

Introduction

A Roadmap for Meaning Research and Applications

“What is the meaning of life?” is probably the most persistent and important question ever asked. The human propensity for grappling with existential questions has long been evident in the chronicles of philosophy, religion, and literature. The broad appeal of trade publications like Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* and Rick Warren’s *Purpose Driven Life* also attests to the widespread public interest in meaning and purpose. Jerome Bruner (1990) has made a compelling case to make meaning the central construct of psychology. In spite of the long history of the human concern for meaning, psychological research on this topic is quite recent.

Wong and Fry (1998) represent the first major publication on empirical research on meaning of life and its vital role in well-being, resilience, and psychotherapy. Back then, I predicted that meaning will take its rightful place at the center stage of psychology, along with self-efficacy and optimism. This prediction has come true, largely as a result the exponential growth of positive psychology, which identifies what makes life worth living as one of the cornerstones of this new movement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

This second edition has 21 new chapters, reflecting the rapidly expanding field of research on the role of meaning in flourishing. Some chapters have been so extensively revised that they can be treated as new chapters. Apart from providing a considerable amount of new material, this revised edition also shows better integration between chapters. This introductory chapter provides an overview of the significant advances in meaning-oriented research and applications.

What Is the Meaning of Meaning of Life?

People routinely talk about their needs for meaningful relationships or meaningful work; but when confronted with the question of meaningful living, they may become uneasy and defensive. Their first reaction is often “What do you mean by the meaning of life?” Even in academic circles, students often ask, “What is the meaning of meaning?” In order to address this common concern, I want to proceed by clarifying the different types and components of meaning.

Situational Meaning Versus Existential Meaning

It is helpful to distinguish between specific meaning and global meaning (Park & Folkman, 1997), or situational meaning and ultimate meaning

(Frankl, 1946/1985). This fundamental distinction can also be framed as situational meaning versus existential meaning (Reker & Chamberlain, 2000; Chapter 20, this volume). Existential meaning actually involves at least seven related questions (Wong, 2010): Who am I? What should I do with my life to make it worthwhile? What can I do to find happiness and life satisfaction? How can I make the right choices in an age of moral ambiguity and conflicting values? Where do I belong and where do I call home? What is the point of living in the face of suffering and death? What happens after death? These questions are concerned with one's philosophy of life and worldviews to make sense of life. All chapters in the volume touch on different combinations of these fundamental questions simply because it would be difficult to fully understand the meaning of life without addressing existential concerns.

Structure and Functions of Meaning

Another approach to understanding the meaning of life is to focus on the structure and functions of meaning. My PURE model (see Chapters 1 and 28, this volume) operationally defines meaning as consisting of four essential components: purpose, understanding, responsible action, and enjoyment or evaluation. Life would not be meaningful in the absence of any of these ingredients. Functionally, these components entail the four major psychological processes for the good life: motivational (purpose), cognitive (understanding), social and moral (responsibility), and affective (enjoyment or evaluation). This model provides a comprehensive framework for individuals to reflect and determine whether they have indeed found something worth living and dying for. All the contributors to this volume address some or all of these four basic components of meaning.

Subjective Versus Objective Meaning

The study of meaning has always been plagued by the subjective versus objective controversy. Meaning is subjective because individuals have to determine for themselves what kind of life is meaningful to them. Their decisions can be entirely based on how they make sense of themselves and the world. A purely subjective stance would lead to the logical conclusion that one can live a meaningful life by being a tyrant, serial killer, or pedophile. Therefore, there is the need for an objective frame of reference regarding the meaning of life, independent of personal biases. An objective principle of meaning is a truth claim that can be verified by empirical research. Psychologists engage in meaning research because they believe that it is possible to discover general principles of meaningful living.

Meaning in life needs to include both subjective and objective perspectives. Frankl (1946/1985) emphasizes that meaning can be discovered by individuals according to their subjective, phenomenological experience. But he also stresses that the discovery of meaning needs to be based on the principles of

authenticity and time-honored universal values. Generally, one's meaning of life is more likely to be beneficial when there is congruence between subjective and objective meaning.

When research findings do not resonate with real-life experiences, we need to question the validity of the research. Furthermore, when we apply research findings without taking into account individual differences and cultural contexts, it may result in misapplication. Better integration between research and application can be achieved if researchers keep in mind the importance of both objective evidence and subjective experience as suggested by William James (1912) and Thomas Nagel (1989). All the chapters in the section on applications have found a way to incorporate both subjective and objective perspectives.

Content Versus Processes of Meaning

Content refers to experiences, activities, goals, and emotional states that imbue life with meaning, whereas processes refer to the psychological mechanisms or adaptive efforts in the quest for meaning. Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler (2006) make an important distinction between the presence of meaning and the search for meaning. However, mere presence of meaning does not indicate what makes life worth living. My implicit theory research (Wong, 1998a) has identified eight sources of meaning: happiness, achievement, intimacy, relationship, self-transcendence, self-acceptance, and fairness. This finding has been replicated in Asian cultures (Kim, Lee, & Wong, 2005; Lin & Wong, 2006; Takano & Wong, 2004). McDonald, Wong, and Gingras (Chapter 17, this volume) introduce a brief version of the personal meaning profile (PMP) for the convenience for researchers and clinicians.

With respect to searching for meaning, the process is neither simple nor straightforward. For example, there are at least six different stages in the process of the search for meaning, which have very different meanings and implications for well-being: (a) the inertia stage, in which individuals have not yet embarked on the quest for meaning; (b) the exploratory stage, in which individuals are struggling to find meaning but have not yet discovered one; (c) the discovery stage, in which individuals have already experienced some success in finding meaning in the major domains of life; (d) the completion stage, in which individuals cease their quests for meaning because they have found satisfactory answers to all their existential concerns; (e) the emergency stage, in which something horrible happens and shatters the assumptive world of individuals, triggering a quest for meaning; and (f) the stagnant stage, in which individuals get stuck in their search because they ask the wrong questions or come to conclusions that do not provide any closure or satisfaction.

In view of the complexities of the quest for meaning, a low score on Steger et al.'s (2006) Searching for Meaning Subscale can mean different things. That is why the subscale has been either negatively correlated to well-being (Chapters

13 and 23, this volume) or unrelated to well-being (Steger et al., 2006). Such inconsistency in findings can be resolved only by additional research on what type of meaning seeking is beneficial and what type is not, as Wong and Watt (1991) have done to resolve a similar controversy surrounding life review. The meaning of searching for meaning can be further clarified by studying when people do engage in which types of meaning search (Wong & Weiner, 1981).

Levels of Meaning

Given the complexity of the world we live in as well as the complexity of meaning as a construct, Peterson (1999, 2007) has proposed three levels of analysis. At the first level, meaning emerges because it helps us to understand what happens to us in everyday living and to decide how to respond in an adaptive way. This level has to do with self-regulation, self-maintenance, and self-propagation; meaning is broadly based on instincts, drives, motivation, emotions, and psychosocial processes involved in goal planning and goal striving. At the second level, meaning emerges because of encounters with something unexpected, negative, or threatening. For example, when our plans are blocked or when our cherished beliefs are threatened, we experience frustration, anxiety, fear, guilt, or anger. Meaning is adaptive in our attempts to overcome obstacles, uncertainties, and conflicts by exploring alternative solutions in order to keep hope alive. At the third level, meaning arises for two reasons. First, the realization that all our beliefs and endeavors are no longer valid puts us in a state of confusion and anxiety, thus creating a need for myth making, religion, and spirituality in order to restore meaning. Second, when all our basic needs are fully satisfied, boredom or atrophy may set in, thus setting the stage for exploration, curiosity, fantasy, or metanarratives in order to restore meaning.

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs represents another way to conceptualize the different levels of meaning, beginning with meeting biological needs and moving toward self-actualization, which includes spirituality and transpersonal experiences. Several chapters in this volume (Chapters 1, 2, and 11) implicitly make reference to different levels of meaning.

What Is the Meaning of Life? Theoretical Perspectives

Meaning of life, especially the ultimate meaning of life, is too deep and complex to be fully understood by human beings. Solomon, one of the wisest persons who ever lived, conceded to this difficulty a long time ago in the book of Ecclesiastes. This daunting task has not prevented people from attempting to understand the mysteries of the human condition through different theoretical lenses.

The Positive Psychology Perspective

The positive psychology perspective seems most intuitive and self-evident. It is very appealing to believe that life is good and that we live in a wonderful

world because we have the freedom and ability to pursue our dreams. Who doesn't want to enjoy life? Who doesn't want to do what one does best and what one loves most? Solomon came to the same conclusion during the early stages of his meaning quest: "A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too I see is from the hand of God" (Ecclesiastes 2:24, New International Version).

According to positive psychology, positive affect and personal strengths are what make life worth living. King and Hicks (Chapter 6, this volume) have provided convincing evidence that positive affect plays a causal role in the experience of meaning even in the absence of realistic evidence that life is meaningful. They are correct in suggesting that the cultivation of positive feelings even in mundane activities can contribute to our overall sense of meaning in life. It is true that when people are in good moods, they are more inclined to see life as meaningful. But there are limitations to positive affect because moods are fleeting, and hedonic happiness invariably returns to a set point. The biggest challenge is to maintain positive affect when one is overwhelmed by pain and sadness. In noxious and disastrous situations, such as the 9/11 and 3/11, only meaning can give us some sense of hope (Frankl, 1946/1985; Wong, 2009).

Peterson and Park (Chapter 13, this volume) studied the relationship between character strengths, well-being, and meaning in older people. They employed two meaning measurements. One is based on the Meaning of Life Orientation subscale (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006). The other is the Meaning in Life Questionnaire developed by Steger et al. (2006). What is noteworthy is that the top four character strengths most significantly related to meaning orientation and presence of meaning are religiousness, gratitude, hope, and zest for life. The high correlation between religiousness and meaning confirms previous research on the inherent connection between meaning and spirituality (Pargament, 1997; Wong, 1998b). This finding suggests that religiosity or philosophy of life about the big picture is an essential aspect of meaning in life.

Peterson and Park (Chapter 13, this volume) conclude, "Positive psychologists stress that their interest extends beyond 'happiness' yet routinely use life satisfaction or happiness measures as the chief outcome of interest (e.g., Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Perhaps measures of meaning should be employed as well." I would go even further: Why not study the effect of acquiring a meaning mindset on a wide range of well-being and strengths measures (Wong, in press-b)?

The Self-Determination Perspective

Self-determination is clearly involved in choosing a preferred life goal as well as in making the necessary adjustments to achieve it. Several chapters in this volume employ this theoretical perspective (Chapters 1, 14, and 24).

Weinstein, Ryan, and Deci (Chapter 4, this volume) provide the most comprehensive and compelling account of meaning in life in terms of self-determination theory (SDT): “As described by SDT then, the meaning-making process is intrinsic to our natures and responsible for helping individuals create what Dittmann-Kohli (1991) called a coherent life course.... As individuals internalize and integrate new experiences, values, and behaviors they experience greater internal harmony, purpose, and wholeness (Ryan & Deci, 2001).” The ability to integrate both humanistic-existential theories and the social-personality processes makes SDT a very powerful theory in providing the mechanisms for meaningful and authentic living.

Weintsein et al. present the self-determination perspective, which incorporates intrinsic motivation and self-knowledge as main determinants. “In short, to find true meaning, individuals must get to know who they truly are—that is, know what is valuable and important to them—and act in accord with that knowledge.” They conclude that meeting the intrinsic needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence also contributes to a sense of life meaning and fulfillment, whereas extrinsic values, goals, and purposes typically do not yield basic need satisfactions. Their SDT perspective focuses on intrinsic motivation and integrates different aspects of personality and experiences of life as a unified whole. Of interest to note that like my dual-systems model, SDT also suggests that meaning can be facilitated by mindfulness.

Integrative Perspectives

A complete theory of meaning of life needs to integrate both positive and negative experiences. Aside from the inevitable physical decline evident in aging, illness, and death, life is unpredictable and hard for most people. Even when things are going well and one’s cup is overflowing with blessings, a single misfortune can destroy one’s world of happiness—just witness the recent catastrophes in Japan. When bad things happen, meaning is needed in order to make sense of suffering and make it more bearable. This is the main message in Shmotkin and Shrira’s chapter in this volume (Chapter 7). They focus on the distinction between subjective well-being and meaning in life and consider how the two concepts serve different purposes and functions in the hostile-world scenario. Subjective well-being allows people to manage the hostile-world scenario, whereas meaning-making systems allow the hostile-world scenario to be interpretable. Both subjective well-being and meaning in life are major assets in dealing with trauma.

Shmotkin and Shrira embrace both hedonic (subjective well-being) and eudaimonic (meaning-in-life) approaches, arguing that each offers important insight for how one deals with a hostile world. Specifically, in dealing with the adverse contingencies of life, subjective well-being facilitates regulatory processes that make the adverse situation manageable, whereas meaning in life facilitates reconstructive processes that make suffering interpretable.

Steger's (Chapter 8, this volume) theoretical perspective focuses on cognition and purpose. Steger provides a comprehensive cognitive definition of meaning that includes existential elements:

Meaning is the web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our experience and formulate plans directing our energies to the achievement of our desired future. Meaning provides us with the sense that our lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are more than the sum of our seconds, days, and years. Comprehending our experience in this way builds the cognitive component of meaning in life. The cognitive component of meaning in life thus refers to the understandings that we develop of who we are, what the world is like, and how we fit in with and relate to the grand scheme of things.

The purpose aspect of meaning, according to Steger, also has an existential quality. Life goals are most meaningful when they flow from a person's sense of the self and place in the world. Citing Frankl (1946/1985), Steger advocates that individuals need to develop a clear vision of what they are trying to accomplish: "I argue that the goals people develop are most beneficial when they arise naturally from the unique ways they comprehend life."

Sommer, Baumeister, and Stillman (Chapter 14, this volume) define meaning in life in terms of four basic needs (purpose, efficacy, value, and self-worth). When people are not able to fulfill these four needs because of misfortunes, they resort to meaning reconstruction in order to maintain a sense of meaning. More important, the authors point out, "Negative events are thus not evaluated in isolation but interpreted according to one's life scheme or storylike representation of the self." Thus, one needs a philosophy of life and a narrative construction of the self in order to make sense of negative events.

They also point out that purposeful pursuit of meaningful goals—not just any goals—leads to greater psychological well-being. What is meaningful has to be derived from one's intrinsic motivation and sense of self in the larger scheme of things. This point is also emphasized by Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, and Carver (Chapter 24, this volume) and McAdams (Chapter 5, this volume).

Sommer et al. (Chapter 14, this volume) conclude that "successfully dealing with the process of aging also corresponds with spiritual and religious practice." According to their research, people find meaning and purpose when they "absorb and participate in large systems of meaning, such as religion (or democracy, conservation movements, etc)." This is consistent with my contention that we need to develop a meaning mindset as the best way to face negative events and aging.

Klinger (Chapter 2, this volume) employs the evolutionary perspective. According to this view, both animal life and human life "consist of a virtually

continual succession of goal pursuits” in order to meet life’s necessities. As a result, sustained and persistent goal striving “constitutes an imperative of purpose.” He emphasizes that “the human brain cannot sustain purposeless living.” Goal striving and positive affect independently contribute to the sense that life is meaningful. The absence of adequate goals or the blocking of major life goals may lead to feelings of meaninglessness, depression, and addiction.

Ryff’s chapter in this volume (Chapter 11) is a good example of the integrative approach because their theory of meaning and well-being incorporates humanistic and existential theories, psychosocial adaptive processes, and neurophysiological substrates. The definition of existential well-being or eudaimonic well-being emphasizes meaning, purpose, personal growth, and mastery. I have always considered the six dimensions of psychological well-being (autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance) as the gold standard of well-being because it is more comprehensive than subjective well-being. It is most interesting that their components of psychological well-being correspond to the components of personal meaning (Wong, 1998a).

Steger (Chapter 8, this volume) is correct in pointing out that “one problem with this body of research is that it has often accumulated in the absence of a unifying theoretical framework.” Wong’s complex dual-systems model (see Chapter 1, this volume) is an attempt to provide a comprehensive framework that incorporates the large amount of research data related to the various dimensions of meaning. The dual-systems model also incorporates various theoretical perspectives in a coherent manner.

The Personality Perspective

Maddi’s theory of hardiness (see Chapter 3, this volume) is rooted in the existential theory that emphasizes people’s quest for meaning in order to overcome existential anxiety about uncertainties and meaninglessness. A disposition toward hardiness consists of three components: challenge, control, and commitment. Together, these three components enable people to cope with stress and maintain a sense of meaning in the face of adversity.

Maddi focuses on adaptive cognitive-behavioral responses to ontological threats in order to create a positive future. Meaning is created through creative problem solving, symbolization, imagination, and social support, thereby restoring a sense of meaning and well-being. The existential courage and decision to confront and experience uncertainty and threat are important for the experience of meaning. His approach further supports my contention that one cannot fully understand the meaning of life without considering the existential philosophical dimension.

According to McAdams (Chapter 5, this volume), there are three levels of personality: (a) dispositional traits, (b) characteristic adaptations, and (c) integrative life stories, evolving in a complex social and cultural context. Meaning

making happens at all three levels of personality. Certain dispositional profiles, such as high levels of extraversion, conscientiousness, openness to experience, and low levels of neuroticism, tend to be associated with an overall feeling that life has meaning and purpose.

McAdams's main focus, however, is on the narrative approach to discovering the existential meaning of the human condition. Narrative construction allows for the examination and transformation of negative events into positives to make life meaningful. More important, it provides a framework that integrates the different fragments of one's life to produce a coherent narrative identity.

Wong (Chapter 1, this volume; see also in press-a, in press-b) has recently proposed that a meaning mindset may also serve as a powerful personality trait. Such individuals as Socrates, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., dedicated their lives to pursue an ideal, a mission, even when such pursuits put their lives at risk. This meaning-mindset hypothesis is especially relevant for developing a positive psychology for the suffering masses, among them cancer patients and trauma victims. Frankl (1946/1985) managed to retain a strong sense of meaning in life and helped others to do so in Nazi concentration camps. Emmons (1999) makes the case that "growth is possible to the degree to which a person creates or finds meaning in suffering, pain, and adversity" (p. 144).

Narrative Perspective

Apart from McAdams (Chapter 5, this volume), several other contributors, among them Sommer, Baumeister, and Stillman (Chapter 14, this volume) and Slattery and Park (Chapter 22, this volume), also favor a narrative approach. Reker, Birren, and Svensson (Chapter 18, this volume) discuss the importance of restoring meaning through autobiographical methods. They report on individuals' ability to transform old meanings into new ones that enable them to achieve a broader and deeper understanding of themselves and of life. "One's horizon expands along with the ability to see the bigger picture. One's worldview undergoes reconstruction and expansion with a renewed sense of connectedness with self, with others, and with all living things." Their chapter lends more credence to the deep-and-wide hypothesis of positive transformation.

Beike and Crone (Chapter 15, this volume) provide further support that a coherent life story helps make sense of life and "provides both temporal and causal explanations for events." In addition, they point out that the story needs to be morally grounded as understood by the social context in which the story is situated. "These well-defined narratives place the self contextually in space and time and integrate the person's life experience and self-concept, thereby providing a sense of a self with purpose (McAdams, 2006)."

The Relational Perspective

Aron and Aron's chapter in this volume (Chapter 9) is important because it emphasizes that other people matter. Their relational theory is about the expansion of the self to the extent of self-transcendence through relationships. Their chapter on love covers a wide variety of topics related to the centrality of relationships in meaningful living. Their self-expansion model encompasses two fundamental principles: (a) the motivational principle to expand one's potential efficacy and (b) the inclusion-of-other-in-the-self principle to expand the self through relationships with others. "It is important to see from another perspective why caring for others is central to meaning."

Aron and Aron conclude that "caring for others is central to meaning." They provide an evolutionary account of the need for caring for something beyond our personal self: "Social units, whether families or businesses, small towns or whole countries (that is whether genetically related or not), tend to survive better if they emphasize cooperation, altruism, sharing, and the general sense that the group is more important than the individual."

An auxiliary of this general principle is that one can be "part of something very large and almost eternal," which takes us to the mystical realm of religion and self-transcendence. In other words, spirituality, religion, myth making, and God are essential for meaningful living simply because they represent our need to serve and belong to something beyond ourselves.

Chapter 12, by Kwee, represents a very different theoretical approach to meaning of life. According to Buddhist psychology, what matters most is not what one can get from the world or whether one's needs are met but what takes place on the inside. This quantum shift of mindset calls for a spiritual awakening or enlightenment, which enables the person to see life differently. It is through this radical inner transformation that one sees life as being meaningful. Mindful meditation is a means to cultivate wisdom and compassion, which characterize the Buddhist vision of meaningful living. "Thus," according to Kwee, "from a Buddhist point of view meaning is derived from the compassion and empathic care for joyful relationships."

Resilience and the Threats to Meaning

In an ideal world, one needs to be concerned only with what is good and right. But in an imperfect world inhabited by imperfect people, we all have to cope with people problems, our own limitations, and predicaments inherent in the human condition. Existential psychologists have long recognized such inherent threats to meaning of life as alienation, death anxiety, freedom, and meaninglessness (Yalom, 1980). Major life disruptions and traumas, especially sexual abuse and domestic violence, can also lead to the shattering of one's assumptive world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) and create a meaning crisis. Tomer (Chapter 10, this volume) and Wong (Chapter 28, this volume)

emphasize the importance of acceptance as an effective way to deal with death anxiety. In terms of the mechanisms, resilience also involves disengagement, reengagement, and goal adjustment, which create meaning in negative situations (Chapters 2, 15, and 27, this volume).

Wong (Chapters 1 and 28, this volume) explains that meaning-centered resilience strategy calls for practicing the ABCDE, which stands for acceptance, belief, commitment, discovery, and evaluation. Each of these components is essential for adaptive success. The challenge for meaning researchers and practitioners is to transform negatives into positives, knowing the fact that the bad is stronger than the good (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). Wong's dual-systems model (Chapter 1, this volume) is one of the several theoretical accounts of such a transformation. Wong postulates that (a) positive outcomes depend on self-regulation of the interactions between approach and avoidance systems within a specific context and (b) optimal functioning depends on achieving an optimal balance between approach and avoidance systems. The dual-system also includes components of culture, personality traits, and mindful awareness.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (Chapter 25, this volume) emphasize that negative events can spur people on the road to growth and personal transformation. "So, in our growth toward meaningful, wise living, traumas can serve the purpose of the crystallization of discontent that Baumeister (1991) describes as provoking changes in meaning." The key to posttraumatic growth is the ability to reconstruct the assumptive world about the self and one's life. This meaning-making ability allows one to create a new narrative that facilitates one's positive change and growth. The discovery of new ways of perceiving life and negative events can lead to better adjustment. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun, their "evolving model of PTG (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) emphasizes cognitive-emotional processes that require people who have suffered trauma to navigate a difficult path to rebuilding a shattered assumptive world." This is consistent with Wong's deep-and-wide hypothesis about the positive potentials of negative life events.

Sickness

Sickness, especially life-threatening illnesses, can trigger death anxiety and the quest for meaning. In her chapter on the role of meaning in coping with cancer, Park (Chapter 23, this volume) describes a study that shows that meaning making results in higher levels of self-esteem, optimism, and self-efficacy. Park's description of meaning systems resembles what I call a meaning mindset (Chapter 1, this volume): "Together, global beliefs and goals, and the resultant sense of life meaning, form individuals' meaning systems. Meaning systems comprise the lens through which individuals interpret, evaluate, and respond to their experiences."

Park also points out, however, that meaning seeking and meaning making may also result in distress. For example, rumination or developing a very negative view of life can lead to depression. This notion is similar to Peterson and Park's (Chapter 13, this volume) finding of a negative correlation between search for meaning and character strengths. Such negative effects may reflect bumps on the road in meaning seeking.

Aspinwall, Leaf, and Leachman (Chapter 21, this volume) demonstrate the importance of meaning attribution and personal responsibility in coping with cancer. For example, believing that God expects people to take responsibility for their own health leads to more health-promoting and disease-avoiding behaviors, whereas believing that cancer is God's will increases the belief that cancer is inevitably fatal. Their study provides empirical support for the idea that even when we have no control over the bad things that happen to us, we can still have control over our attitude and beliefs (Frankl, 1946/1985). In short, to believe in our personal responsibility for achieving a positive outcome can increase health-promoting behavior.

Aspinwall et al. conclude that finding meaning from adverse situations contributes to both mental and physical well-being. More specifically, religious and spiritual beliefs and practices are thought to serve as a central component of an individual's general orienting system, which helps the individual understand, appraise, and derive meaning from stressful life events and ultimately helps that individual decide how to react. Their conclusion provides further support to the two general principles that (a) self-transcendence is a key ingredient of a meaningful life and (b) finding meaning is a key ingredient of resilience.

Wrosch et al. (Chapter 24, this volume) emphasize the importance of disengagement and reengagement in self-regulation when the original goals become unattainable and one's sense of meaning is threatened. Subjective well-being depends not only on the pursuit of a meaningful goal but also on the ability to reinvest one's energy in an alternative goal when the original goal is repeatedly blocked. Trying a different pathway and switching to an alternative life goal both represent the deep-and-wide coping strategy.

Aging

The inevitability of aging and death poses a unique challenge to the task of meaningful living. This inevitability is no longer just a matter of overcoming situational stress because it has to do with the global stress of human existence. Once again we are confronted with an existential crisis that can be resolved only through meaning making and transcendence.

Krause (Chapter 19, this volume) points out that research suggests "meaning making is a lifelong process that is important at every point in the life course." He concludes that people who have a deep sense of meaning in life enjoy better mental and physical health than do individuals who have not

been able to find meaning in life. Krause defines meaning in terms of values, purpose, goals, and the ability to reconcile the past. He adds an existential layer to the definition of meaning: “Although clearly linked to values, a sense of purpose is conceptually distinct. It has to do with believing that one’s actions have a set place in the larger order of social life and that one’s behavior fits appropriately into a larger, more important social whole.” In other words, purpose implies that one’s cherished values and goals are chosen according to one’s worldviews and life orientation.

A goal not only inspires what Frankl calls “will to meaning” but also evokes commitment to a plan of actions. “A goal or plan instills the belief that no matter how bleak things may seem at the moment, there is still a way to get through these difficulties; and, further, that if these goals or plans are executed faithfully, hard times will eventually subside.” His findings are clearly supportive of the efficacy of Wong’s ABCDE coping strategy. He also recognizes the need for social support; family members and close friends can help restore a sense of meaning in life in older adults by reminders that it is still possible to pursue cherished values with commitment and dedication.

Reker and Wong (Chapter 20, this volume) present a research program on healthy aging. They compared successful and unsuccessful agers in institutions and the community on a variety of well-being measures. Their chapter highlights the pivotal role of meaning in psychosocial adjustment to aging. They found that both meaning and spirituality are associated with successful aging.

Dying

Becker (1973) emphasizes the terror of death because of the human capacity to foresee one’s demise. Research supporting terror management theory (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2002) demonstrates how the unconscious motive to defend against this terror can lead to violence and aggression. Similarly, Peterson (1999) observes that a strong commitment to religious beliefs and meaning systems, when threatened, can lead to evil and violence. Tomer (Chapter 10, this volume) and Wong (Chapter 28, this volume) emphasize the importance of acceptance as an effective way to deal with death anxiety. Tomer’s chapter is an excellent resource on how people ascribe different meanings or values to death and how meaning influences different death attitudes as measured by Wong, Reker, and Gesser (1994). More specifically, Tomer concludes that viewing death as meaningful was related to less fear of the unknown, whereas viewing death as purposeless was related to greater fear of the unknown.

Meaning-Centered Interventions

Wong (Chapter 28, this volume) summarizes the main contributions of logotherapy and presents the latest developments of integrative meaning-centered

therapy. He stresses that meaning therapy serves the dual function of healing what is broken and bringing out what is good and right about individuals. After describing the defining characteristics of the meaning approach, he introduces PURE and ABCDE as the two major meaning-based intervention strategies to facilitate healing and personal growth.

Beike and Crone (Chapter 15, this volume) highlight the temporal dimension of meaning in memory reconstruction. Negative or traumatic memories are persistent primarily because of the strength of their negative emotional content, and they are more resistant to modification or reconstruction than are positive memories. Healing of painful memories depends on allowing emotions to fade and gaining a sense of closure. Upon recollecting such “closed memories,” people report discovering more insight and meaning from their memories. “An initially crushing blow can be seen as a meaningful turning point toward happiness if one can shed the emotion that narrows the variety of meanings that can be applied.”

Effective meaning-oriented interventions depend on understanding the cultural context. According to Slattery and Park (Chapter 22, this volume), a woman who has undergone trauma, for example, “needs to create a narrative that helps her develop coherent and consistent global and appraised meanings that are understandable and consistent within her culture and context. Until she is able to create satisfying context-consistent resolutions between global and appraised meanings, she is likely to remain symptomatic (Gray et al., 2007).”

Slattery and Park emphasize the distinction between global meaning and appraised situational meaning as a motivation or an incentive for change. Examples are provided of how changes in global meaning, appraised meaning, or behavior can facilitate positive change. This intervention makes use of the negative emotion of tension and unease to motivate positive change. They point out that for problems that cannot be directly “repaired” or solved through behavioral change, as in sexual assault, illness, or death, meaning-making efforts are often most effective in facilitating positive change.

Ventegodt and Merrick (Chapter 26, this volume) point out that a holistic approach to meaning of life needs to balance between sexuality and sense of coherence. “Sexuality is often a quality ascribed to the body, and sense of coherence is often a quality ascribed to the spiritual dimension of human beings; by seeing these qualities as being heart-qualities, love and sexuality are transformed to something more whole and holy.”

In a holistic approach to therapy, which integrates the physical with the psychological and spiritual, meaning has emerged as an important element. During clinical interviews regarding the quality of life of the client, the authors emphasize the importance of recovering a sense of meaning in life and reestablishing one’s life mission to facilitate healing. Emphasis is also on the actual experience of being engaged in meaningful pursuits and using all

one's resources and physical, mental, and spiritual potentials. This holistic consciousness-oriented approach "will help people become valuable not only to themselves but also to each other."

The chapter by Shek (Chapter 16, this volume) represents a cross-cultural perspective of meaning. From his cross-sectional and longitudinal studies on Chinese students across socioeconomic statuses, he shows that purpose is not only positively correlated with psychological well-being and school adjustment but also negatively correlated with antisocial behavior and substance abuse. These findings emphasize the importance of meaning and purpose in contributing to youth resilience in a Chinese population. He points out that adolescents with stronger endorsement of positive Chinese beliefs about adversity are more resilient. Another important aspect of his chapter is his conclusion that family functioning is related to adolescent meaning in life. Thus, for meaning and resilience in the Chinese adolescent population, perceived family functioning is important.

Wong and Wong (Chapter 27, this volume) emphasize the role of meaning in resilience. They define resilience in terms of bouncing back and bouncing up beyond the baseline, citing the notion that what does not kill you can make you stronger. They provide additional evidence on the deep-and-wide hypothesis in effective coping with adversity. Reinforcing Shek's findings, Wong and Wong reiterate the need to take into account cultural context and family systems in meaning-oriented interventions.

Conclusions

I hope that this brief guided tour has not only given readers a sweeping view of the lay of the land but also revealed a bold new vision for the future of meaning-oriented research and applications. The human quest for meaning is probably the best kept secret to the greatest human adventure—namely, that it has always been here, springing from the deepest yearnings of the human heart, confronting the mysteries, uncertainties, and fears of human existence, and pursuing dreams and ideals that know no boundaries. The never-ending quest for meaning and significance has taken human race to the sublime heights of truth, goodness, and beauty, as well as to the hideous lows of atrocities, aggression, and oppression against fellow human beings (Frankl, 1946/1985; Peterson, 1999; Pyszczynski et al., 2002). The future of humanity hinges on understanding and harnessing the unlimited potentials of meaning seeking and meaning making.

Meaning research is a complex business. This volume shows that we need rigorous theoretical analysis, sophisticated research methods, and deep philosophical insight in order to understand the uniquely human capacity for meaning seeking and meaning making. No one theory or research paradigm can discover the whole truth about meaningful living. Not even scientific research can do justice to this ancient, universal, grand story of human

adventure, which reaches the deep recesses of unconsciousness and the mystical realms of spirituality. In meaning research, psychologists can benefit from the great wisdoms and insights from philosophy, religion, and literature about the human striving to live fully, vitally, and authentically. Most of the chapters in this volume reflect the benefits of cross-fertilization between science and humanities.

There is already extensive literature on the vital role of meaning in integrating various aspects of human needs and functions in the service of survival and flourishing (Wong & Fry, 1998). In this revised edition, all chapters offer some new findings or insights about the adaptive benefits of meaning. Having a clear sense of meaning and purpose can not only pull us out of depression, misery, and anxiety but also give us the motivation, optimism, and strength we need to flourish. Steger's chapter (Chapter 8, this volume) contains the most detailed information about the benefits of meaning. Klinger (Chapter 2, this volume) concludes that "goal pursuits influence most of an individual's cognitive processing, emotional responses, and therefore consciousness as well as choices and overt actions. Goal striving appears also to form one of the main determinants of persons' sense that their lives are meaningful." Thus, the meaning advantage is that it is capable of both increasing well-being and decreasing psychopathology. The dominant message from this volume is that meaning is the foundation of positive psychology because it is the key component of positive affect, well-being, physical health, resilience, relationship, achievement, spirituality, successful aging, and dying well.

This book will serve as a rich resource not only for researchers and clinicians but for all those seeking to make life better. I invite readers to make good use of this book in their own personal quest for meaning. I also challenge researchers and practitioners to discover the potential of a meaning mindset in transforming society and culture to create a social ecology conducive to human flourishing.

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