Exploring the Relationship Meaning in Life and Meaning in Life's Domains: Suggestions for a New General Approach

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Abstract

Research on meaning in life has progressed rapidly over recent years, and attention is turning away from meaning in life as a whole toward the meaning that people experience in specific life domains. New research on meaning in domains will have greatest impact if it is conducted thoughtfully, and with an eye toward integration with the broader field of research on meaning in life. To facilitate this impact, I distinguish between sources of meaning and domain meaning, and explore better ways of conducting top-down approaches to domain meaning. Further, I propose that the most useful research into meaning in domains will include three components: utilization of meaning in life theories; utilization of scholarship and theories specific to the domain; and a focus on how meaning may help people address challenges in that domain. The example of alienation, terrorism, and nationalism is used to illustrate this approach, and also to highlight the important role that meaning scholars and practitioners should be encouraged to play in helping overcome the many mounting threats facing the viability of human well-being and perhaps even human society.

Prelude

Our perception of meaning can be viewed as occurring at multiple levels, from syntactical judgments of word definitions all the way to our guesses at what the nature, origin, and point of the universe might be. An explosion of research has taken place in the past decade or two focusing on the human face of meaning, what is commonly called meaning in life. Meaning in life is targeted at understanding not the micro level of the meanings of words nor the macro level of the meaning of the universe, but instead on the meaning people perceive in their own, personal lives. Paul Wong was among the earliest and most vocal thinkers to shine a light on the importance of meaning in life, and to elaborate Yalom's (1980) distinction between personal meaning and the more cosmic meaning that rises to the level of spirituality, religion, theology, and the cosmos themselves (Wong, 1989). At the same time, Wong also directed the field's attention to how typical people perceived the attributes of a meaningful life (Wong, 1998a). By going one step beneath the surface of meaning in life, Wong's research reminded us that meaning is made from life as it is lived and as it unfolds across the many domains on which we spend our time and attention. It is fitting, therefore, that this present exploration of how scholars might conceptualize and delve into people's encounters of meaning within life domains also joins a celebration of the impact, leadership, and inspiration Paul Wong has given to those who study, strive to understand, and work to share meaning in life. One might even say that Wong's tireless dedication to the domain of work is both intimately aligned with how he lives a deeply

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meaningful life, and also shines light on one path others may follow to meaningful lives of their own.

Introduction

When I began to read about meaning in life in preparation of my earliest studies, we had just entered a new millennium, and had yet to begin the post-millennium convulsions that seemed to ignite after the terrorism of September 11, 2001, and which still seem to wreak entropic havoc on the world's social and political institutions to the present day. Beyond the boundless energy of Frankl's seminal work, much of the research literature consisted of studies from scholars who only published one or two papers on the topic. The exceptions to this tendency were all the more important to the field, and to me personally, because they demonstrated the possibility of creating a systematic program of empirical inquiry into the human quest for meaning (cf., Wong, 1998b). Chamberlain, Crumbaugh, Debats, DeVogler, Ebersole, Klinger, Reker, Ryff, and Wong each published at least a trilogy of work prior to 2001, laying the foundation for all that would follow. It seems astonishing to reflect on the number of times I was told that meaning in life was not a "real" or "suitable" topic for research. Now, not only are there many outlets for publishing research on meaning, but three of the top five most-cited papers in one of those outlets, the *Journal of Positive Psychology*, are about meaning or purpose. From the visionary *fin-de-siècle* books of Chamberlain, Reker, and Wong to a position at the apex of the influential subfield of positive psychology in just a handful of years—so far it has been a good millennium for research on meaning.

In fact, there has been such a blossoming of research that many of the most pressing questions back in the first decade of the 2000s are now, well, boring. Meaning, whether referred to as meaning in life, purpose in life, or meaningfulness, has been linked to pretty much every other psychological variable imaginable, particularly wellbeing and psychological distress variables, in an increasingly diverse span of countries and cultures (for reviews, see Steger, 2009, 2012). So many studies have been conducted showing that meaning in life is positively related to better subjective health, better objective physical health, and even greater longevity that there are meta-analyses on the topic (Cohen, Bavishi, & Rozanski, 2016; Czekierda, Banik, Park, & Luszczynska, 2017). And so, we move on to more complex questions about meaning in life. Or, perhaps more accurately, we return to more complex questions about meaning in life. The topic of the present paper is taking a look at ways in which research can go to a more specific level, beneath the analysis of the global meaningfulness people perceive in their lives as a whole, and to the way in which meaning might be experienced in life domains. I will first look at a top-down approach to understanding how meaningfulness may be experienced in life domains, illustrated by the examples of parenthood, relationships, and education. I will then look at models that emerged from the bottom-up within domains to address meaningfulness, using work as the primary example. Finally, I will propose a hybrid model for researching domain meaningfulness by utilizing both meaning in life theory and important theories in the specific domain in order to identify the key challenges meaning could potentially solve, using the example of alienation, terrorism, and nationalism.

Three Part Models of Meaning in Life

A variety of descriptions of meaning in life have been provided in psychology and related fields. Over the past few years, several different groups of researchers have argued that when people are

attempting to answer questions about whether their lives are meaningful, they make those judgments in three parts. The early multidimensional models of meaning emphasized having a cognitive framework to organize knowledge about the world, and feeling fulfilled in one's life (Battista & Almond, 1974). These cognitive and affective dimensions supplement Frankl's (1963) original emphasis on the motivational dimension of purpose, or having interesting or at least plentiful goals to pursue. Thus, one three-part configuration would be cognitive, affective, and motivational dimensions of meaning in life (addressed in combination across, e.g., Battista & Almond, 1974; Halama, 2002; Klinger, 1977; Park, 2010; Reker & Wong, 1988).

Admittedly, I am partial to an alternate model, in which we argued that meaning in life consists of significance, coherence, and purpose (Martela & Steger, 2016). In our model, we opted for significance over an affective dimension, and characterized significance as the judgment that one's life has inherent value or worth. We described coherence as the set of cognitive representations and models that enables one to understand self, world, and the interaction of the two; and we proposed that purpose integrates the possession and activation of highly valued and important overarching goals that one seeks to pursue over very long periods of time. Others have proposed a similar triumvirate model to ours, with more of an emphasis on feeling that one's life matters in the grand scheme of things as opposed to a sense of significance (George & Park, 2016). This set of models emphasizes cognitive, motivational, and *evaluative* dimensions of meaning.

Essentially, there has been historic agreement on a cognitive and a motivational dimension to meaning, and some have thought that an affective or an evaluative dimension also is present. There is not enough research to judge how well any of these models capture what humans do when they attempt to determine if their lives are meaningful. Further, there is absolutely no research to help us understand whether there is anything like a distinct meaning emotion, or whether the affective dimension proposed for meaning is instead underpinned by more general and basic emotions (cf. King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006). Moreover, it seems unlikely that if there was a distinct meaning emotion that it would be "fulfillment," which is similar not only to other emotions (joy, contentment, etc.) but also seems at least as cognitive as other notable wellbeing constructs such as "satisfaction." It is not the purpose of this paper to argue one way or the other about this, so, for present purposes, I will use the four dimensions scholars have focused on to suggest that when we are discussing meaning in life, we are discussing some combinations of judgments people make that their lives make sense within a coherent cognitive framework (coherence), that they have strong motivations to pursue highly valued aims in their lives (purpose), that they have the emotional experience that their life is fulfilling (fulfillment), and/or that they evaluate their lives to be fundamentally worth living and to matter (significance).

Top-Down, from Meaning in Life to Meaning in Domains

There are two closely related ideas in meaning in life research that are relevant to understanding meaning in domains. We must distinguish between domains and sources of meaning. Domains are simply identifiable parts of people's lives to which they devote attention and for which they can provide descriptors. For example, leisure might be a life domain for some people, in which they devote their attention to learning more about their favorite leisure activities, which they could describe as reading, art, music, foreign languages, etc. Our interest in domains is due to the notion that people may ascribe meaningfulness to domains in standalone judgments. To continue our example of leisure, a person might devote attention to leisure activities such as video games

or drawing, but not necessarily judge those activities to be meaningful. Thus, there would be no meaning in the domain. Sources of meaning are similar in that they, too, are parts of life that people are able to describe and to which they may devote attention. However, the primary distinction is that sources of meaning are understood to be relevant to meaning in life as a whole. Where our interest in domains is in their self-contained meaningfulness, our interest in sources of meaning is as engines for broader meaning in life. Leisure activities may or may not be meaningful in and of themselves, but if engaging in them creates a sense that life is more meaningful, then they can be said to be a source of meaning. Exercise makes a good example for many of us. Exercising itself may not be meaningful (low meaning in domain), but it may contribute to the meaning we perceive in our life overall (strong source of meaning). Any list of domains and sources of meaning might include the same parts of life—health, family, work, leisure, spirituality, and so on—but the research question is quite different depending on whether we are approaching those parts of life in terms of the meaningfulness people experience in them (domains) or in terms of the meaning they generate for people's lives as a whole (sources).

If domains are thought of as parts of life that we may experience as meaningful, then one approach to better understanding that process of experiencing meaning would be to model it after how people experience meaning in life as a whole. If we agree for the moment that people experience meaning in life when they judge there to be coherence, purpose, significance, and fulfillment, then a top-down approach to meaning might start by arguing that these four judgments also form the basis by which people judge the meaningfulness of specific life domains. Taking up these arguments gives us one way of conceptualizing and measuring meaning in domains, essentially by asking variants of four basic questions:

- Do I make good sense of this domain within my larger meaning system?
- Do I set and pursue long-term goals in this domain that sustain my motivation?
- Do I feel fulfilled by my experience in this domain?
- Do I see that this domain matters to me, and that I value it and find it worthwhile?

Certain domains are more popular than others in research that asks people about their sources of meaning, or where their meaning in life comes from. The focus of this paper is not on the sources or domains from which people ought to draw meaning, although that is an important question, as research shows that there appear to be consequences to people's wellbeing, their experience of meaning, and their search for meaning depending on the nature and number of sources (e.g., Grouden & Jose, 2015). But, because relationships of one type or another are almost always the most important or most commonly mentioned sources of meaning (e.g., Delle Fave, Brdar, Freire, Vella-Brodrick, & Wissing, 2011; Steger et al., 2013), it might be useful to use two different types of relationships, interpersonal and parental, to illustrate the kind of top-down approach to domain meaning one might take.

Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationships span a number of sub-types, from co-workers to friends to neighbors to lovers. When it comes to relationships that are judged to be meaningful, it seems that notions such as intimacy, similarity, affection, shared histories, helping or being helped, or reciprocity would be natural partners. Although a top-down approach to domains may neglect domain-specific elements, it offers utility in the form of a universal template based on what we believe is known about meaning in life. If one was to explore how meaningful a particular relationship was to someone using this approach, one might ask if the relationship makes sense and is predictable,

whether there is a cognitive model that can help incorporate the inevitable changes and evolutions over time of the people involved and their context. This is a sensible way to explore relationship coherence because it hews to the characteristics of coherence itself, simply applied to relationships.

In this example, I added an additional component of coherence that is not generally acknowledged but which seems implicitly important; that is, the capability for mental models to accommodate and assimilate to the natural fluctuations, changes, and evolution over time of individuals and contexts. Park's (2010) meaning model does a wonderful job of highlighting this central function of meaning in the context of trauma and stress. Yet, the capacity for meaning-making is undoubtedly both common and critical to the coherence aspect of meaning, as life unfolds, regardless. This may be particularly true for relationships, but it is not exclusively so.

One could inquire about the goals a person has about a relationship, and how motivated one is to continue, improve, wind-down, or terminate a relationship as well. This line of questioning would assess relationship purpose. Relationship fulfillment has already received a lot of attention, and it might be worth considering how the question seemingly at the heart of half of modern novels—am I fulfilled in this relationship?—is a meaning question when push comes to shove. Similarly, relationship significance seems familiar, although perhaps people are more comfortable talking about how they *prioritize* a given relationship rather than whether a relationship is valued or matters.

Just as scholars have argued that we have much to learn by improving how we assess meaning in life as a multidimensional construct (e.g., Heintzelman & King, 2014; Martela & Steger, 2016), even taking this small step of importing a universal template of meaning dimensions would reveal significantly more than optimistically asking "is this relationship meaningful?" Further, because some of the dimensions of meaning are fairly mainstream (e.g., fulfillment), it would help connect meaning research on relationships with the broader relationship research.

Parenthood

As much as interpersonal relationships may prompt reflections on fulfillment, or require a form of coherence that can adapt to change over time, those dynamics are amped up in parental relationships. Elsewhere, we have discussed the role of meaning in parenthood (Morse & Steger, in press), but essentially one can view parenthood in terms of role and identity, in terms of relationship interactions, and in terms of the negotiation of the goals and purposes of parenthood from the sides of the parents and their increasingly autonomous children. Perhaps more than other relationships, society has long had an interest in encouraging people to step into parental relationships, which further adds important contextual factors. I might add that because the passage of time is so regimentally demarcated in childhood (matriculations and graduations, birthdays, developmental milestones), and because we ourselves each were parented, the role of parent often summons the ghosts of our own experiences. In short, parenthood is exactly the kind of topic to which meaning scholars should be attracted; it is complex, relevant to almost all living humans, consequential to our shared social health, and of massive interest to everyday folks.

A top-down approach to parenthood meaning sets aside all those factors and just imports the same template as was used in interpersonal relationships. We may ask:

- Do I understand my role as a parent, changes to my identity? Can I track changes in my other relationships and life domains? Do I have a belief system or structure that guides my parenting?
- How am I setting and pursuing goals that I want to achieve, or see achieved through my children's lives, either for my own sake or for others' sakes? What is my ultimate dream as a parent?
- Do I find my role as a parent to be fulfilling?
- Is being a parent important to me, do I value this domain, find it worthwhile?

A more formal research project seeking to examine the meaningfulness of parenthood might ask respondents to indicate agreement with items such as: I understand what is needed of me as a parent; I am quite clear in what I am hoping to accomplish for my children through my parenting; Being a parent makes me feel fulfilled; and Being a parent is the most worthwhile thing I do in my life. Using a unidimensional inquiry about whether parenthood is meaningful essentially yields only ranges of yes and no. Is being a parent meaningful to you? Whether the answer is yes or no, the information conveyed is quite limited. It still is possible to examine the predictors, correlates, and consequences of viewing parenthood to be meaningful or meaningless, but it is difficult to learn what makes parenthood so. Further, it is likely that such blunt questions prompt motivated responding to accord with widespread cultural messages about how rewarding being a parent is supposed to be. Similar influences over veridical responding also may affect questions about fulfillment or significance, but it is less clear that people would feel compelled to adopt a specific stance over coherence and purpose.

Education

One last relationship example may be seen as part of a progression from more or less symmetrically reciprocal *interpersonal* relationships through asymmetrical but enduring *parental* relationships to another form of highly asymmetrical but rather brief relationship, namely *education*. Of further interest, where interpersonal relationships and parenting may focus on the meaningfulness of the experiences encountered within those relationships, meaning in education creates the opportunity to go beyond asking whether education is meaningful to someone toward asking how educators might seek to provide students with the tools to themselves create meaningful lives. Here, the by now familiar four-question pattern might change to re-focus on the consensus dimensions of meaning in life, but with a twist to create targets rather than self-ratings:
- Coherence: How do I help my students learn to have an active inner life, and grow to understand the world and their place in it? How do I help my students create a mental framework for life, and identify their beliefs?
- Purpose: How do I help my students identify life goals, plan their achievement, and find the energy to pursue them?
- Fulfillment: How do I help my students feel positive and fulfilled in their studies and lives?
- Significance: How do I help my students feel that their lives are worth living and have value?

Hopefully, these examples of three different relationships demonstrate the simplicity of applying this kind of a top-down template to meaning in life domains, while also showing that there could be some flexibility. Asking about meaning in domains is not necessarily as

straightforward as inquiring whether "it" is meaningful. As the example of education shows, applying a multidimensional template from meaning in life generally might help identify targets for building meaning as an outcome as well.

Bottom-Up Models of Meaning in Domains

Part of the rationale for using a top-down approach to understanding meaning as it is experienced in life domains is that there are few existing models of domain meaning. The only domain of which I am aware is work. There is a quickly growing literature on meaningful work that goes back to the 1970s, with Hackman and Oldham's (1976) Job Characteristics Model. This section will briefly examine those models and provide a comparison between the relative rigidity of top-down models and the broader and more flexible scope of bottom-up models.

Where top-down models provide utility and can be imported into any domain, bottom-up models often draw on multiple literatures to create bespoke solutions. Many of these models call back to the global models of meaning in life, but not in any systematic way. Meaningful work scholars draw on existential psychology and meaning in life research to some extent, but rely more heavily on vocational psychology, business and management, social psychology, and the psychology of motivation. Despite this span of inputs, there is a lot of similarity among models and measures of meaningful work. For this section, three quite different approaches are brought together. The benefits of doing so are inherent to bottom-up models: there is greater richness and complexity, and new insights might be gleaned that can be tested with later research.

Perhaps the most traditional approach to meaningful work is one I helped produce. In Steger, Dik, and Duffy (2012) we examined the first four decades of research on meaningful work, creating an item pool and eventual measurement tool that reflected a middle ground between meaning in life as a general topic and the meaningfulness people experienced at work. Three dimensions were identified:

1. Positive Meaning of Work—Work has a point and identifiable outcome
2. Meaning Making through Work—Work nourishes meaning in life as a whole
3. Greater Good Motivations—Work does good for the world beyond the self

The second approach comes from Pratt and colleagues, and rather than focusing on subcategories of meaningful work, this approach focused more on how people's varying orientations to how meaningfulness is experienced through working per se (Pratt, Pradies, & Lepisto, 2013). Pratt and colleagues also identified three dimensions, but they differ quite a bit from me and my colleagues:

- Craftsmanship—meaningfulness is experienced when work is done well
- Kinship—meaningfulness is experienced when work builds bonds and connections
- Serving—meaningfulness is experienced when work helps others

Finally, in their review of the experience of meaningfulness at work, Rosso and colleagues created a circumplex model that resulted in four quadrants that describe different drivers of meaningful work (Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, 2010):

- Self-Connection—meaningfulness is rooted in authenticity, identity
- Individuation—meaningfulness is rooted in self-efficacy, control
- Contribution—meaningfulness is rooted in self-transcendence, impact
- Unification—meaningfulness is rooted in shared values, connection

Despite using different approaches and relying on different bodies of literature, there are points of overlap, as well as some diversity. This diversity is a strength, and points toward new

observations and research questions. In a top-down approach, we really would only be focusing on questions around coherence, purpose, significance, or fulfillment. Figure 1 shows a list of each of the elements of meaning from these three meaningful work models, and one possible configuration of the various dimensions they highlight. It is possible to cast most of these dimensions in terms of coherence, purpose, significance, and fulfillment (e.g., authenticity would be a classic contributor to coherence), but their manifestation in the work domain may be uniquely suited to the domain itself.

Figure 1. Three leading models of meaning in the work domain, and the main elements that may be drawn from them.
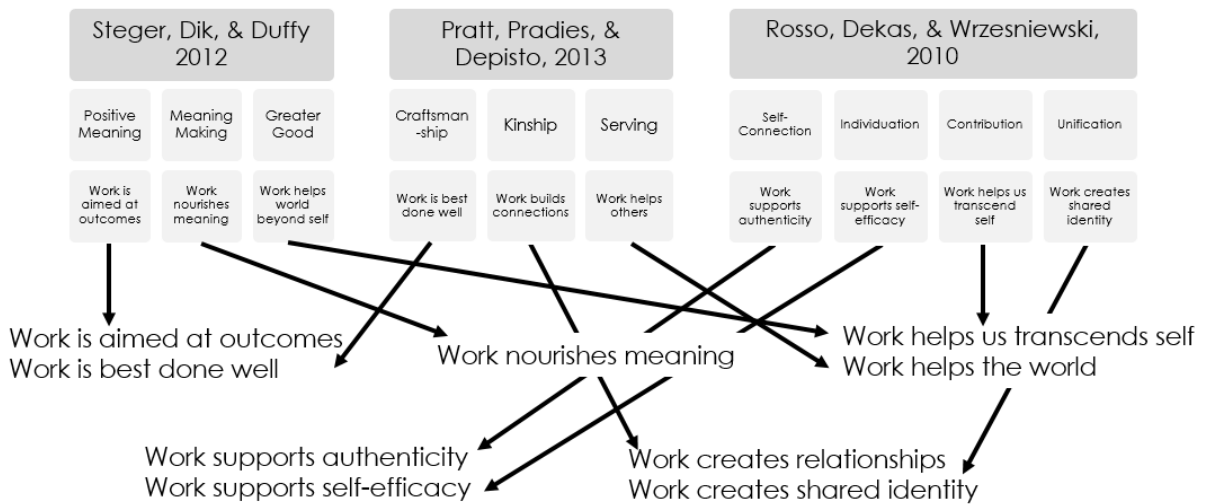

Figure 2. A novel model of how meaning is fostered at work, drawing on meaningful work models, to illustrate the potential for innovation.
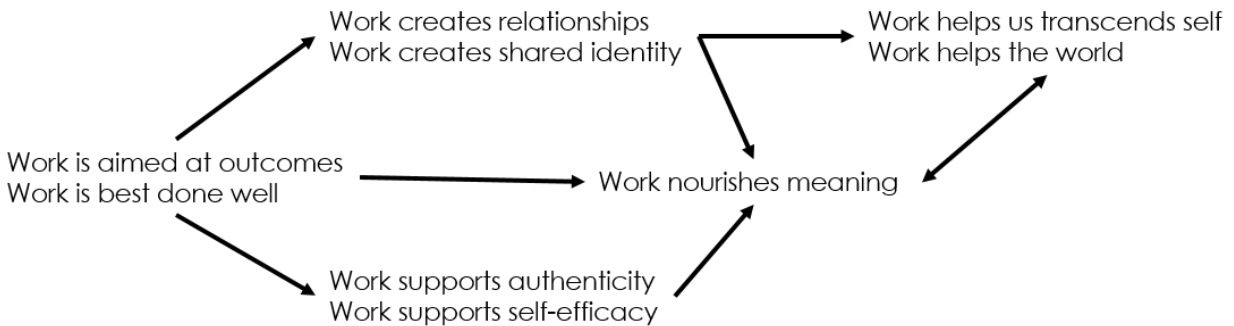

Figure 2 goes one step further to suggest one possible model of how the elements may foster each other. To my knowledge, this model has not been suggested elsewhere, which could be taken to mean it is new and intriguing or that it is too silly for other scholars to bother with. However, it does suggest a novel approach to studying how meaning may arise in the work

domain, and is quite different than a model that would draw on top-down approaches. One of the interesting aspects of conducting this quick exercise is seeing the emergence of primary components of major theories of psychological wellbeing. For example, one could argue that work aimed at outcomes/work is best done well connects this model to Ryff's (1989) environmental mastery component and Deci and Ryan's (2000) component of competence. Authenticity and self-efficacy may correspond to autonomy in both models, and relationships and shared identity may correspond to positive relationships and relatedness, respectively. Going one step further, Martela and colleagues suggested that beneficence, or the desire to help others, may supplement the three established needs of Self-Determination Theory, which might be seen here in the idea that work helps the world (Martela, Ryan, & Steger, 2018).

A Proposal for a Systematic, Meaning-Centric Approach to Domains

Hopefully the example of meaningful work illustrates that there are opportunities for great advances in our understanding of meaning as a human experience to be gained through examining meaning in domains. In the case of meaningful work, new models could be proposed, such as the one I concocted here, which would be useful for future research. However, it would also be useful to re-incorporate general meaning in life theories back into the work domain. Do the elements drawn out in Figures 1 and 2 fully address needs for coherence, purpose, significance, and fulfillment? It is likely that they do not, but also that the way in which these needs are addressed through work would differ from the way in which they are addressed through relationships, education, or other domains. Therefore, I would like to outline three primary qualities a more robust examination of meaning in domains should include going forward.

Should be Informed by Meaning Theory

When parts of life are viewed as domains rather than sources, they are cast somewhat in isolated terms—they become little worlds of their own. Rather than simply contributing to a general impression that life is meaningful because of experiences in a particular part of life, the question becomes how do people perceive or generate meaningfulness that is rooted and experienced in the part of life itself. It is only reasonable, therefore, that what we learn about how people experience meaning should be applied to domains. Integrating theories and empirical findings about meaning in life as a whole will strengthen the rigor and expand the depth of meaning in domain scholarship. An additional benefit is that knowledge generated within domain-specific investigations can be reverse-engineered to both advance our understanding of meaning in life, but also be migrated to other domains through the hub of meaning in life as a whole. In the example of meaningful work, we might ask if acting with the intention of creating outcomes and doing one's best work are universal components of meaning, or if they also are components of meaning in other domains, such as parenting, education, leisure, or spirituality.

Should be Informed by Important Theories in Domain

Simultaneously, we ought to consult important theories in each domain. Learning the language, models, and empirical results of each domain will improve any models of meaning we want to generate, and also will help meaning scholars communicate with others interested in that domain. Important theories in other domains also hold the benefit of not being developed to understand

meaning. They most likely will represent very different perspectives on the phenomenon, and will highlight aspects that might be overlooked through the lens of meaning. It certainly is possible that such new perspectives might add valuable insights into meaning in life as a whole, as well, once filtered back up through domains.

Should Focus on How Meaning Helps People Address Key Challenges in that Domain

Finally, I suspect that many of those interested in meaning at either the global or domain level are interested in trying to make a difference through meaning. The nature of meaning certainly is a worthy intellectual goal, and presents each of us with many, many hours of enjoyable pondering, musing, and introspection. The application of meaning, however, also is a worthy goal, and has decades of brilliant work to support it, though much of that work is woefully underappreciated by mainstream society. I would suggest that as our world of meaning scholarship has accelerated past simple research questions, it may also have accelerated past pointless research questions. An example of a pointless research question is "do people think the domain of health is meaningful?" I suspect that we can find individual variation on how meaningful just about any domain is judged to be, but that we would be better off knowing about the consequences of such judgments. To my mind, it is important that we show some additional value to understanding meaning in domains rather than simply showing that people can see it there. There are undoubtedly many ways to ensure that there is value in investigating meaning in domains, but one way is to focus on looking at how meaning helps people address the challenges they face in those domains. What are people trying to do in domains? What obstacles or distractions do they face? What challenges is meaning thought to be good for addressing?

We can use these three points to evaluate the state of our understanding of domain meaning. In the example of meaningful work, there is evidence that the research is informed by meaning theory (e.g., Steger et al., 2012 cites this body of work), and there certainly is evidence that important theories of work and vocation have been integrated (e.g., the work on calling and its influence on Rosso et al.'s 2010 model of meaningful work is heavily rooted in vocational psychology). There certainly are many challenges facing people when it comes to work, some of which are addressed by current meaningful work models and some of which are not. Among the challenges of work are finding a sense of dignity and contribution (yes, this challenge is addressed to some degree by meaningful work models), securing basic necessities (no, such matters are not addressed), balancing necessity with one's aspirations and dreams (not really), balancing individuation and joining (yes), developing responsibility (yes), maintaining motivation when organizational incentive structures fail you (yes). I think a more diligent examination of the challenges that must be addressed in the domain of work would reveal relatively stronger and weaker spots in current meaningful work models, to the benefit of future work in the area, which underscores the importance of collaborating across disciplines.

Alienation, Terrorism, and Nationalism

Meaningful work provides an example of how this proposal may be used to examine existing models, but how might it be used to initiate inquiry into new domains? Among the many dire threats to human civilization as we know it, the fracturing of our social compacts with each other along battle lines constructed of abstractions ranks up there. Alienation, terrorism, and nationalism each sever our bonds to each other, disrupting the kinds of social interactions that have supported human flourishing throughout most of our species' history (e.g., Baumeister &

Leary, 1995). Although independent, they seem to me to work together to fuel a distinctly existential crisis. People who feel outcast or wronged in some way seek to put a face and a name to their tormentors, and a menagerie of terroristic and nationalistic families beckon to them with a reason for their suffering. We see the attractions of joining the "right team"—whether defined by ideology, race, or location—in the burgeoning ranks and unprecedented sway of terrorism and nationalism.

It is difficult to imagine convincing someone in 1980 to 1990 that in the not so distant future, a terrorist group would come into being, mutate its tactics from assassination of regional rivals to outright war on sovereign governments, and eventually rule unchallenged over an area somewhere between the size of South Korea and Bulgaria, all while attracting militants to its ranks and claiming responsibility for violence in many other countries. That this metastasization happened in only four short years (2010-2014) points fingers at many causes, but one of those causes surely was the willingness of individual people to lash out in violence against strangers and innocents who represented the enemy to them in some way. This seems like a crisis of meaning to me. Gilles de Kerchove, the European Union's counterterrorism director points in a similar direction in describing the difficulty in isolating a single cause explaining why people become terrorists: "There's all these different factors involved: poor integration, poor education, discrimination, a difficult neighborhood, the need to be part of a group or *to have a sense of purpose*" (Hjelmgard, 2017, emphasis mine).

Applying the present proposed approach to understanding meaning in domains would lead us to consult meaning theory, theories on alienation, terrorism, and nationalism, and try to identify the challenges people face—or perhaps more accurately in this case the needs that are satisfied—in this domain. A top-down approach might raise four kinds of questions about alienation, terrorism, and nationalism:

- Comprehension: Whose fault is this? Why are things changing?
- Purpose: What is my function in society?
- Significance: What can I do that matters and makes life worth something?
- Fulfillment: How can I feel fulfilled in this empty life?

It is perhaps too pat of an approach, but it is fairly clear how joining a nationalist or terrorist group could provide appealing answers, or at least some answers, to each of these questions. Whose fault is it? The "Others," of course. What is my function in society? To rectify these wrongs on behalf of my brethren. What can I do that matters? To serve in this battle. How can I feel fulfilled? By joining the movement. Since the writings of Frankl (1963), concern has been expressed over the consequences to society's failure to provide paths to purpose and meaning. Perhaps the intervening decades have only seen society draw further away from its function as a platform for finding avenues to meaningful life, creating a different kind of existential vacuum for fragmented, warped ideologies to fill. At the very least, a top-down model of meaning in domains can guide us to consider the existential needs that are going unmet, and which need greater attention. In the particular domain of alienation, terrorism, and nationalism, it is clear that there are a variety of "meanings" that can draw people together, but that the ascendant ones appear to do so mainly by fomenting opposition to some enemy, rather than by helping us draw close.

However, we can go deeper if we integrate even basic information about how terrorism and nationalism meet people's needs. For example, de Kerchove's brief list of possible contributing factors was intended to be read by subscribers to a US-based national newspaper (Hjelmgard, 2017), not highly-trained technocrats, but it still contains perspectives that are

missing from a generic meaning-centered approach like the top-down one I've discussed here. Using de Kerchove's list, and expanding his points from a basic psychological perspective creates the following list of precipitating factors, or needs met by terrorism:

- Poor integration: Social fragmentation; fear of different, the outsider
- Poor education: Loss of shared canonical knowledge; susceptibility to conspiracy theories and alternate acts; loss of economic participation
- Discrimination: Life's true lack of fairness; marginalization and dehumanization
- Difficult neighborhood: Cycles of violence; loss of social trust
- Need to be part of a group: Entrenchment of concerns; civil erosion and polarization
- To which I would add: Nihilism and nothing to lose

Each of the psychological layers within de Kerchove's list can be viewed in terms of their underlying themes and unmet needs. In Table 1, I have tried to draw this out. The point of trying to expand, then distill, some of the precipitating factors of terrorism into unmet needs is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of the psychology of terrorism. Gaining specialized knowledge in this field of study is necessary for developing better models of meaning in domains, but even this brief exercise may reveal useful new direction for study, and the critical contributions to be made by meaning scholars and practitioners.

Let us imagine a government proceeding to work to address the problem of terrorism using some of de Kerchove's observations. Certainly, they may wish to invest in social integration, education, tolerance, and infrastructure, but doing so blindly may have unintended consequences. For example, in the 1950s-1960s, the United States invested in a huge infrastructure project designed to better connect the country and provide economic integration for its citizens. However, interstate highway construction bulldozed thriving communities across the country. In St. Paul, Minnesota, the vibrant African-American community named after its main street, Rondo, was heavily damaged when the interstate was rammed through its very center, destroying one-in-eight African-American homes (Minnesota Historical Society, n.d.). For decades afterward, the fractured neighborhood was economically bleak and had a reputation for high levels of crime. In the interests of efficiency, this infrastructure project may seem reasonable in its present route, but a meaning scholar would have recognized the high cost of destroying the heart of a community. We are better positioned to understand needs for belonging, certainty, self-worth, shared understanding, trust, values, and validation. Further, we can see how to connect these and other human needs to aspects of meaning, such as coherence, purpose, significance, and fulfillment.

Table 1. Precipitating factors followed by a psychological unpacking of those factors, underlying themes, and unmet needs as relevant to terrorism.

Precipitating Factors	*Psychological Interpretation*	*Underlying Themes*	*Unmet Needs*
Poor integration	Social fragmentation	A place among others	Belonging
	Fear of the different, the outsider	Destruction of threat and uncertainty	Trust
Poor education	Loss of shared canonical knowledge	Individual experience is the only reliable information	Shared understanding
	Susceptibility to conspiracy theories and alternate acts	Knowledge of the truth	Certainty
	Loss of economic participation	No function in mainstream society	Self-worth
Discrimination	Life's true lack of fairness	Following rules and being a good person are no protection	Values
	Marginalization and dehumanization	Lives have no value	Self-worth
Difficult neighborhood	Cycles of violence	Hurting is the way of the world	Validation
	Loss of social trust	Everyone is a potential enemy	Trust
Need to be part of a group	Entrenchment of concerns	Fight for my side	Belonging
	Civil erosion and polarization	Attacking others is normal	Values
Nihilism	Nothing to lose	No obstacles to extreme action	Values

Conclusion

From a basic knowledge standpoint, it is important for meaning scholars and practitioners to differentiate between sources of meaning and domains of meaning, and to create more sophisticated approaches to understanding meaning in domains. Beyond the intellectual interest in exploring what might be the next big frontier in meaning research, understanding how people find and create meaning in domains may help us provide better guidance on how people can live the lives they want. Meaning in life as a whole can seem intimidating, or too abstract, for many people, yet it is intuitive to think about wanting meaningful relationships or meaningful work lives. There is some evidence that meaningful experience in domains drives meaning in life as a whole (Steger & Dik, 2009), which further highlights the need for good research and practice.

We also may become more relevant through a more intentional approach to understanding meaning in domains. In the end, it comes down to what challenges can meaning help us solve, and what needs can meaning help us serve? I think we are advantageously positioned to help others do better what we already do well. We are used to meaning as a way to provide: alternatives to fear; authenticity; responsibility; tolerance of risk and discomfort; dedicated effort over time; and transcending the demands of our lazy, distracted, easily scared, self-absorbed skins. Where, in our world's distracted death spiral into the void, *aren't* these provisions useful, or even necessary?

I believe that meaning researchers, practitioners, and fans belong in the important conversations of our day. We belong at the table to discuss solutions to sectarian violence, economic disparities, gender and sexual abuse, human trafficking, global warming and climate collapse, imminent mass refugee migrations, annihilation of ecosystems and lifeforms, weaponization of information, terrorism, radical nationalism, and the other existential threats of our day. In this way, I admit to being inspired again by the example of Paul Wong. He is a deep thinker and a wise man, with many contributions to our knowledge of meaning, but on top of that, he has always sought to make that knowledge practically useful. He has opened his mind, his heart, and his home to others, creating communities, and seeking to seed the world with meaning-centered solutions to the aches that fill so many of us. We are at an incredible moment, when we are not surviving on the brave but solitary visions of singular personalities like Frankl, Ryff, and Wong. We have a whole new generation of meaning scholars, meaning practitioners, and those who straddle both worlds. Inspired by Paul Wong, but driven by hundreds and hundreds of scholarly and applied data points, let us take a seat at the table and share our vision.

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