fisher, 2002; Grygielski, Januszewska, Janusxewska, Juros, & Oles, 1984; Harris & Standard, 2001), and are more likely to derogate themselves (Harlow et al., 1986; Scheier & Newcomb, 1993). Cancer patients who report lesser meaning in life also report a wider discrepancy between who they feel they actually are and who they would ideally like to be (Heidrich, Forsthoff, & Ward, 1994). People who report lesser meaning in life report more numerous negative life events (Newcomb & Harlow, 1986) and hassles (Flannery & Flannery, 1990) and more grief in their lives (Edmonds & Hooker, 1992). Unsurprisingly, they report higher levels of suicidal ideation (e.g., Edwards & Holden, 2001; Harlow et al., 1986; Lester & Badro, 1991; Scheier & Newcomb, 1993), although, interestingly, they also report greater fear of death (Durlak, 1972; see also Tomer, this volume).

People who experience a deficit in meaning in life express a stronger need for psychotherapy (Battista & Almond, 1973). Comparisons between psychiatric or psychotherapy patients and general population samples bear out this relationship, with patients reporting lesser meaning in life (e.g., Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Frenz et al., 1993; Pearson & Sheffield, 1974b). Loss and developmental disruption also appear related to meaning in life, with homeless and at risk youths (Bearsley & Cummins, 1999) and bereaved parents (Florian, 1989) reporting lower meaning in life. Likewise, members of substance abuse treatment groups, both adults (e.g., Nicholson, et al., 1994) and adolescent (Hutzell & Finck, 1994), report lesser meaning in life compared to general samples; meaning in life is inversely correlated with levels of substance use (Harlow et al., 1986; Newcomb & Harlow, 1986; Padelford, 1974; Shean & Fechtman, 1971) and successful completion of substance abuse treatment (Klinger, 1987). Low-meaning people also report greater sexual frustration (Sallee & Casciani, 1976).

Antisocial behavior is also higher among people low in meaning in life. For example, meaning in life is inversely correlated with problem/antisocial behavior in Chinese students (Shek, 1997; (Shek et al., 1994), and disruptive pre-secondary school students (e.g., Rahman & Khaleque, 1996) report lower levels of meaning in life, as do criminals in the United States (Addad, 1987; Reker, 1977) and New Zealand (Black & Gregson, 1973), and shoplifters (McShane, Lawless, & Noonan, 1991).

There is evidence, however, that therapy has benefits for people in terms of meaning in life, and improvements in meaning have been reported in psychiatric patients at posttreatment versus pretreatment in both psychological (Crumbaugh, 1977; Wadsworth & Barker, 1976, see also Davis & McKearney, 2003) and substance abuse treatment (Waisberg & Porter, 1994).

In summary, a substantial amount of research has been conducted on the link between the experience of meaning in life and the experience of psychological distress and psychopathology. This research supports the contention that meaning in life is inconsistent with the experience of psychological distress, across a wide range of indicators. There is no solid evidence that meaning in life reduces distress or psychopathology, but the evidence reviewed here does seem persuasive in making the case that meaning in life should be considered a part of the overall picture of psychological health and functioning, and perhaps warrants scrutiny as either an essential

outcome variable for therapeutic interventions or the inspiration for new meaning-based interventions (see Wong, 1998b).

Spirituality

To this point, this chapter has surveyed several studies establishing links between meaning in life and positive functioning (well-being) and negative functioning (psychological distress and psychopathology). Spirituality may represent a unique dimension of functioning, irreducible to a simple positive or negative dichotomy. The present use of the term spirituality highlights a general sense of transcendence and connection with something larger than one's self. Other accounts of spirituality have identified it as the pursuit of significance in that which is sacred about life (e.g., Pargament, 1997), which is certainly in line with how meaning in life has been conceptualized in this chapter. Spirituality has been suggested as a theoretical source (Emmons, 2003) or augmentative factor (Reker & Wong, 1988; see also Krause, this volume) for meaning in life, and this chapter advanced some conceptual links between meaning in life and people achievement of a sense of transcendence and connection. Because spirituality is somewhat of an umbrella term covering formalized religious experience as well as individual transcendental experience, we will consider all such relevant expressions of spirituality in this section, including religious experience, religiousness, spirituality, and transcendence.

Beginning with people's general, spiritual experiences, previous research has shown that meaning in life is positively related to spiritual satisfaction among the elderly (Gerwood, LeBlanc, & Piazza, 1998) and spiritual well-being and the importance of spirituality among college students (Harris & Standard, 2001). People high in meaning report a larger number of transcendent experiences (Kennedy, et al. 1994), and score higher on measures of existential transcendence (Harris & Standard, 2001), cosmic transcendence among Dutch adults (Braam, Bramsen, van Tilburg, van der Ploeg, & Deeg, 2006), sense of universality and spiritual transcendence (Piedmont & Leach, 2002), and self-transcendence (Reker, 1994). They report more transcendent goals (Sharpe & Viney, 1973).

Meaning in life is also positively correlated with intrinsic religiosity (Crandall & Rasmussen, 1975; Steger & Frazier, 2005; Soderstrom & Wright, 1977), and religious satisfaction among retired academics (Acuff & Allen, 1970; Acuff & Gorman, 1967), as well as religious activity (praying, meditating; Steger & Frazier, 2005), the salience of one's religion (Peterson & Roy, 1985), and beliefs in personal monotheism (Molcar & Stuempfig, 1988). Chinese post-secondary school students with religious beliefs reported greater meaning in life (Shek, Hong, & Cheung, 2001). People who have devoted their lives to their religious beliefs also tend to report greater meaning in their lives than people who have not. This has been found among Anglican (Roberts, 1991) and Dominican nuns (Crumbaugh et al., 1970), as well as Protestant ministers (Weinstein & Cleanthous, 1996), and recently converted Christians (Paloutzian, 1981).

Although the earliest research on meaning in life and spiritual variables was conducted in the late 1960s, there appears to have been a steady interest in understanding the connections between these two bodies of research. The body of evidence is small, but consistent in indicating that people who have more satisfactory religious and spiritual lives also report greater meaning in life. Thus, meaning in life appears connected to transcendence, as well as positive and negative functioning.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Four decades of research has led to the accumulation of an impressive number of variables related to people's experience of meaning in life. Broad measures of well-being and adjustment, life satisfaction, self-worth, self-empowerment broadly construed, depression, anxiety, and differences in meaning among known clinical or behavioral groups have been the subject of the largest number of studies, with at least ten published reports fitting into each category. Thus, it seems safe to conclude that people who say they lead meaningful lives are also fairly happy, satisfied with their lives and self, and experience lower levels of psychological distress, psychopathological complaints, substance-related problems, and disruptive behavior.

One problem with this body of research is that it has often accumulated in the absence of a unifying theoretical framework. Various influential theories or prominent empirical reports have been consulted in most of the studies reviewed here, usually for the apparent purpose of laying the groundwork for relatively circumscribed investigations. For example, Frankl's (1963) theory that meaning arises, in part, from people's adaptive endurance of suffering has inspired a number of studies looking at people's coping (e.g., Debats et al., 1995; Steger, Frazier et al., in press), and Maslow's (1971) theory of self-actualization has inspired research looking at self-worth (e.g., Ebersole & Humphries, 1991). However, the entire endeavor of meaning in life research would benefit to some degree by developing higher-order conceptual models and theoretical frameworks that could integrate the intriguing and often solitary number of findings and provide us better information about the deeper nature of meaning in life as a human experience, and lead us to prioritize a future research agenda.

I have attempted to sketch one such model by drawing on the distinct psychological features of meaning in life to identify implications for well-being, psychological distress, and spirituality. Of particular interest were the ideas that meaning in life necessarily involves people feeling their lives matter, making sense of their lives, and determining a broader purpose for their lives. I also suggested that theories about meaning in life could generate hypotheses at lower levels of abstraction. For example, from this approach, we can account for the positive relation of meaning in life with relatedness (Ryff, 1989; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, et al., 2008) by arguing that having high quality relationships indicates an effective ability to understand how one fits with the world around one (see also Aron, this volume). This is more satisfying than arguing that good relationships are important to meaning in life because they are important for well-being in general because the former explanation gleans insight into where meaning comes from and what it does. In contrast, the latter explanation seems to diminish critical distinctions between meaning in life and other well-being variables; as a consequence, those who are less familiar with or interested in meaning in life might dismiss it as being generic and thus unworthy of investigation. Meaning in life research has achieved a high degree of visibility and acceptance within the broader spectrum of psychological research due to the consistent, dedicated, and rigorous work of many scholars over the past four decades. To continue this legacy will require maintaining the empirical rigor and theoretical innovation that have marked the best of previous scholarship, and endeavor to connect the disparate threads of research into an integrated theory of meaning in life.

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