

Finding Meaning in Life

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Background: We intended to review the Meaning in Life (MIL) literature to find out the current issues with the field, and propose suggestions for future directions for its study along with a project to be done in the fall..

Modern Meaning Research

- Most findings come from comparing MIL scores (calculated from questionnaires with likert-scale items like "my life has meaning") with measures of well-being and personality.
- High MIL has been shown to be an strong predictor of high physical and psychological health, career success, athleticism, among other benefits.
- MIL research currently focuses on trying to identify what "meaning" really means, what causes high MIL scores and why it has such profound benefits. Despite the great promise of the construct, empirical work has not matched the depth and breadth of the theoretical work.

The Current Issues with The Field

- **Meaning in where?** Experts have pointed to the fact that, as currently conceptualized, the "meaning" in MIL is vague and imprecise, but not many point at the "life" part. Is MIL a momentary feeling? A judgment of life in general? On the collection of events in one's life? These questions are to be answered if we want to move on with inquiry.
- **From global to situational:** Currently, what has been mostly studied is so called Global Meaning in Life (see page 2), meanwhile, meaning states (see page 2) have been left aside. Studying meaning as a state as well as a trait is important for understanding of meaning as a whole.
- **Not enough discriminant validity.** Meaning may be confounded with construct like happiness or inspiration, finding what is unique about meaning is critical for empirical investigation.

The Proposed Project:

An Empirical Analysis of The Effects of Meaningful Moment Writing on Mood and Well-Being

Students will be randomly assigned to write about either a recent meaningful experience (ME) or a neutral condition. Participants will then proceed to answer a series of questions on the features of the experience, their affect, and Meaning Salience (see page 2).

Hypothesis:
Writing about ME will result in an increase in positive affect and well-being



Important Directions for Future study

- The field still needs consensus on the vocabulary. Currently, the same one construct is referred to by countless different names. A proper synthesis and consolidation of the nomenclature would be a highly desirable endeavor.
- The questionnaires currently being used are highly reliable, but the vagueness of what they measure should be addressed directly. Cognitive interviewing is a great tool to assess how respondents deal with each question. Doing a cognitive interview for the MLQ would be a great step forwards.
- Knowing the correlates of personality and Meaning Salience/Meaningful Experiences, could tell us a lot about what meaningful states are really about.
- The daily meaning, meaning salience, meaningful experience relationship is still unclear and should be revised and unraveled. The constructs are highly similar and seem to overlap a lot. Knowing the proper place of each should be the next step if we are to truly understand them.

Glossary of some of the major concepts



Global Meaning in life/Trait Meaning

- **Global Meaning in Life** refers to an individual's judgement of how meaningful they think their whole life is. This is a stable measure and is the most commonly used in meaning research.
- The most popular questionnaire of the sort is Steger's **Meaning in Life Questionnaire**. The questionnaire gained popularity for its psychometric reliability, but is criticized for not giving a definition of what it measures.

Meaning State/ Short-term Meaning

- Unlike **Trait Meaning**, **State Meaning** is a momentary assessment of how much meaning an individual feels at any given time. Despite its close connection with MIL, because it is much harder to study, state meaning has not been studied as much.
- Recent technological advancements have allowed researchers to better assess participants' affective landscape at random time intervals, resulting in a significant increase of short-term meaning research.

Meaning Making

- **Meaning Making** is the process that individuals undertake to make sense of the environment around them and their life in general. Although most of the **Meaning Making** literature deals with making sense of great losses and trauma, many have pointed to the fact that **meaning making** is a much more intuitive and constant process than otherwise suggested.
- Some models of **Meaning Making** worthy of mention are **Heine et al.'s Meaning Maintenance Model**, and **Park's (2010) Meaning Making Model**.

Meaning Salience

- **Meaning Salience** is a relatively new concept in the field. **Hooker et al. (2018)** define **Salience** as the degree to which individuals are aware of what makes their life meaningful and purposeful during daily activities.
- Research shows that higher **Salience** is strongly correlated with having more frequent **Meaning State** experiences. Due to this strong connection, **Salience** questionnaires have short-term meaning items in them.

The meaning trichotomy

- The **Meaning Trichotomy** (**Martela & Steger, 2016**) is a model that attempts to delineate three essential features of MIL:
 - Purpose:** Refers to living motivated and with goals to pursue. Having purpose is to have a sense of directedness in life.
 - Coherence:** Coherence refers to living a life where things make sense, are clear and comprehensible, and fit well as a whole.
 - Significance:** Significance refers to having a life that matters, and is important for reasons you regard as worthy.
- With the lack of consensus in the literature, the trichotomy filled an important gap. The breakdown got popular and was quickly admitted into the mainstream research.

References

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