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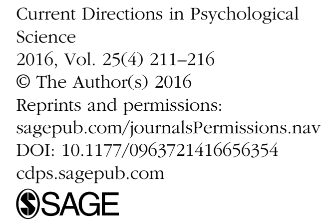

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Beyond the Search for Meaning: A Contemporary Science of the Experience of Meaning in Life

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Abstract
Recent advances in the science of meaning in life have taught us a great deal about the nature of the experience of meaning in life, its antecedents and consequences, and its potential functions. Conclusions based on self-report measures of meaning in life indicate that, as might be expected, it is associated with many aspects of positive functioning. However, this research also indicates that the experience of meaning in life may come from unexpectedly quotidian sources, including positive mood and coherent life experiences. Moreover, the experience of meaning in life may be quite a bit more commonplace than is often portrayed. Attending to the emerging science of meaning in life suggests not only potentially surprising conclusions but new directions for research on this important aspect of well-being.

Keywords
well-being, meaning in life, positive psychology

Perhaps since the publication of Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946/1984), the psychological approach to the experience of meaning in life has focused on humanity's search for an experience that seems simultaneously ineffable yet vital, essential but somehow potentially unattainable. Psychologists have often examined what happens when meaning is absent: when experiences feel senseless, when purpose is difficult to ascertain, when meaning must be created (Park, 2010). Without question, we can learn from studying the absence of phenomena: From knockout mice (in which genes are inactivated by researchers) to transcranial magnetic stimulation, science demonstrates that necessary function can often be demonstrated, vividly, in absentia. However, we cannot learn all there is to know about anything, especially a subjective experience that enjoys the mystique that surrounds meaning in life, by focusing solely on what happens when it is lacking.

Yet understanding the presence of meaning in life as an experience poses some difficulties. Meaning in life, though widely recognized as a cornerstone of well-being, has been difficult to define, not to mention to measure reliably, to manipulate, and to understand. And, one might ask, why bother? In the absence of traumatic life events, the question of life's meaningfulness is often regarded as a luxury, a prototypical "first-world problem": Only when everything else is going well could people possibly turn to questions about life's meaning (Baumeister, 1991). Such thinking fits with the placing of meaning in life upon a pedestal in the pantheon of well-being constructs. The meaningful life is highly valued yet rarely attained, reserved for a few lucky souls (Seligman, 2012). Meaning in life would seem to be the icing on the cake of psychological well-being—presumably important but too esoteric to matter in any real way to human existence.

In this article, we focus on contemporary research on meaning in life, building to the conclusion that meaning in life might well serve important functions in human adaptation. We first note that meaning in life is not ineffable: Just as many complex psychological experiences can be defined and measured, so too can meaning in life.

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This fact has allowed us to learn quite a bit about the experience of meaning in life. Rather than being mysterious and inaccessible, meaning in life is rooted in quotidian circumstances and is a surprisingly common human experience.

Defining Meaning in Life

First, meaning in life can be defined. Almost all scholarly definitions of meaning in life share a few essential features. For example, one representative scholarly definition suggests that "lives may be experienced as meaningful when they are felt to have a significance beyond the trivial or momentary, to have purpose, or to have a coherence that transcends chaos" (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006, p. 180). Three central components of meaning are highlighted in this definition and throughout the literature on this topic: purpose, significance, and coherence (Heintzelman & King, 2014b; Martela & Steger, 2016; Park & George, 2013). *Purpose* refers to having goals and direction in life. *Significance* entails the degree to which a person believes his or her life has value, worth, and importance. *Coherence*, characterized by some modicum of predictability and routine, allows life to make sense to the person living it. Although the relations among and potential distinctiveness of these three facets of meaning remain an important area for research, psychometric studies have suggested that these facets of meaning in life may occupy a lower level in a hierarchy, with "global meaning" at the top (e.g., Krause & Hayward, 2014). A final important aspect of this definition is the emphasis on meaning in life as a subjective state: Lives are not simply meaningful or not; they are *experienced* as meaningful.

Although this (or any) definition may not capture every possible nuance of meaning in life, it is an approximation that allows us to view this experience through the lens of science. It is a workable conceptual definition that permits measurement.

Measuring Meaning in Life

As is the case for research on other aspects of well-being, the vast majority of research on meaning in life has involved self-report questionnaires. Currently, the most commonly used, and most well-vetted (Brandstätter, Baumann, Borasio, & Fegg, 2012), measure of meaning in life is the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). The MLQ contains subscales measuring the search for meaning and the presence of meaning, respectively. (These two scales are only weakly and inconsistently related to one another.) The MLQ-presence subscale contains face-valid items, such as "I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful." As researchers do for essentially all other aspects of well-being, we in the field of well-being research ask people to rate a set of items like this one on a 1-to-7 Likert-type scale.

Using self-report ratings to measure what is sometimes considered the most profound human experience may seem like utter heresy. Nevertheless, research using these ratings indicates we should care, perhaps deeply, about what these ratings represent. Self-reported meaning in life is associated with a host of psychological (including quality of life and incidence of psychological disorders; e.g., Steger & Kashdan, 2009) and physical health outcomes (including risk of heart attack, stroke, and Alzheimer's disease; e.g., Boyle, Buchman, Barnes, & Bennett, 2010; Kim, Sun, Park, Kubzansky, & Peterson, 2013). Much of this research has been prospective and/or longitudinal. Analyses of the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS) data set have shown that those who experienced their lives as purposeful were less likely to die during the 14 years after the baseline measurement, controlling not only for demographics (including age) but also for other aspects of psychological well-being (e.g., Hill & Turiano, 2014). In a sample of over 1,500 adults with coronary heart disease (drawn from a representative sample of Americans over age 50), individuals who rated their lives as more purposeful were significantly less likely to experience a myocardial infarction over the following 2 years (Kim, Sun, Park, & Peterson, 2013). Additional correlates of meaning in life span a host of domains, including enhanced social appeal (Stillman, Lambert, Fincham, & Baumeister, 2011) and work adjustment (Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010). Such results indicate that these rather humble ratings do at least warrant scholarly attention. If we entertain for a moment the idea that these self-reports indicate a consequential subjective experience, then we can move forward and ask some central questions about the experience of meaning in life.

What Makes Life (Feel) Meaningful?

Research using self-reports of meaning in life has identified several robust correlates of the experience. Some of the things that make life meaningful are not at all surprising. A central aspect of experience that makes life meaningful is social relationships. Meaning in life is positively related to the degree to which one feels that one's need for relatedness is met (Hicks & King, 2009), feels a sense of belonging (Lambert et al., 2013), and feels close to and supported by family (Lambert et al., 2010). Furthermore, whereas being excluded or ignored reduces feelings of meaning in life (Stillman et al., 2009; Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004), experimentally increasing belongingness increases the sense that one's life is meaningful (Lambert et al., 2013).

In addition, religious faith can provide individuals with a great sense of meaning in life (Hicks & King, 2008; Steger & Frazier, 2005). Religion can supply a framework for understanding the world, providing coherence. For instance, in the face of bereavement, religion can provide a system for meaning making that facilitates healthy coping (Park, 2005). Furthermore, religion can help a person to establish goals to foster a meaningful existence (Emmons, 2005).

Another potential source of the feeling that life is meaningful has been hiding in plain sight—namely, socioeconomic status. Although many large-scale representative correlational studies have identified a positive relationship between meaning in life and financial resources (e.g., Kobau, Sniezek, Zack, Lucas, & Burns, 2010; Pinquart, 2002), few have treated this association as substantive. A recent series of studies demonstrated that income functions in much the same way as social relationships and religious faith in predicting higher levels of meaning in life (Ward & King, 2016).

An additional and potentially surprising source of meaning in life (perhaps the most robust of all predictors) is being in a pretty[1] good mood, or positive affect. People who say they feel happiness, cheer, or enjoyment are more likely to rate their lives as meaningful. The strongest predictor of a day's being considered meaningful is the amount of positive mood experienced that day (King et al., 2006). Controlling for a host of other putative sources of meaning in life, positive affect is independently associated with feeling that life is meaningful. Moreover, experimental evidence demonstrates a causal link: Induced positive affect increases meaning in life (e.g., Hicks & King, 2008; King et al., 2006; Ward & King, 2016).

Interestingly, research has shown that positive affect can compensate for low levels of a range of correlates of meaning in life, including social relatedness, religious faith, and socioeconomic status. Even among those who are lonely, who lack religious faith, and who are poor, a pretty good mood can facilitate a level of meaning in life commensurate with that of people who have many friends, religious faith, and high levels of financial resources (Hicks & King, 2008; Hicks, Schlegel, & King, 2010; Ward & King, 2016). One can be lacking in many of the things that are considered to make life meaningful, and yet a good mood may suffice to make life feel meaningful.

Research has also begun to build a strong case that one of the predictors of meaning in life is simply living in a world that makes sense. For example, in a series of studies, people read about trees growing in a patterned versus chaotic fashion. Results showed that those exposed to patterns demonstrated a greater sense of purpose (Kay, Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Landau, 2014). In another set of studies, participants were exposed to a series of photographs of trees (four trees from each season). Half of the participants saw the pictures arranged in a patterned fashion (by seasonal content); the other half saw the pictures presented in random order. Those in the patterned condition reported higher meaning in life compared to those in the random condition (Heintzelman, Trent, & King, 2013, Studies 1 and 2). When environmental stimuli are characterized by objective coherence, life feels more purposeful and meaningful.

Future research should continue to examine the experiences and characteristics that make life meaningful. The satisfaction of chronic organismic needs (e.g., not only relatedness but also autonomy and competence) are likely sources of the experience of meaning in life (Trent & King, 2010). In addition, consider how frequently psychological theories refer to the ways that various beliefs systems or worldviews are described as helping to "make sense" of experience (e.g., Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006). The fact that the experience of meaning in life can be reliably measured suggests that testing the associations among various worldviews (not only religious worldviews) and the experience of meaning is an important area for future research.

How Meaningful Is Life, on Average?

Clearly, many of the correlates (and causes) of a meaningful life reviewed above are not at all unusual experiences. Rather, many of these represent the default states of human life: social inclusion, positive affect, religiosity, and environmental regularities. The things that make life meaningful are readily attainable. Could the experience of meaning in life be similarly commonplace?

A review of the research examining meaning in life using two common meaning-in-life scales as well as meaning-in-life items included in large epidemiological samples showed that, on average, people in a broad range of life circumstances evaluate their lives as pretty meaningful (Heintzelman & King, 2014b)—significantly over the midpoint on rating scales. In contrast to the notion that it is somehow rarer than, say, the happy life (Seligman, 2012), the meaningful life appears to exist all around us. It is, in fact, commonplace.

Subsequent research has shown that the high level of espoused meaning in life cannot be explained by impression management or social desirability: While meaning in life is socially desirable, reports on these scales are not inflated enough to account for the rather high levels of meaning espoused (Heintzelman, Trent, & King, 2015).

On average, life is pretty meaningful. This conclusion likely prompts thoughts about the multitude of instances of meaninglessness. These readily come to mind: random events, natural disasters, senseless acts of violence. How can life be pretty meaningful if such events are so easily

imagined? Vivid senselessness compels attention, but the base-rate information provided above ought not to be neglected in favor of such cognitively available examples.

What Does the Feeling of Meaning Tell Us?

The growing evidence that the experience of meaning in life is simultaneously linked to positive outcomes and relatively commonplace prompts intriguing questions about the adaptive role of meaning. For instance, what functional role does this experience play in human life? To address these questions, we proposed a meaning-as-information framework (Heintzelman & King, 2014a). This framework draws on the feelings-as-information hypothesis, which suggests that affective states provide information to direct behavior and cognitive processing in adaptive ways (Schwarz & Clore, 1988). Integrating this approach with associative learning and the ecological perspective on perception, we argued that feelings of meaning track the coherence of one's environment to provide important information to direct processing in a situationally appropriate manner. This framework suggests that strong feelings of meaning can be adaptive because they emerge when one inhabits a stable environment that fosters positive functioning across many domains of life. In keeping with the meaning-as-information approach, research has demonstrated that the experience of meaning in life facilitates reliance on intuitive information processing (Heintzelman & King, 2016).

Has the Meaning *of* Life Been Ruined by the Science of Meaning *in* Life?

If experience is any indicator, a number of conclusions here will garner a less than enthusiastic response—for instance, that meaning in life can be measured using self-reports, or that seemingly trivial experiences, such as being in a good mood or exposed to regularity, lead to greater meaning in life. However, perhaps the conclusion most likely to be considered heretical is that life is pretty meaningful, which may make it seem as if we have made it too easy to lead a meaningful life and robbed meaning in life of its elite status. If people take these conclusions seriously and believe with conviction that their lives are probably pretty meaningful, will they stop striving? Will they become complacent? These questions suggest that, despite the many positive correlates of the sense of meaning in life we have reviewed, there is a risk involved in people coming to view their lives as meaningful.

We suggest that the belief that life is meaningful is not likely to be problematic. Societal problems do not appear to be rooted in people's thinking that their lives are too meaningful. Many tragedies—suicides, mass shootings, terrorist bombings—more likely result from feeling that one does *not* matter or that one's existence has no purpose (e.g., Heisel & Flett, 2004; Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009). People commit suicide, and the social group is stunned: How could he not have known what he meant to all of us? It is when people (mistakenly) feel their lives are meaningless that bad things happen.

Surely the scientific study of meaning in life involves some settling—settling on a conceptual definition that may be vaguely incomplete; settling on a measure that seems potentially trivial against the backdrop of the grand questions of human existence. Such compromises are not unusual in psychological science. Moreover, if the experience of meaning is important, as many theories of human functioning contend, then the value of scientific inquiry on this topic more than justifies these compromises. Only through such research can we come to understand what makes life (feel) meaningful and why that matters.

Recommended Reading

Heintzelman, S. J., & King, L. A. (2014a). (See References). Presents a theoretical scheme linking the experience of meaning to the mood-as-information approach as well as animal learning models.

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Note

1. We use this unusual adverb "pretty" here to indicate that the level of positive mood that appears to contribute to meaning in life need not be extremely high. Rather, even the kind of mild mood boost that might come from a mood induction such as reading newspaper comics or listening to happy music leads to higher meaning in life.

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