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The Pursuit of Meaningfulness in Life

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Human beings begin life as animals and remain tied throughout life to natural cyles of birth and death, eating and sleeping, reproduction, danger and safety, and more. Yet to this natural dimension of human life must be added a cultural one. Humans use their thinking capacity to transcend their immediate environment and their natural urges and responses. Thinking usually involves meaning, as in the use of language, symbols, and connections between concepts. Whereas natural law depends on the principles of physics, chemistry, and biology, culture rests on language and meaning. Hence, an account of the human being that neglected meaning would miss much that is essential and, indeed, much that is distinctively human.

Psychologists gradually have begun to study meaning in life. Frankl's (1959/1976) early work emphasized the importance of finding value in life, and he is widely credited with being a pioneer in the study of meaning. His work constituted a courageous rebellion against the behaviorist and psychodynamic paradigms that dominated psychological theorizing at that time. Another important work in the history of the study of meaning was Klinger's (1977) book *Meaning and Void,* which emphasized the importance of purposes for conferring meaning on life. Still, these works were isolated intellectually from the main work of their time. In a more recent edited volume by Wong and Fry (1998), however, there are many different authors with broad and multifaceted interests in the human quest for meaning and its implications for psychological functioning. Clearly, there appears to be more attention given to meaning in psychological theorizing.

The Nature of Meaning

The essence of meaning is connection. Meaning can link two things even if they are physically separate entities, such as if they belong to the same category, are owned by the same person, or are both used for a common goal. The connection between the two is not part of their physical makeup and thus can only be appreciated by a human mind (or some other mind capable of processing meaning). Ultimately, therefore, meaning is a nonphysical reality. It is real in that it can have genuine causal consequences, and yet it cannot be reduced to physical principles.

Money provides one of the best illustrations of the nonphysical reality of meaning. A dollar bill certainly has a physical reality as a scrap of green paper with a certain molecular structure.

But no amount of analyzing that molecular structure will reveal what that dollar bill has in common with 10 dimes or 4 quarters. It is only in terms of meaning that this dollar bill is the same as the 10 dimes. Moreover, that meaning links the particular dollar bill to many other bills in far-off places, all of which are defined as having exactly the same value, even though the price of bread or gasoline may vary from place to place.

Furthermore, it should be noted that a great deal of money does not exist in physical form. If all the existing American bills and coins were accumulated in one pile, they would add up to less than a third of the total American monetary system. Much of America's money exists only in the form of abstract representations. For example, if you have a bank account, the bank theoretically holds some of your money. In fact, however, the bank does not stockpile a stack of bills and coins that constitutes your money (or the money of anyone, for that matter). In the old "bank runs," the rumor that a bank would run out of money would cause people to hurry to ask the bank to give them their savings in cash, and the bank did not have enough cash to satisfy that demand. As another example, many purchases are made by check or credit card, and no actual coins or bills are used. These transactions are not physical events that can be fully, adequately explained in terms of atomic, molecular, chemical, or biological processes.

In contrast, life is a biological process that can be fully explained in physical terms (except insofar as its course is changed by meaning—such as if someone moves to a new country in pursuit of religious freedom). Human life is bound by the rules of natural law, and, as such, the basic animal needs continue to exert a powerful influence on human activity.

A seeming paradox in the concept of a meaning of life is that meaning is stable whereas life is malleable. Because meaning must be shared by many people, language is only usable in society if the meanings of words remain largely constant over time. If half the people in your town started saying "no" when they meant "yes," whereas the others continued to use "yes" to mean "yes," chaos would ensue. Likewise, your address, social security number, membership in a family, and other meanings that define you are inherently stable, except for well-established procedures for changing them (such as when you sell your house and move to another). The way that people understand highly abstract concepts such as justice or patriotism can evolve slowly in periods of social change, but even then some continuity is usually necessary, and most of the meanings in the language will remain stable.

Life, in contrast, is characterized by ongoing change. Growth, decline, ingesting food, eliminating waste, reproducing, and other natural parts of life all involve change. Your physical being is constantly in flux, even if your meaningful identity as defined by society remains essentially the same.

A meaning of life is therefore an imposition of a stable conception onto a changing biological process. This may seem quixotic, as if one were trying to pin a stable definition onto a moving target. Yet there probably is a deeper reason for the contrast between the stability of meaning and the flux of life. Although life is marked by constant change, living things strive for stability. Change is not welcome to most living things, and almost anyone who has lived with animals can attest to their pronounced preference for stable, predictable routines and environments. Rick Snyder, the senior editor of this volume, told us a relevant story about his 25-year-old parrot named Norman, who recently was moved to a new and much nicer cage. When Norman was let out of his new cage for the first time, he went into a shrieking tantrum and destroyed a nearby cloth chair.

Thus, meaning can be regarded as one of humanity's tools for imposing stability on life. The human organism is exposed to change but desires stability, and it turns to meaning to help create that stability. For example, sexual attraction and emotional intimacy wax and wane, and long-term relationships are a process of ongoing adaptation and mutual evolution. Yet this seeming instability is counteracted by imposing a stable meaning, namely, marriage. The act of marriage is not a physical event in the sense that the atoms and molecules of someone's body undergo a change, but the wedding does establish certain lasting meanings (such as who has the right to have sexual relations with whom), and these provide a stable framework for defining how two people are connected to each other. Thus, the marital link promotes a more stable relationship even in the context of changing emotions and sexual desires.

Another important aspect of meaning is that it has multiple levels, and indeed most events can be described at multiple levels. Drawing on works pertaining to the philosophy of action,

Vallacher and Wegner (1985, 1987) explicated how people's behaviors and experiences are altered by shifting among different levels of meaning. Low levels involve concrete, immediate, and specific meanings, whereas high levels invoke long time spans and broad concepts. For example, the activity of walking to school can be described in low-level terms as a sequence of leg movements and other physical events. It can be described at medium levels of meaning such as going to school. At high levels of meaning, it can be described as part of the process of getting an education and advancing one's life. Each of these meanings is equally correct.

As shown in the research studies by Vallacher and Wegner (1985, 1987), the different levels have different consequences and implications. People who are aware of their activities at low levels of meaning are quite amenable to influence and change. In contrast, people who are aware of their activities at high levels of meaning are able to guide them by intelligent reference to values and principles. Low levels of meaning focus on specifics and details, whereas high levels of meaning make connections across time and to broad goals. When people encounter difficulties or problems, they "shift down" because these lower levels of meaning seem to facilitate solving problems and making changes. When things are going well, they shift to higher levels. The very shift upward to a higher level of meaning is typically experienced as a very positive event that brings satisfaction and pleasure. This last point—the increase in satisfaction that comes from moving to high levels of meaning—is especially relevant to positive psychology. Increases in level of meaning do more than help one escape from suffering: They also enhance positive satisfaction and the sense of fulfillment.

Four Needs for Meaning

After reviewing evidence from several scholarly fields, Baumeister (1991) concluded that the quest for a meaningful life can be understood in terms of four main needs for meaning. These constitute four patterns of motivation that guide how people try to make sense of their lives. People who have satisfied all four of these needs are likely to report finding their lives as being very meaningful. In contrast, people who cannot satisfy one or more of these needs are likely to report insufficient meaningfulness in their lives.

The first need is for purpose. The essence of this need is that present events draw meaning from their connection with future events. The future events lend direction to the present so that the present is seen as leading toward those eventual purposes. Purposes can be sorted into two main types. One is simply goals: an objective outcome or state that is desired but not yet real, and so the person's present activities take meaning as a way of translating the current situation into the desired (future) one. The other form is fulfillments, which are subjective rather than objective. Life can be oriented toward some anticipated state of future fulfillment, such as living happily ever after, being in love, or going to heaven.

The second need is for values, which can lend a sense of goodness or positivity to life and can justify certain courses of action. Values enable people to decide whether certain acts are right or wrong, and, if people shape their actions by these values, they can remain secure in the belief that they have done the right things, thereby minimizing guilt, anxiety, regret, and other forms of moral distress. Frankl's (1959/1976) influential discussion of life's meaning emphasized value as the main form of meaning that people needed. Values are hierarchical, and each question about whether something is good or bad is typically answered by appealing to a broader level of abstraction and a principle about what is good. Ultimately, of course, there must be some things that are good in and of themselves, without needing further justification. These can be called *value bases* (Baumeister, 1991). For example, many religious people believe that God's will is a value base, insofar as they regard it as supremely right and good and do not hold that God serves some yet higher purpose.

The third need is for a sense of efficacy. This amounts to a belief that one can make a difference. A life that had purposes and values but no efficacy would be tragic: The person might know what was desirable but could not do anything with that knowledge. It is relatively clear that people seek control over their environments (and over themselves; see Baumeister, 1998), and a deep lack of control can provoke a serious personal crisis that can have a negative impact on physical and mental health.

The fourth and last need is for a basis for self-worth. Most people seek reasons for believing that they are good, worthy persons. Self-worth can be pursued individually, such as by finding ways of regarding oneself as superior to others

(see Wood, 1989). It also can be pursued collectively, such as when people draw meaningful self-esteem from belonging to some group or category of people that they regard as worthy (Turner, 1975).

It is popularly believed that people can find a single source that will satisfy all their needs for meaning. Indeed, the colloquial question about life's meaning is usually phrased as if the answer were singular: What is the meaning of life? Empirically, however, people's lives usually draw meaning from multiple sources, including family and love, work, religion, and various personal projects (Emmons, 1997).

Having multiple sources of meaning in life protects the individual against meaninglessness. Even if family life turns bad and leads to divorce and the dissolution of the family, for instance, the person may still have work and religion to furnish meaning. Another benefit of having multiple sources of meaning is that there is less pressure for each of the sources to satisfy all four sources of meaning. For example, modern work may offer many goals and a powerful sense of efficacy but not much in the way of value. A person therefore may find that the career is quite satisfying in some respects but fails to yield a firm sense of what is right and wrong. Family life, however, may provide that very sense of value (e.g., doing what is best for the children is typically regarded as an important good) that is not found in workplace activities.

The Value Gap and the Self

The four needs for meaning can be used to assess not only the meaning of individual lives but even the meaningfulness throughout a society. Applying these four needs throughout a society necessarily glosses over many important variations among individuals. Nevertheless, Baumeister (1991) was able to draw some general conclusions about how people succeed and fail at finding meaning in modern life.

Modern Western society seems reasonably adept at satisfying three of the four needs for meaning. Of course, this is not to suggest that all individuals are able to satisfy these needs. In general, however, the culture does offer adequate and varied means of satisfying needs for meaning.

First, there are abundant purposes, especially in the form of goals. Throughout most of human history, most people have been farmers and homemakers, which entailed doing work that remained essentially the same year after year. In the 20th century, however, the nature of work changed so that more and more people had careers, in the sense that their work lives progressed through a series of different jobs with different responsibilities, tasks, and rewards (see Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Rodgers, 1978). The shift in the nature of work into being careers means that people find a seemingly endless hierarchy or sequence of goals that can structure their work.

Fulfillments, the other form of purpose, also are offered in modern society, but there are some recurring problems in the nature of fulfillment that always have plagued secular ideals of fulfillment. For example, the idea of fulfillment is that it will mark a permanent improvement in life—"living happily ever after"—whereas in reality most fulfillment states are relatively short-lived. Still, the pursuit of fulfillment does form a central aspect of the meaning of many lives, and it can continually provide meaning across the life span.

In regard to the need for a sense of efficacy, there are several available routes in society today. People can exert control in many ways and on many levels. Work, family, hobbies, volunteer work, and other pursuits typically offer abundant means of satisfying the quest for efficacy.

Modern society also furnishes an appealing assortment of ways to establish self-worth. Both group and individual criteria for self-worth are available, and the diversity of pursuits and spheres means that nearly everyone probably can find some way to be better than other people. In contrast to the abundant options for satisfying the three needs for purpose, efficacy, and self-worth, modern society does not seem to succeed as well at offering people a reliable and convincing set of values. Moral discourse has lost its bearings and foundations (Bellah et al., 1985), and Baumeister's (1991) appraisal emphasized the "value gap" as the most widespread difficulty that people today have in finding meaning in life.

One reason for this difficulty is the loss of consensus about values. The very diversity and multiplicity of endeavors in modern society seems to frustrate the quest for solid values, even while it may facilitate the effort to satisfy other needs for meaning. In order to tolerate diversity, it is sometimes necessary to accept that other people's values can be different than one's own, and this seems to make one's own values seem arbitrary or replaceable, which un-

dermines the assumptions on which values are based (see Berger, 1967, on plausibility structures).

Another reason for the value gap is that the transition to a modern society replaces traditional values with bureaucratic rationality. The strong values that guided our ancestors, such as tradition and religion, have been weakened during the modernization of society, and no firm values have replaced them. The transition to modern society is perhaps inherently destructive of certain value bases, and once a value base is lost, it is difficult to revive or replace (Habermas, 1973).

The relative lack of firm, consensually recognized values—the value gap—is thus the most common and socially pervasive problem in the modern quest for a meaningful life. The other needs for meaning can be problematic for many individuals, but at least society does offer ample means of satisfying them. Values in particular are the area in which society is least helpful. Indeed, the positive psychology movement may be able to make a substantial contribution to modern well-being and meaningfulness if it can help people with the process of finding ways to see their lives as having value.

The rising emphasis on self and identity in the modern world can be viewed as a response to the value gap. Modern culture has elevated the self to the status of serving as a basic value. People feel a moral obligation and an entitlement to seek self-knowledge, to cultivate their talents and fulfill their potentialities, and to do what is best for their personal growth and happiness. This is a remarkable change from the traditional moral system, which usually arrayed moral injunctions against anything that was self-serving. Indeed, the restraint of selfish pursuits is arguably the essential core of previous morality and the reason that morals emerged in the first place. Shifting the cultivation of self from the enemy of moral values to one of the staunchest bases of moral values is a fundamental and far-reaching realignment.

Happiness and Suffering

A happy life and a meaningful life are not the same thing. For example, a terrorist or revolutionary fighter may have an extremely meaningful life, but it is not likely to be a very happy one. Baumeister (1991) reviewed extensive evidence showing that having children reduces the happiness and life satisfaction of parents, but that this loss of happiness may be compensated by an increase in meaningfulness (i.e., parenthood can help satisfy all four needs for meaning).

It would be excessive to conclude from such examples, however, that happiness and meaningfulness are opposites or even that they are negatively correlated. In the majority of cases, more meaningful lives will be happier ones, and the existential despair that accompanies a profound sense of meaninglessness is likely to be incompatible with lasting happiness.

Probably the best way to reconcile these conflicting signs with the weight of human experience is to propose that meaning is necessary but not sufficient for happiness. People who cannot find meaning in life (i.e., who cannot satisfy the needs for meaning), and whose lives therefore are experienced as severely lacking in meaning, are probably unable to achieve happiness. But meaningfulness is probably not enough to ensure happiness. Meaning is a prerequisite for happiness, but there also are other necessary ingredients.

Turning to the topic of suffering, it appears to stimulate the needs for meaning (see Baumeister, 1991). When people suffer some misfortune, they often cope with it by finding some form of meaning. Giving meaning to the negative life event may constitute a form of control, even if it has no practical value (e.g., Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982). For example, people who suffer from chronic pain report feeling better if they are able to put a label on the pain so as to define and explain it, even if that diagnosis entails that nothing can be done about it (Hilbert, 1984). Simply having a label is comforting and eases stress; in turn, this allows the person to move on (see Snyder & Pulvers, 2001).

In her influential paper on how people cope with misfortune, Taylor (1983) demonstrated the power of suffering to stimulate the needs for meaning. In her account, people cope with suffering and misfortune by means of three general strategies: finding purpose in it, rebuilding a sense of mastery or control, and bolstering their self-worth. These correspond to three of the four needs for meaning (i.e., purpose, efficacy, and self-worth). The fourth, for value, probably deserves to be included as well, because when people believe that their suffering serves some positive value, they can bear it more easily. Indeed, part of the long-standing appeal of Christian religion is that it confers

value on suffering for its own sake, insofar as the sufferer is imitating Christ. The symbolic link between one's own misfortune and the suffering of the divine figure ("we all have our crosses to bear," in the revealing cliche) transforms one's suffering by conferring value and thereby facilitating coping.

Making Meaning

The term *meaning-making* refers to an active process through which people revise or reappraise an event or series or events (e.g., Taylor, 1983). This reappraisal often involves finding some positive aspect (such as the proverbial silver lining) in a negative event. The transformation process from adversity to prosperity has been referred to as the *benefit-finding* aspect of meaning-making (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998). A second aspect of meaning-making involves looking for attributions (e.g., that God intended for the event to occur) in an effort to understand the event. This aspect has been referred to as the *sense-making* function of meaning-making (Davis et al., 1998). Meaning-making also has been defined as the search for significance (Park & Folkman, 1997). Park and Folkman (1997) distinguished between the global and situational levels of meaning-making. *Global meaning-making* refers to the establishment of a basic orientation, long-term belief system, or set of valued goals. *Situation-specific meaning-making* refers to finding meaning in a particular context or situation that is congruent with one's global meaning structure.

It is tempting to imagine that all aspects of human life evolved because they serve a purpose and are part of a grand evolutionary plan. Evolutionary psychologists (Buss, Haselton, Shackelford, Bleske, & Wakefield, 1998) and neuroscientists, however, maintain that not all human psychological and behavioral outcomes are purposeful from an evolutionary perspective. Nevertheless, the ability to create higher order meaning from seemingly unrelated stimuli or events does seem to have been hardwired into human brains. Gazzaniga (e.g., 1993, 1997) has proposed that part of the human brain is designed specifically to interpret incoming information. This so-called left brain interpreter was first discovered in patients who had split-brain surgery in which the bundle of fibers connecting the brain's two hemispheres was severed; thus, each hemisphere no longer could relate information to the opposite hemisphere. Gazzaniga noticed that these patients' verbal accounts of an event were supplemented with contextual information that aided in making sense of an event that only half of the brain knew about. In a famous example, Patient P.S. was shown different pictures to each half of her brain and then asked to respond in various ways. After her left hemisphere was flashed a picture of a chicken claw and her right hemisphere was flashed a picture of a snow scene, P.S. was asked to choose from an array of pictures in front of her which object was related to what she saw. After (correctly) choosing the picture of the chicken with her right hand and the picture of the snow shovel with her left hand, she was asked why she selected those items. She responded by saying, "The chicken claw goes with the chicken, and you need a shovel to clean out the chicken shed" (Gazzaniga, 1993, p. 253). The left hemisphere had observed the left hand's selection and had interpreted it with the contextual knowledge it had, which did not include the knowledge that the right hemisphere had seen a snow scene. In subsequent investigations, there has been support for the theory that the left brain is hardwired to produce a narrative reflection of the brain's inputs.

The seemingly universal development of meaningful interpretation also suggests that human beings are hardwired to seek meaning. Kagan (1981) observed how voraciously children seem to learn language, including the toddler habits of naming everything and narrating one's own actions. He concluded that human beings are innately predisposed to acquire and use meaningful thought. After all, children do not need to be forced or pressured to learn language—on the contrary, they generally pick it up rapidly and eagerly, regardless of whether parents encourage, discourage, or ignore the process (see also Snyder, 1994).

Research Methods for Studying Meaning-Making

Meaning-making has been explored through several methodologies. In general, these methods share the basic assumption that meaning-making is idiosyncratic. Often researchers study meaning-making with interview methods (e.g., Davis et al., 1998). The interviews are conducted

by trained professionals and may take place in the context of a therapeutic session (e.g., Clarke, 1996). Interviews are advantageous because they allow research participation by people who are not able to convey information in written form (e.g., after a physically limiting accident). Additionally, interviews are open-ended and can touch on a variety of topics, thereby allowing for more depth and breadth of information.

Researchers who study meaning-making through writing have used a number of approaches. Some researchers ask participants to write a story or narrative on a specific topic, whereas others ask participants to write their life stories with no direction to content (e.g., Heatherton & Nichols, 1994; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; Pennebaker, 1993). The narrative method typically involves asking people to write an account of an event or period in their lives, such as a traumatic experience (Pennebaker, 1993) or successful or failed attempts at life change (Heatherton & Nichols, 1994). Life stories (e.g., McAdams, 1985) are in-depth descriptions of a person's whole life. In research conducted by McAdams and colleagues (e.g., McAdams, 1993; McAdams et al., 1997), people are asked to look at their life as a book with a title, chapters (significant periods in life), and plot summaries. The advantage of written meaning-making communications is that they usually are constructed in a linear fashion, allowing for a more cohesive body of knowledge.

Beyond the precaution that these methods may restrict the demographics of participants, it does appear that simply putting thoughts and emotions into language facilitates one's ability to construct meaning (see Esterling, L'Abate, Murray, & Pennebaker, 1999; see Niederhoffer and Pennebaker, this volume).

Benefits of Making-Meaning

There is abundant evidence that engaging in meaning-making has positive effects. Benefits to the self can occur because meaning-making allows a person to establish his or her identity and affirm self-worth (Baumeister & Wilson, 1996; McAdams, 1996). In addition, there are physical and psychological health benefits to finding meaning in life. A consistent theme throughout meaning-making research is that the people who achieve the greatest benefits are those who transform their perceptions of circumstances from being unfortunate to fortunate. For example, transforming a bad event or undesirable set of circumstances into a positive outcome is the central theme of generative people—those who are concerned for and committed to the well-being of future generations (McAdams et al., 1997).

McAdams (1996) noted that a life story can be used to create, transform, solidify, or highlight important aspects of life. Indeed, he proposed that personal identity can be established through the task of asking people to write a life story with one central theme. This task provides an opportunity to reflect on one's purpose in life, which, in turn, may guide future life choices. Because accomplishments and goals achieved can be featured as central events, creating a life story can also boost one's self-worth. Thus, creating a life story provides an opportunity to bask in one's accomplishments and also to create a personal ideology.

Researchers examining the mental and physical health effects of meaning-making consistently report that meaning-making is associated with positive health outcomes. Pennebaker's research on traumatic events indicates that even short writing sessions over 3 days can have wide-ranging effects. This research has shown that writing about emotional upheavals is related to heightened immune system functioning (Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988), fewer physical illnesses and physician visits (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986), and improved liver enzyme functioning (Francis & Pennebaker, 1992). There is also evidence that this type of writing is related to improved academic performance (Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990) and resumed employment after being unemployed (Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994).

Indeed, the very meaning of Pennebaker's findings has shifted toward a greater emphasis on making meaning. His early explanations for the benefits of writing about traumatic events were based on the hunch that people wanted to communicate about their problems but actively inhibited these impulses, and the inhibition itself was considered to be a source of harm to the body. Subsequently, however, he has begun to emphasize that writing or speaking about the trauma was beneficial because it helped people make sense of what they had suffered (Esterling et al., 1999).

A powerful example of the effect of meaning-making on physical health is illustrated in research on HIV-positive men who recently had

experienced the loss of a close friend or lover to AIDS (Bower, Kemeny, Taylor, & Fahey, 1998). Interviews and physical health indices show that between 2 and 3 years after the death, the bereaved people who engaged meaning-making about their loss showed a less rapid decline in CD4 T lymphocyte cells, a key immunological marker of HIV progression.

Mental health also is positively affected by meaning-making. People coping with the loss of a family member show better adjustment if they engage in meaning-making (Davis et al., 1998). Specifically, Davis et al. found that two aspects of meaning-making—making sense of the loss and finding something positive in the experience—differentially predicted psychological adjustment. Up to 12 months after the loss, making sense of the event predicted decreased distress (i.e., psychological adjustment), whereas at 13 to 18 months after the loss, finding something positive predicted decreased psychological distress (see Nolen-Hoeksema and Davis, this volume).

Meaning-making has been studied in the contexts of psychotherapy and career burnout. Clarke (1996) and others reported that meaning-making in the process of psychotherapy was associated with more successful outcomes. In fact, some therapists explicitly use a story or narrative metaphor to represent what occurs in the therapy hour (see Neimeyer & Stewart, 2000). This method has advantages for both the therapist and the client, in that the story metaphor provides a script to follow.

Research on attitudes toward one's career has shown that attempts to find meanings in life are related to career burnout (Pines, 1993). Pines argued that, in American culture, career often takes the place of religion in people's lives, which then compels people to find significance in their work. Because work does not easily lend itself to existential significance, however, relying on career for meaning in life is associated with career burnout.

Meaning-making—or the lack thereof—has been linked to a variety of cognitive and emotional states. For instance, an impoverishment of meaning is associated with feeling emotional dejection (e.g., sadness) but not agitation (van Selm & Dittman-Kohli, 1998). Interestingly, writing about a traumatic event, which is a form of meaning-making that is strongly associated with positive outcomes, leads to a surge in negative affect and a decrease in positive affect immediately after writing about the event (see Esterling et al., 1999). After a period of several weeks, however, people have experienced significantly less negative affect and more positive affect as a result of writing about the event.

In addition to emotional changes, cognitions and perceptions change as a result of meaning-making. People attempting to find meaning often undergo a period of rumination. Rumination has been conceptualized as a way to revise the script of an event so as to acquire a new understanding of the experience (Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983; Tedeschi, 1999). In support of this theorization, King and Pennebaker (1996) found that, for a person facing a loss, rumination may aid in resolving the loss (King & Pennebaker, 1996). Indeed, some theorists maintain that cognitive changes are central to meaning-making (Esterling et al., 1999).

How Meaning Is Made

We now review the possible mechanisms through which meaning-making produces its effects. Researchers have found that writing (and to some extent talking) about an event forces structure onto thoughts and feelings that previously had not been clearly organized (Esterling et al., 1999; King & Pennebaker, 1996). Language provides an opportunity to develop new insights and coping strategies. Content analyses of written traumatic accounts revealed that a growth in insight from the start of the writing period to its end is most predictive of later positive outcomes. Similarly, a greater number of causal links and revelations of understanding during the writing process also predict psychological and physical benefits (Pennebaker & Francis, 1996).

In telling a story, both the background and the ordering of events are important. Similarly, a story about one's life includes not only the objective facts but also the context in which the events occurred. Thus, the person is able to place the story in a setting appropriate to its outcome or purpose (e.g., Heatherton & Nichols, 1994). In addition, McAdams (e.g., McAdams et al., 1997) has found that generative people tend to write their stories in a particular order, such that the story begins with a bad event or burden, which ultimately is transformed into a positive outcome. In this way, the protagonist triumphs over adversity, thereby creating a main character (self) who is strong, moral, and good.

Although the empirical knowledge about the process of making meaning is still in a very early state of development, it seems reasonable to speculate that the main way that meaning-making achieves benefits involves imposing a coherent structure on events and in particular imposing a structure that is characterized by movement from negative to positive.

Importance for Positive Psychology

The study of making meaning began by focusing on how meaning can help people cope with misfortune, trauma, and other bad events. In that respect, it conforms to the focus on the negative that has been deplored by the proponents of positive psychology. Perhaps that pattern and sequence were understandable. On this point, Baumeister, Vohs, Bratslavsky, and Finkenauer (2000) have proposed that one general principle of psychology is that bad is stronger than good, and so it is hardly surprising that early psychologists have focused on the bad rather than the good (simply because they wanted to begin work with the strongest effects).

In this chapter, however, we have contended that meaning is powerful both for remedying the bad and for enhancing the good. True, meaning is most urgently sought by victims and sufferers, because the need to reduce suffering takes precedence over most other human motivations. But that is only one side to the story of meaning.

Happiness, fulfillment, generativity, and other forms of positive well-being are the essential focus of positive psychology, and meaning is integral to all of them. Moreover, a meaningful life is itself a highly positive outcome. As Ryff and Singer (1998) wrote, "Purpose in life and personal growth are not contributors to, but in fact defining features of positive mental health" (p. 216). The essential contribution of positive psychology is to emphasize that the desirability of a meaningful life goes beyond the fact that meaningfulness reduces suffering. Even in the absence of suffering, trauma, pathology, or misfortune, human life will fall far short of its best potential if it lacks meaning. By understanding how people seek and find meaning in their lives, positive psychology can enhance the human experience immensely.

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