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Family as a salient source of meaning in young adulthood

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Five studies demonstrated the role of family relationships as an important source of perceived meaning in life. In Study 1 ($n = 50$), 68% participants reported that their families were the single most significant contributor to personal meaning. Study 2 ($n = 231$) participants ranked family above 12 likely sources of meaning. Studies 3 ($n = 87$) and 4 ($n = 130$) demonstrated that participants' reports of their closeness to family (Study 3) and support from family (Study 4) predicted perceived meaning in life, even when controlling for several competing variables. Study 5 ($n = 261$) ruled out social desirability as an alternative explanation to the proposed relationship between family and meaning. We conclude that for young adults, family relationships are a primary source of meaning in life and they contribute to their sense of meaning.

Keywords: family; meaning; young adulthood; source of meaning

Introduction

Scholars have traditionally assumed that mental health is the absence of mental illness; however, some have acknowledged both the limitations of this conceptualization and the need for positive markers of mental health (e.g., Machenbach, Van Den Bos, Joug, Van De Mheen, & Stronks, 1994). Leading a meaningful and purposeful life has been proposed to be one of the core features of positive mental health (Ryff & Singer, 1998; see Steger, in press, for a thorough treatment of the implications of meaning on well-being).

Definitions of meaning in life vary. Baumeister (1991) describes meaning in life as having a sense that one's life has purpose or feeling that one has a place in the grand scheme. Reker (1997, p. 710) defines meaning as 'having a sense of direction, a sense of order, and a reason for existence, a clear sense of personal identity, and a greater social consciousness.' For the purpose of these studies, we concur with Baumeister's suggestion of meaning as being a sense that one's life has purpose and a place in the grand scheme.

This article examines two questions regarding meaning, one regarding the potential source of meaning and the other regarding a sense of meaning. The questions are: 'where does one find such meaning?' (sources of meaning) and 'the extent to which various sources are related to perceptions of meaningfulness?' (sense of meaning). We define source of meaning as that which supplies or contributes to perceived meaning. We define sense of meaning as the degree to which an individual feels a sense of direction, order, and reason for existence. Schnell and Becker (2006) examined 26 sources of meaning and explored individual differences in these sources of meaning by personality. However, these researchers did not include family as one of their 26 sources of meaning and we suspected that family relationships would be an important source of meaning that has been previously overlooked. Furthermore, we sought to determine whether closeness with family or support from family would contribute to participants' sense of how meaningful their life is.

Prior literature indicates that relationships should contribute to meaning. Insofar as people have a basic need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), they are motivated to make such connections as a pervasive aspect of life. McCall and Simmons (1996) suggest that social roles bring meaning to people's lives because they provide a system of beliefs that guide values, give purpose, and create expectations for the future, which stimulate goal formation. Moreover, interacting with others within one's social and cultural group is central to the biological strategies of humans, as social animals

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(e.g., Aronson, 2004; Baumeister, 2005). Thus, social relationships may play an important role in the perception of meaning in life (Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004).

Prior research has provided support for the notion that social connection is important to an individual's perception of life as meaningful. There are data to show that anticipated social support is associated with a deeper sense of meaning over time (Krause, 2007) and that social relationships are the most frequent source of meaning (Debats, 1999). Being excluded from such relationships not only causes a temporary decrease in the meaningfulness of the moments during which one is excluded, but also results in a broad reduction in the perception that life is meaningful (Stillman, Baumeister, et al., 2009). Specifically, rejected participants showed greater endorsement of items such as 'life has no meaning or purpose.' Furthermore, the relationship between social exclusion and the perception of low meaning in life extends to naturally occurring differences in belonging: individual differences in loneliness predict the evaluation of life as low in meaning, even when controlling for a host of related variables (Stillman, Baumeister, et al., 2009). Granted, it is unlikely that all social relationships have an equal impact on meaning, and to our knowledge no study has examined or compared the differential impact of different social relationships on meaning.

Overview of current studies

The objective of Studies 1 and 2 was to determine whether family would be described in both an open-ended format (Study 1) and with a forced choice ranking (Study 2) as a primary source of meaning. In Study 1, we asked participants to write about the one thing that brings them the most meaning in life with the expectation that most people would report that family brings them the most meaning. In Study 2, participants ranked the importance of family and 12 other plausible sources of meaning with the expectation that family would be ranked highest relative to the other potential sources of meaning. The objective of Studies 3–5 was to determine whether family, operationalized in terms of closeness (Study 3) and support (Studies 4 and 5), would be a strong predictor of a sense of meaning. In sum, we hypothesized that family would be chosen as the top source of meaning and that higher reported sources of meaning should naturally contribute to a higher sense of meaning. Only about 2% of the participants from the pool of students from which we drew our samples reported being married and less than 1% reported having children. Thus, nearly all participants were answering the questions in regard to their families of origin.

Study 1

An open-ended question about what brings the most meaning to one's life could be potentially useful for determining the salience and/or pervasiveness of family relationships in contributing to meaning in life. Thus, we began in Study 1 by using open-ended questions regarding what makes peoples' lives meaningful. In addition, one might wonder if, among other social relationships, there is anything in particular that is special about family relationships as providers of meaning to one's life. In fact, there are a number of reasons to expect that good, close friendships might rival family relationships in providing meaning, especially for young adults. Indeed, friends fulfill a variety of roles in an individual's life and may satisfy needs that cannot be met by family relationships (M.H. Richey & H.W. Richey, 1980). However, we predicted that the majority of participants would describe family as being the single most salient contributor of meaning, because for many, families have consistently furnished them with physiological and safety needs and they should thus be more likely to turn to family to meet their high-order needs of meaning. We also expected that a high percentage of individuals who did not cite family as being the single most important contributor to meaning would mention it in a follow-up question.

Method

Participants

The sample included 50 (34 female) undergraduate students who completed the study for partial course credit in an introductory class on family across the lifespan that meets university requirements for social studies and thus draws on students from various disciplines. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 27 with a median age of 20 years.

Procedure

Participants were asked to 'pick the one thing that makes life most meaningful for you and describe why you selected it.' They were then asked a follow-up question that requested that they 'list at least three other things that make your life feel meaningful.'

Results

Consistent with our hypothesis, in responding to the first question regarding the most important contributor to meaning, 68% described their families in general or a specific family member (e.g., sister, parent) as their

most important contributor to meaning. The second most frequently mentioned contributor to life meaning was friends (14%), followed by God (8%), education (6%), success (4%), and the remaining three individuals mentioned a journal, 'random people,' or 'finding a purpose.' Thus, a close social relationship was mentioned as the most salient contributor to meaning by a vast majority of participants and family relationships were mentioned most frequently as providing meaning.

We then examined the responses of the 16 individuals that did not mention family as the most important contributor to meaning in their lives, to see if they would mention family in the follow-up question. Again, our hypothesis was confirmed as 69% of these individuals mentioned family in response to the follow-up question. In total, 90% of participants in the study indicated family as an important contributor to their perception of life's meaning. We also examined the responses of the 43 individuals who did not cite friends as being their most salient source of meaning. Of these individuals, 26 (60% of those that had not mentioned friends initially) mentioned friends as a contributor to meaning in the follow-up question. Thus, 66% of all total participants mentioned friendship as a contributor to the meaning. Although the friendship response made up some ground in answer to the follow-up question, results indicate that family was a more pervasive response than friendship as the single greatest contributor to meaning.

Discussion

Given the importance of peer relationships for people of this age group, it is plausible that friendship might potentially rival family in salience, but it did not. We do not dispute that friendships and other relationships make life more meaningful for many individuals; however, our findings indicate that family relationships were the most salient and pervasive for providing meaning to participants in this study. We propose that this could be due to young adults reverting back to the secure base of their families of origin to derive meaning during this period of transition.

Study 1 demonstrated that family was the most salient source of meaning. However, given the open response format of the question, it could be that family is a construct that comes to mind easily, so that participants' responses may have simply reflected cognitive accessibility. In addition, when asked to list what else brings meaning to life, a majority of participants also cited friends as being important. Thus, in Study 2 we wanted to test how family would measure up compared to a wide variety of variables that could contribute to meaning.

Study 2

In Study 1 we found that family contributed more to meaning than other social relationships. The objective of this study was to replicate this finding using another methodology and to expand upon it by exploring how family would rank among several other likely contributors to meaning. Specifically, we presented participants with a list of 12 potential sources of meaning in life (e.g., family, friends, happiness, personal achievements, religious faith, etc.). This list was derived from theory and research on meaning in life and eudemonic well-being more generally (e.g., King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006; Ryff, 1989; Wong, 1998; Yalom, 1982). Consistent with the results of Study 1, we hypothesized that participants would rank family as the strongest contributor to the experience of personal meaning.

Method

Participants

The sample included 231 (151 female) undergraduate students who completed a laboratory study for partial course credit in an introductory psychology course. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 years with a median age of 18 years.

Procedure

Upon arrival at the laboratory, participants were escorted to a visually isolated computer. They were told that they would complete a few unrelated tasks. For their first task, participants were instructed:

> You will see a list of things other people have mentioned which provides their lives with meaning. We would like you to think about whether these things influence your experience of meaning in life too. After thinking about what gives your life meaning, please rank all of the items in terms of how much each one influences your experience of meaning in life. To rank the items, simply use the mouse to drag and drop each of the boxes to the screen to the right. Place the most important source of meaning at the top of the screen and continue to rank the rest of sources from most important to least important.

There were 12 boxes each labeled with a different source of meaning including 'family,' 'friends,' 'happiness,' 'religious faith,' 'achievements,' 'self-acceptance,' 'personal growth,' 'self-worth,' 'justice/fairness,' 'personal goals,' 'intimacy,' and 'helping others.' After the ranking task, participants completed a variety of diverse measures unrelated to this study.

Results

A repeated measures analysis of variance yielded a significant main effect $F(11, 2530) = 75.02$, $p < 0.001$,

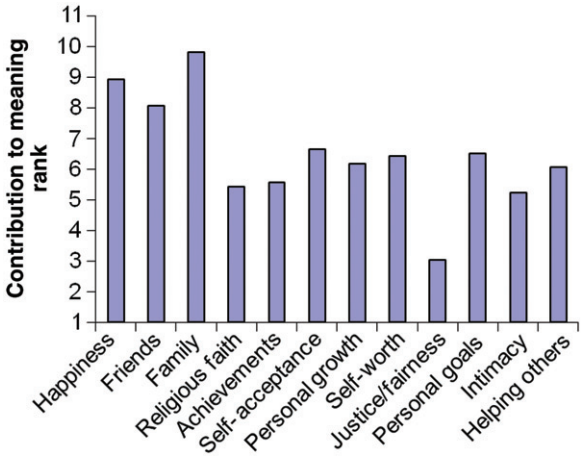

Figure 1. Study 2 mean ranked values for common contributors to meaning ($n = 231$). Higher rank scores indicate higher contribution to meaning.

$\eta_p^2 = 0.25$. As hypothesized, *post hoc* Tukey LSD tests revealed that family was indeed rated as a significantly more influential source of meaning in life ($M = 9.81$ $SD = 0.14$) compared to each of the other sources (all p's < 0.001; see Figure 1). Given that these ranking data were non-parametric in nature, we also ran this analysis using the Friedman (1937) procedure. The results did not differ from those of the repeated measures analysis of variance test, and family was again significantly more influential compared to all other sources of meaning (all p's < 0.001).

Discussion

The data supported our hypothesis that family relationships would be ranked as the most important source of meaning. These results not only replicate our prior findings, indicating that family is a more important contributor to meaning than friends. They also demonstrate the preeminence of family relationships over other likely sources of meaning such as happiness, religious faith, and personal growth. Thus, the results of Studies 1 and 2 indicate that family is a strong source of meaning. The objective of Studies 3–5 was to determine whether family, as a top rated source of meaning, would be related to an individual's sense of meaning.

Study 3

The objective of Study 3 was to test whether reports of naturally occurring close family relationships would contribute to participants' sense of meaning manifested by whether it would be related to a stronger sense of meaning in life. We also wanted to test whether this relationship would hold even when controlling for several other previously examined predictors of meaning. We hypothesized that higher family support scores would predict higher meaningfulness scores, controlling for self-esteem, relatedness, competence, autonomy, and closeness to friends.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 87 (39 women) participants enrolled in an introductory psychology course who completed an online survey in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Ages ranged from 18 to 23 years with a median of 19 years.

Measures

Meaning in life. To assess meaning in life, participants completed the 8-item meaning measure developed by Krause (2007). A sample item is 'I feel like I have found a really significant meaning in my life,' and coefficient alpha in the sample was 0.87.

Inclusion of self with family and friends. Adapted versions of the inclusion of self with others (A. Aron, E.N. Aron, & Smollan, 1992) were used to assess closeness to family and closeness to friends, respectively. These were single-item measures each consisting of seven pairs of two increasingly overlapping circles, starting with very little overlap and ending with almost complete overlap. One circle represents the 'self' and one represents 'family' (or 'friends'). Each assessed how much aspects of the self and family (or friends) are close to each other, which could be perceived as a measure of closeness to family or friends.

Psychological needs satisfaction. Participants also completed the 21-item Basic Psychological Needs Scale (Gagné, 2003). The Basic Psychological Needs Scale assesses the extent to which participants' needs for competence (e.g., 'Most days I feel a sense of accomplishment from what I do'; $\alpha = 0.76$), relatedness (e.g., 'I get along with people I come into contact with'; $\alpha = 0.81$), and autonomy (e.g., 'I feel like I can pretty much be myself in my daily situations'; $\alpha = 0.61$) are currently satisfied.

Self-esteem. The 10-item Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale was included to assess overall feelings of self-worth (e.g., 'I feel that I have a number of good qualities'; $\alpha = 0.92$). Self-esteem has also been suggested to be an important contributor to the experience of meaning (e.g., Baumeister, 1991).

Table 1. Summary of Study 3 hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting meaning scores ($n = 87$).

Variable	β	SE β	β	p
Step 1				
Inclusion with family	0.40	0.07	0.51	0.00
Step 2				
Inclusion with family	0.25	0.07	0.32	0.00
Self-esteem	0.24	0.12	0.25	0.06
Autonomy	0.09	0.16	0.07	0.59
Competence	0.20	0.14	0.20	0.15
Relatedness	0.03	0.13	0.03	0.80
Inclusion with friends	0.03	0.08	0.03	0.74

Notes: SE, standard error; $R^2 = 0.26$ for Step 1 ($p < 0.01$); $\Delta R^2 = 0.22$ for Step 2 ($p < 0.05$).

Results and discussion

We computed a hierarchical regression equation in order to first examine the zero-order contribution of inclusion of self with family to meaning in life judgments and then again controlling for satisfaction with relationships, autonomy, competence, self-esteem, and closeness to friends scores to test whether even when controlling for all these variables, the relationship between family and meaning would still persist. As expected, closeness to family predicted enhanced meaning in life ($\beta = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$) and continued to do so even when controlling for all other study variables ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.01$, see Table 1 for full details). The results of this study indicate that closeness to family is a strong, robust predictor of meaning in life.

The more the people felt that they are closely identified with family and friends, the higher they rated life as meaningful. Other positive ratings, such as relatedness, did not predict meaning. So life's meaning does not simply correlate with things that are positive. Feeling close to friends did not predict meaningfulness in life. Thus, not all forms of closeness are equally impactful.

Study 4

The objective of Study 4 was to provide further evidence for a strong, robust relationship between family relationships and sense of meaning, this time by operationalizing family relationships in terms of perceived support from family. In addition to the control variables from Study 3, we also controlled for depression and happiness (which have also been shown to relate to meaning, e.g., King et al., 2006) to provide an even stricter test. We hypothesized that higher family support scores would predict higher meaningfulness scores, controlling for happiness, depression, self-esteem, relatedness, competence, autonomy, special other support (this was typically a romantic partner or someone else with whom they had a special relationship), and friend support. This time we operationalized social relationship in terms of support to ensure that both belongingness with family (Study 3) and social support of family (Study 4) would be important predictors of meaning, and would be stronger predictors of meaning than these same dimensions of belonging or support from friends.

Method

Participants

One hundred and thirty participants (74 women) enrolled in an introductory psychology course completed an online survey for partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Ages ranged from 18 to 27 with a median of 19.

Measures

Meaning in life. To assess meaning in life, participants completed the same 8-item measure for meaning in life developed by Krause (2007) from Study 3. Coefficient alpha was 0.85.

Social support. Social support was measured using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Canty-Mitchell & Zimet, 2000). The MSPSS contains three 4-item subscales that assess perceived social support from family (e.g., 'I get the emotional help and support I need from my family'; $\alpha = 92$), friends, (e.g., 'I can count on my friends when things go wrong'; $\alpha = 0.90$), and from significant others (e.g., 'There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings'; $\alpha = 0.97$).

Psychological needs satisfaction. Participants also completed the same 21-item Basic Psychological Needs Scale (Gagné, 2003) from Study 3. Alphas for the subscales were 0.80 (competence), 0.83 (relatedness), and 0.73 (autonomy).

Self-esteem. The 10-item Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale from Study 3 was again included to assess overall feelings of self-worth. Alpha in this study was 0.90.

Happiness. Happiness has been shown to be associated with meaning in life in previous research (e.g., McGregor & Little, 1998). To measure happiness, participants completed the 4-item subjective happiness scale (e.g., 'Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself: less or more happy'; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999; $\alpha = 0.90$).

Depression. Similarly, depression has been negatively related to meaning (e.g., Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). To assess depression, participants completed the 8-item depression scale from the Personality Assessment Inventory (PAI; Morey, 1991) including items such as 'I have no interest in life,' ($\alpha = 0.90$).

Results and discussion

A hierarchical regression equation was computed in order to examine the contribution of family social support to meaning in life judgments. We first examined the zero-order relationship in Step 1 and found that family support was strongly related to perceived meaning ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$). On the second step we entered happiness, need satisfaction, self-esteem, and depression scores as well as the other social support variables (friend and special other). As expected, family social support continued to predict enhanced meaning in life ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$), even when controlling for all these competing variables (see Table 2 for full results). These findings are consistent with our hypothesis that family support would be positively related to meaningfulness, and that the association would hold even when controlling for other known predictors of meaning. These findings provide additional evidence that reports of naturally occurring levels of family support are also related to meaning. Although family was not the strongest predictor of meaning, we suspect that this is likely due to an artifact of measurement, the fact that we measured only one aspect of family–family support. Other dimensions of family were not included, but they also likely have an effect on meaning. However, one shortcoming of Studies 3 and 4 is that neither of them took socially desirable responding into account. It could be that both family support and meaning are socially desirable variables and that the association between them is actually due to the shared variance with social desirability.

Table 2. Summary of Study 4 hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting meaning scores ($n = 130$).

Variable	*B*	SE *B*	*β*	*p*
Step 1				
Family support	0.35	0.07	0.42	0.00
Step 2				
Family support	0.15	0.07	0.18	0.02
Depression	−0.17	0.22	−0.09	0.45
Self-esteem	0.11	0.11	0.13	0.31
Autonomy	0.02	0.12	0.02	0.72
Competence	0.33	0.11	0.31	0.00
Relatedness	0.01	0.11	0.01	0.94
Happiness	0.30	0.08	0.35	0.00
Significant other	0.07	0.04	0.12	0.13
Friend support	−0.09	0.07	−0.12	0.18

Notes: SE, standard error; $R^2 = 0.18$ for Step 1 ($p < 0.01$); $\Delta R^2 = 0.35$ for Step 2 ($p < 0.05$).

Study 5

The objective of Study 5 was to rule out socially desirable responding as an alternative explanation for the relationship between family and perceived meaning. We hypothesized that, even when controlling for social desirability, happiness, depression, and life satisfaction, that family support would predict perceived meaningfulness.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and sixty-one participants (230 women) enrolled in an introductory family studies course completed an online survey for extra credit. Ages ranged from 17 to 28 with a median of 20.

Measures

Meaning. To assess meaning, we used the 5-item meaning presence subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006), which assesses the extent to which one perceives meaning to be present in one's life (e.g., 'I understand my life's meaning'; $\alpha = 0.87$).

Self-esteem. The 10-item Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale from Studies 3 and 4 was again included to assess overall feelings of self-worth. Alpha in this study was 0.78.

Happiness. We again used the 4-item happiness measure from Study 4 (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999; $\alpha = 0.86$).

Depression. To measure depression we again used the PAI (Morey, 1991; $\alpha = 0.86$).

Social desirability. A shortened, 10-item version of the Marlowe–Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Reynolds, 1982) was used to assess the tendency to present oneself in a socially desirable manner. Reliability was not computed because this measure more closely resembles an index than a scale.

Results and discussion

A hierarchical regression equation was computed in order to examine the contribution of family social

support on meaning in life judgments. We first examined the zero-order relationship in Step 1 and found that family support was strongly related to perceived meaning ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < 0.01$). On the second step, we entered happiness, self-esteem, and depression scores as well as social desirability. As expected, family social support continued to predict enhanced meaning in life ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.05$), even when controlling for all these competing variables (see Table 3 for full results). These findings are consistent with our hypothesis that family support would be positively related to meaningfulness, and that the association would hold even when controlling for social desirability and other known predictors of meaning.

General discussion

Across five studies, we found evidence that family relationships are a potent source of meaning in life and contribute to a sense of meaning. Study 1 demonstrated the salience of family relationships for creating meaning. We found that 68% of participants reported family to be the one thing that brought the most meaning to their lives, while the next most commonly cited source of meaning (friendships) was endorsed by 14% of respondents. When allowed to mention three sources of meaning in life, 90% of participants mentioned family as contributing to meaning in their lives, compared to 66% who mentioned friends. Thus, family was the most prevalent and salient contributor to meaning for these participants.

In Study 2, we hoped to increase the breadth of our findings by comparing the contribution of family relationships with 11 likely alternative sources of meaning. We found that participants ranked family as being more important to meaning than any other alternative source presented. Finally, in Studies 3–5, we tested the strength of the relationship between family, operationalized in terms of closeness (Study 3) and support (Studies 4 and 5) and naturally occurring, self-reported meaning and found a robust relationship that persisted even when controlling for several competing variables, including social desirability (Study 5). Our data indicated that family relationships are an important and widespread source of meaning in life for a vast majority of our young adult participants. Thus, data from a variety of methods across five studies indicate that family is a primary source of meaning and contributes to a sense of meaning.

Table 3. Summary of Study 5 hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting meaning scores ($n = 261$).

Variable	*B*	SE *B*	β	*p*
Step 1				
Family support	0.35	0.06	0.40	0.00
Step 2				
Family support	0.14	0.05	0.16	0.01
Social desirability	0.04	0.03	0.08	0.15
Depression	−0.08	0.14	−0.04	0.58
Self-esteem	0.08	0.17	0.41	0.31
Happiness	0.05	0.02	0.21	0.02

Notes: SE, standard error; $R^2 = 0.16$ for Step 1 ($p < 0.01$); $\Delta R^2 = 0.50$ for Step 2 ($p < 0.05$).

Returning to family as a secure base and source of meaning during emerging adulthood

Arnett (2000) has defined emerging adulthood as a time period that is neither adolescence nor young adulthood, but is rather separate from them both (usually around ages 18–25 years). Although the developmental stages of adolescence and childhood are undoubtedly paramount developmental periods, early adulthood is also crucial period in the quest for one's identity. In fact, Arnett argues that central to emerging adulthood is identity exploration. This transition from adolescence to adulthood in Western societies is characterized by a dramatic decline in parental restrictions, leaving offspring to pave a path of their own in life. Although familiar with the household he or she was raised in, the emerging adult is now released in to the world to create his or her own foundation.

Arnett (2000) argues that the stage of 'emerging adulthood' is unique because of the vast opportunities young adults have with regards to relationships, work experiences, and world view. Young adults are able to examine many different opportunities, exploring the world in the hope of finding intimate relationship partners to spend their lives with, a solid career to build their life upon, and a world view to embody the way they see life. This is why Arnett labels early adulthood as the 'roleless role' (Arnett, 2000). Similarly, in Erikson's psychosocial stage theory (Erikson, 1950), the exploration period of young adulthood is a separate and unique stage of development in which the primary objective is to achieve intimacy rather than be subject to isolation. Also, Erikson (1968) believed that through social interactions a person developed his or her sense of self, or his or her ego identity. Thus, it seems plausible that during this distinctive period of exploration and identity formation when instability and identity variability are at their peak, young adults may turn back to their families for a sense of meaning, security, and identity in the midst of insecure times. Families may provide a secure base to turn to, during this period of transition.

Building on Bowlby's (1958) theory of attachment, Ainsworth (1969) described the secure base as a safe place for a child to retreat to when he or she is feeling

overwhelmed. Ainsworth (1969) found that during play as the child ventured away from the caregiver, most consistently returned to or touched base with the caregiver using his or her as a secure base from which to explore the world. That is, he or she was able to be comforted and 'recharge' before heading back out on their own again. Supporting Bowlby's observation that the attachment system is important from the cradle to the grave, Ainsworth found a relationship between a mother's Adult Attachment Interview Classification and her child's Strange Situation Classification suggesting that adults have the same set of goals in adult attachment behavior as infant attachment behavior (Ainsworth & Marvin, 1994).

How is the attachment system manifested in emerging adulthood? We agree with Arnett and Erikson that this period is characterized by exploration, identity development, and the formation of new attachment figures (primarily a romantic partner), and propose that just as the venturing toddlers in Ainsworth's study continuously returned to the caregiver, young adults, during this quest to discover their own life purpose, will revert back to the secure base of their own families of origin to derive meaning. Unlike toddlers, however, who literally return to the caregiver, in emerging adulthood attachment needs can be satisfied symbolically (e.g., by looking at a photograph, reading an e-mail, and so on).

Need to belong

Some research indicates that belonging is an important predictor of meaning (e.g., Stillman, Lambert, Fincham, Baumeister, & Hicks, Under review) and we propose that family relationships, due to their non-transitory, ubiquitous nature are uniquely well-suited for satisfying belongingness needs and that this is a likely reason why family relates to meaning. We propose that a key reason why family relationships are related to higher meaning is due to family's unique capacity to satiate belongingness needs. The need to belong theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) holds that human beings are innately driven to form lasting, positive relationships. Several studies have demonstrated that experimentally ostracized participants report the moments of ostracism to be low in meaning (e.g., van Beest & Williams, 2006; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000; Zadro et al., 2004). Stillman, Lambert, et al. (2009) found that belonging was a strong predictor of meaning in life. In fact, participants in their study primed with belonging reported higher meaning than those primed with either social support or compliments. We suggest that similarly, family relationships would be an important source of belongingness, partly due to the ubiquitous nature of families – nearly everyone has a family to whom to belong. Testing belongingness as a potential mechanism for the relationship between family and meaning would be a worthwhile direction for future research on this topic.

Implications of findings

What are the implications of perceiving life to be meaningful? Research indicates that the evaluation of one's life as meaningful (or meaningless) has profound implications for well-being, so that the perception of greater meaning has consistently been associated with many indicators of well-being (e.g., Baumeister, 1991; Frankl, 1963; Ryff, 1989; Steger et al., 2006). Higher levels of meaning are also associated with lower levels of distress, as indexed by a variety of variables such as depressive symptoms (Debats, van der Lubbe, & Wezeman, 1993; Mascaro & Rosen, 2005), stress (Mascaro & Rosen, 2006), and thoughts of suicide (Harlow, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1986) to name a few (see Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008, for a thorough treatment of the implications of meaning on well-being). Given that perceiving life to be meaningful seems to be unambiguously beneficial, knowing the most salient predictors of meaningfulness is an important priority.

The results from five studies indicate that family is an important contributor to meaning. This is important because although prior research has established a link between social relationships and meaning (e.g., Krause, 2007), further exploration of the type of relationship that is most salient to meaning, to our knowledge, has not been conducted. Awareness of a strong link between family and meaning could have implications for practitioners. For instance, perhaps a family-based approach may be appropriate for clients low in perceived meaning, at least for therapists working with young adult clients.

Limitations and future directions

Although we controlled for social desirability in Study 5, which tested the question of sense of meaning, it could be that identifying family as a source of meaning could also be socially desirable. Thus, future research should control for social desirability when assessing sources of meaning. Another key limitation of these studies is that participants may have varied ideas of what meaning means to them. It is difficult to know for sure how each participant conceives of meaning and perhaps this could be addressed in future research by providing participants with a definition of meaning before asking them what brings meaning to their lives. Another possibility would be to use the Ultimate Meanings Technique (Leontiev, 2007, p. 243), 'a research and clinical instrument that makes it possible to reconstruct the system of a person's beliefs

about the goals and meanings of human life.' The advantage of this type of technique is that it directly assesses each individual's meaning in life and that it also minimizes the level of socially desirable responding.

Also, by design, these studies exclusively examined the contribution of family relationships to meaning in young adult college students. In fact, many of these students were freshmen, thus, family may have been more salient for them. However, it is possible that older or more diverse groups may derive a higher proportion of meaning from other sources and this should be tested by future research. Family may not be as salient a source of meaning for other groups, (e.g., empty nesters who have already raised their children) and this should be examined by future research. Also, it is notable that family would be such a salient source of meaning in such an individualistic culture. It seems plausible that the salience of family as a source of meaning is likely to be even stronger in other cultural contexts and this should be tested.

Another question that deserves further attention is why family relationships contribute to meaning. Baumeister (1991) proposed four basic needs for meaning, and to have a meaningful life, a person would have to have some combination of undertakings and relationships that would satisfy each of them. The four needs for meaning were as follows: first, a need for purpose relates current life activities to future (possible) outcomes and events, from which the present draws meaning and which can organize and guide present decisions. Second, need for value and justification entails having a basis for understanding what is right *versus* wrong and being able to construe most of one's actions as right (as well as being able to choose how to act right). Third, efficacy means being able to have an effect on the world, without which purpose and justification are rather empty shells. It is as a child in the family that one first develops this sense. Fourth, self-worth involves having some basis for regarding oneself as a valuable person, often as superior to others. Most parents value their children, providing a foundation for the development of self-worth, again pointing to the family as an initial source for fulfilling this need.

We suspect that family can satisfy all four needs for meaning, which could help explain why it figures prominently in people's meanings of life. Family provides purpose (e.g., trying to live up to expectations of parents, provide for children), value (families often teach what is right, and moreover doing things for family is generally regarded as an unquestioned good), efficacy (one can contribute to the family and impact others), and self-worth (most families value their members). Future research should explore whether family is a stable source of satisfaction for all four needs for meaning.

We propose that the ubiquitous and long-lasting nature of families make them ideal for satiating belongingness needs. This supposition could be gainfully examined empirically. It seems plausible that belonging would function as a mechanism in the relationship between family and meaning.

Summary and conclusion

In five studies, we documented the relationship between family relationships and perceived meaningfulness. The first two studies used two different methodologies to assess what young adult participants perceived as being the source of meaning in their lives: an open-ended format (Study 1) and a computerized ranking system (Study 2). Both methodologies revealed a similar result that, for the young adult participants, family was the most salient source of meaning. In fact, family relationships surpassed friendships and other social relationships and were ranked above happiness, religious faith, personal growth, and other alternative sources of meaning. The final three studies tested the strength of the relationship between family operationalized in terms of closeness (Study 3) and support (Studies 4 and 5) and found that it did relate to reported meaningfulness even when controlling for competing variables such as self-esteem, happiness, friend support, and social desirability. These studies also served to validate family as a source of meaning. Based on the results of these five studies, we conclude that family relationships are a salient source of meaning in the lives of young adults.

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