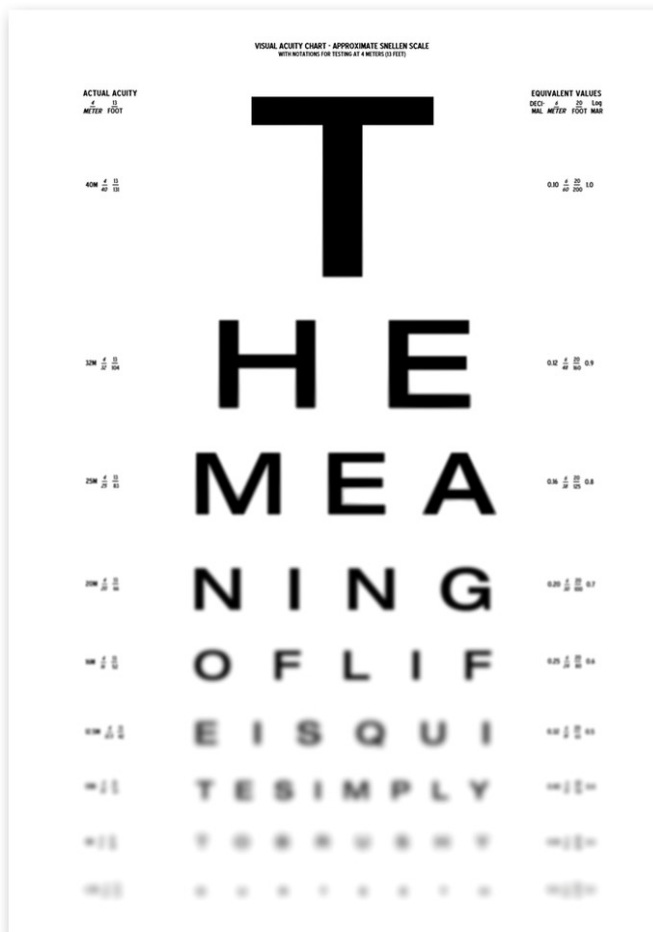


# Top entry page

# The meaning of Life



## Introduction

"**Meaning**" can be considered an important aspect in the vast majority of topics studied in psychology and has been a central topic within positive psychology since its starting point. In general the term "meaning" is used to refer to an individual's **sense of purpose** and **role in the world** (Baumeister, 1991).

Whilst the concept of meaning is not new in psychology there has recently been increased interest in it which is reflected by a proliferation in the number of published articles surrounding the topic in the last few years.

However, the study of meaning presents many challenges. The **definition** of "meaning" is **not clear cut** and the term is used widely without a **common implicit definition** (Leontiev, 2013). Even within academic research it is possible that different researchers are using the term "meaning" whilst referring to different definitions of the word (Leontiev, 2013). To increase the complexity of the study of the concept further, there are **no reliable tools for measuring meaning**.

There have been many theories suggested for meaning reality, most of which involve similar dimensions but infer their importance differently. Baumeister (2002), argues that there are **4 primary needs** for a

meaningful life, if any one of these needs is not fulfilled then we will not feel that we have a meaningful existence. A second more elaborate framework for meaning has been proposed by Reker and Wong (2012). Within this theory, meaning is seen to have **many important dimensions**. It takes into consideration and explains in depth **sources of meaning** as well as the **modalities that it is experienced** through. This is the most **multidimensional theory** noted within this wiki which also suggests that it is the **most well-equipped to map the complexity of meaning** as a phenomenon. In comparison, a **meaning-making theory** by Park (2013), describes a meaning making framework which is explained in stages that relate to stressful life events.

When comparing meaning theories to the empirical evidence there are **definite gaps to be found**. Most studies regarding meaning-making frameworks have found **contradictory results** with support for predictions being **weak or absent** (Park, 2013). There are many reasons why this may be occurring, such as the fact that many studies only take in to consideration **one or two measures of meaning**, as meaning is such a complex concept it could be that this is simply not adequate to study the phenomenon in great enough depth. There may also be **issues with discriminant validity across studies**.

There are many cultural and historical links to meaning. Meaning is never purely defined by an individual themselves and therefore it always tied to the culture which they are immersed in. **Religion** is one of the key examples of how culture can **create and define meaning**. Psychology has never been completely blind to the topic of meaning and it can be traced as far back in psychology as Freud (1953) who claimed **no matter what we do it always means something**. However, come the turn of the millennium, meaning has begun to receive **greater attention** within psychology, there are now bi-annual conferences dedicated to the topic and its **momentum within the literature** is obvious.

Recent studies have found that **family and personal life** are one of the main **sources of meaning** (Fave, 2013). It has also been shown that meaning in life can be an **indicator of psychological and spiritual well-being** and **positive development** (Steger, 2009, 2012). Meaning is also considered important in aiding the **understanding of human experience** (Yalom, 1980) and **behaviour** (Baumeister, 1991).

This wiki will attempt to expand the reader's **understanding of the complexity of the concept** of meaning. It will describe various definitions and theories of meaning, and give an account of the historical and cultural relations of the concept. It will briefly describe three journal papers regarding the different aspects of meaning to refer the reader to further interesting reads.

## Key paper

The journal of Positive Psychology recently published a special issue specifically **dedicated to meaning**. This consists of 9 articles which discuss the issues that will be presented here in much greater depth for further reading. This special edition can be accessed here: **Positive Psychology in search for meaning** ([http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rpos20/8/6#.Uu\\_gbfl\\_tvQ](http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rpos20/8/6#.Uu_gbfl_tvQ))

**One paper** within this issue that we felt would be a particularly useful for helping to develop an understanding of the topic "The meaning of life" from a beginners view point is:

**Park, C. L., & George, L. S. (2013). Assessing meaning and meaning making in the context of stressful life events: Measurement tools and approaches. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 8(6), 483-504** ([http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17439760.2013.830762#.Uu\\_gqPI\\_tvQ](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17439760.2013.830762#.Uu_gqPI_tvQ))

This article starts with a discussion on **what the meaning of life is** and describes a **meaning-making framework** which combines current theories of meaning and meaning making in the context of stressful

life events. It provides **multiple different methods of measuring meaning** and meaning making in **clearly structured tables** as well as describing the **positive and negative aspects** of each method. It highlights the **need for more consistency in theoretical constructs and measurements**. It also provides a wealth of sources for further reading.

## Definitions of meaning

One of the major problems in studying meaning is the **ambiguity surrounding the concept**. Attempts to define "meaning" have been thought to make fairly good approximations of the construct, however many researchers argue that there is still a sense that there is something missing (Heintzelman, 2013).

Within the many attempts to define "meaning" there have been **three common features**:

- connections, associations and relationships
- a sense of coherence or comprehensibility to the experience of meaning
- and that meaning is a subjective experience

## Connections

Many attempts to define meaning refer to **connections, associations and relationships** (Baumeister, 1991; Leontiev, 2005; Vols, 2006; Steger, 2012).

Meaning can be defined as a... "*shared mental representations of possible relationships... Thus, meaning connects things.*"

(Baumeister, 1991)

It is therefore realistic to conclude that meaning is in some way about the **experience of stable relationships**. However there is some debate between definitions as to whether these connections must **actively be created** (Vols, 2006) or can **spontaneously appear** in our lives (Leontiev, 2005).

## Coherence

Many attempts to define meaning also refer to the idea that it involves an **analysis** of an individuals' **life or circumstances** to create a **coherent whole that makes sense** (Baumeister, 1991; Reker & Wong, 1988; King, 2006).

"*Lives may be experienced as meaningful when they are felt to ... have a coherence that transcends chaos.*"

(King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006)

As humans, we are capable of **imposing order** in chaotic circumstances to create comprehensibility and therefore this would suggest we are **capable of creating meaning**.

## Subjective experience

This recurring feature in definitions suggests that meaning is not just connections and/or coherence but an individuals' **subjective experience of these**.

"*Meaningfulness is something very subjective, a pervasive quality of a person's*

*inner life. It is experienced both as ideas and as emotions. It is clear, then, that when we ask about the meaningfulness of someone's life we are asking about the qualities of his or her inner experience."*

(Klinger, 1977)

To illustrate, life events, experiences and objects have no meaning except that they are **meaningful to someone**.

Conscious processes are not necessary for the detection of both connections and coherence.

Heintzelman (2013) argues that some features of meaning are **controlled by unconscious process and therefore are literally indescribable**. She argues that the difficulty in defining meaning itself **reflects one of its fundamental features**. By accepting these indescribable, unconscious processes in the definition of meaning, its understanding can be developed and tools to measure and study the concept can be greatly expanded.

## History of meaning

The above section does a good job of outlining where the study of meaning stands in the present literature, but what of its history? Meaning is **far from a new topic** in academia. Indeed, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the opening decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Russian philosophy was flourishing. One of the central themes of this movement was its critique of the hedonistic paradigm by raising the spectre of meaning (Leontiev, 2013). The philosophers of the day proposed that meaning should be the guiding principle of ethics as opposed to happiness (Leontiev, 2005), as otherwise we are ultimately tied to the hedonistic paradigm.

Psychology has never been entirely blind to the issue of meaning. Freud (1953) discovered that **no matter what we do, it always means something**. Adler (1980) argued that **humans live in a realm of meaning**. Frankl (1967) proposed that **human existence is not only guided by, but directed at meaning**. However, meaning failed to enter the world of mainstream psychology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Why? Well, one of the key problems with the study is trying to pin down what 'meaning' actually is. It presents an odd case; it refers to a cognitive interpretation, a feeling, an incentive, a value, a valence, and so on (Leontiev, 2013). It is never purely defined in terms of the individual, but in an interaction between individuals and the world. It is fluid, not fixed, neither a state, nor a trait. This made the topic extremely difficult to study, based on the standard methodologies of psychology, which aim to reduce a phenomenon down into a smaller set of predictive variables that can easily describe it. However, to do this with meaning would impoverish the concept itself. To study meaning, Shotter (1990) argues that the postmodern situation in present-day science demands approaches that would allow us to get in touch with the reality we study, rather than observe it distantly. Where then, does that leave the study of 'meaning'?

Come the turn of millennium, the study of meaning started receiving a greater degree of attention. In 2000, Paul Wong organised a conference called 'The search for meaning in the new Millennium', which has since become a bi-annual conference devoted to existential positive psychology and meaning-centered psychotherapy (Leontiev, 2013). In a particularly exciting turn for the study of meaning, **Paul Seligman (2002) included 'meaningful' living as one of the core principles of positive psychology**. Though the study may not be entirely mainstream yet, it is clearly gaining momentum in the literature. Indeed, as will be discussed later, over the past decade, several models have been proposed for meaning and meaning formation.

# Culture and Meaning

**One of the key observations one can make about meaning is that it is never defined purely within the agent; it is inherently tied to the world outside beyond them** (Leontiev, 2013). As such, one of the most interesting aspects of meaning is how it is formed by the culture in which we exist. Each culture or subculture will have different ways of creating meaning for itself, offering up the opportunity for an entire thesis on the subject, and as such, we shall confine ourselves to a few specific views, primarily those of the main world religions.

A religion makes the shift to an institution when the myths and rituals that have forged its sacred histories are organised into officially sanctioned models of orthodoxy (correct interpretation of myths) and orthopraxy (the correct interpretation of rituals) (Aslan, 2006). Christianity can be called the principal example of an “orthodoxic” religion, the distinguishing mark of a faithful Christian is their beliefs – expressed through creed (Aslan, 2006). **So for a Christian, it is precisely their beliefs themselves that confer meaning in terms of their culture.** On the other hand, Judaism is a prime example of an “orthopraxic” faith, whereby **it is the believers actions** – expressed through the Law – **that imbue one’s life with meaning** (Aslan, 2006). As we can see here, there is a clear difference in the ways that these cultures attempt to form meaning, emphasising different aspects of the believers life; it is not that Christianity discounts action, or that Judaism discounts beliefs, **merely that different aspects of a believer’s life inform the process of meaning formation.**

Again, we see differences in how meaning is created for members of a culture if we turn towards Islam. One of the core principles of Islam is that of the Ummah; the borderless religious community. During Islam’s rapid expansion over many linguistic and cultural boundaries, the Ulama – religious scholars in charge of guiding the Ummah – sought to formalize the expression of faith through ritual, in turn providing guidelines to determine just who was and was not Muslim (Aslan, 2006). The result of this effort was what are now commonly referred to as the ‘5 pillars of Islam’ (Aslan, 2006). Four of the five pillars are inherently communal activities, and the ultimate purpose of the five pillars is to aid the believer in the expression of their membership in the Muslim community through action (Aslan, 2006). As Islam does not have a standardised religious hierarchy, the religious community is seen as a divinely inspired community through which salvation is achieved, i.e., the community is the core of the Muslim faith, its church. **Meaning and purpose, in Islam, is thus conferred by membership in the Ummah, by undertaking its religious rituals** (Aslan, 2006).

Looking towards Buddhism, we see yet another culture carving out meaning in a different fashion. Here, the believer can only find the meaning of their life precisely by searching for the meaning of life, a view supported by Frakl (1967). This idea could be most appropriately summed up by one, perhaps unexpected, radical Buddhist Koan: “If you meet the Buddha on the way, kill him”. If one finds the Buddha, all of the secrets of the path to enlightenment could be solved by him, thus depriving your own journey of meaning. **It is the journey, not the destination, in which meaning can be found.**

The takeaway message of this section is that **meaning has an intimate relationship with the culture in which we live.** If we come from one background rather than another, our perception of a meaningful life can vary wildly, before we even touch on more recent distinctions in the field such as individualism vs. collectivism. Where then, does that leave the study of meaning within the context of psychology? The psychology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could largely be characterised as the study of individual differences, which relies precisely on the comparison between individuals, whereas meaning exists not only within, but in common understanding across members of a culture (Leontiev, 2013). As the next section will show, positive psychology has recently forged ahead in developing more detailed and varied

section will show, positive psychology has recently forged ahead in developing more detailed and varied models of meaning and its associated phenomena.

# Theories

Within the study of meaning, a large number of theories have been proposed for **meaning reality**, a few of which shall be detailed here. An important point to note is that all of these theories involve many similar dimensions, but demark them in different fashions, and infer their importance differently. A second class of theory, **meaning-making**, will also be outlined.

## Meaning-reality theories

### • Baumeister & Vohs (2002)

Leontiev (2013) has argued that the theory articulated by Baumeister & Vohs (2002) marks an important advancement of the study of meaning. The first observation, as noted above, is that “the essence of meaning is connection” (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002, p. 608). Rather than mapping the dimensions of meaning, Baumeister demarks 4 primary needs for a meaningful life:

1. *Need for purpose* – essentially the need for life goals and drives
2. *Need for values* – these can reinforce or guide one’s purpose, and help the agent to imbue their purpose with meaning
3. *Need for a sense of self-efficacy* – a desire for a feeling of self-control and autonomy
4. *Need for self-worth* – a desire to feel they are inherently valuable, naturally this is related to self-efficacy, and is often relationally formed.

The key point of this theory is that we only feel we have a meaningful existence *when all four needs are satisfied*; when one is missing, one’s meaning in life cannot be complete.

### • Reker & Wong (2012)

Reker and Wong (2012) have proposed quite an elaborate framework for meaning and its sources, in part because of Reker’s view that ‘a complete understanding of meaning requires both an elemental and holistic view of life’ (2000, p. 52). In this theory, meaning is seen to have several important dimensions:

1. **Structural components:** cognitive, motivation, and affective factors
2. **The sources of meaning**
3. **The breadth of meaning:** the **diversity** of meaningful experiences
4. **The depth of meaning:** The **quality** of a given meaningful experience

Considering the sources of meaning, the work of Emmons (2003) is highly informative. He posited that there are 4 key domains in which individuals search for meaning: *achievement/work*, *relationships/intimacy*, *religion/spirituality*, and *self-transcendence/generativity* (Emmons, 2003).

Furthermore, Wong (1998) argues for several extra dimensions, or types of meaning which he saw as key. First is the distinction between *Global and Situational meaning*, which refers to whether the meaning in question is viewed by the agent as being *the ultimate meaning of their life*, or a *situation specific meaning*. Wong (1998) argued that meaning had a couple of preconditions, *social relationships and personal qualifications*. The final key point of this theory is that meaning is experienced through 3 separate modalities; *activities, experiences, and attitudes*. This theory of meaning is essentially demarked

by its complexity, it is the most multidimensional of the theories noted here, which may mean it may be the most well-equipped to map the complexity of meaning as a phenomenon.

# Meaning-making theories

## . Park (2013)

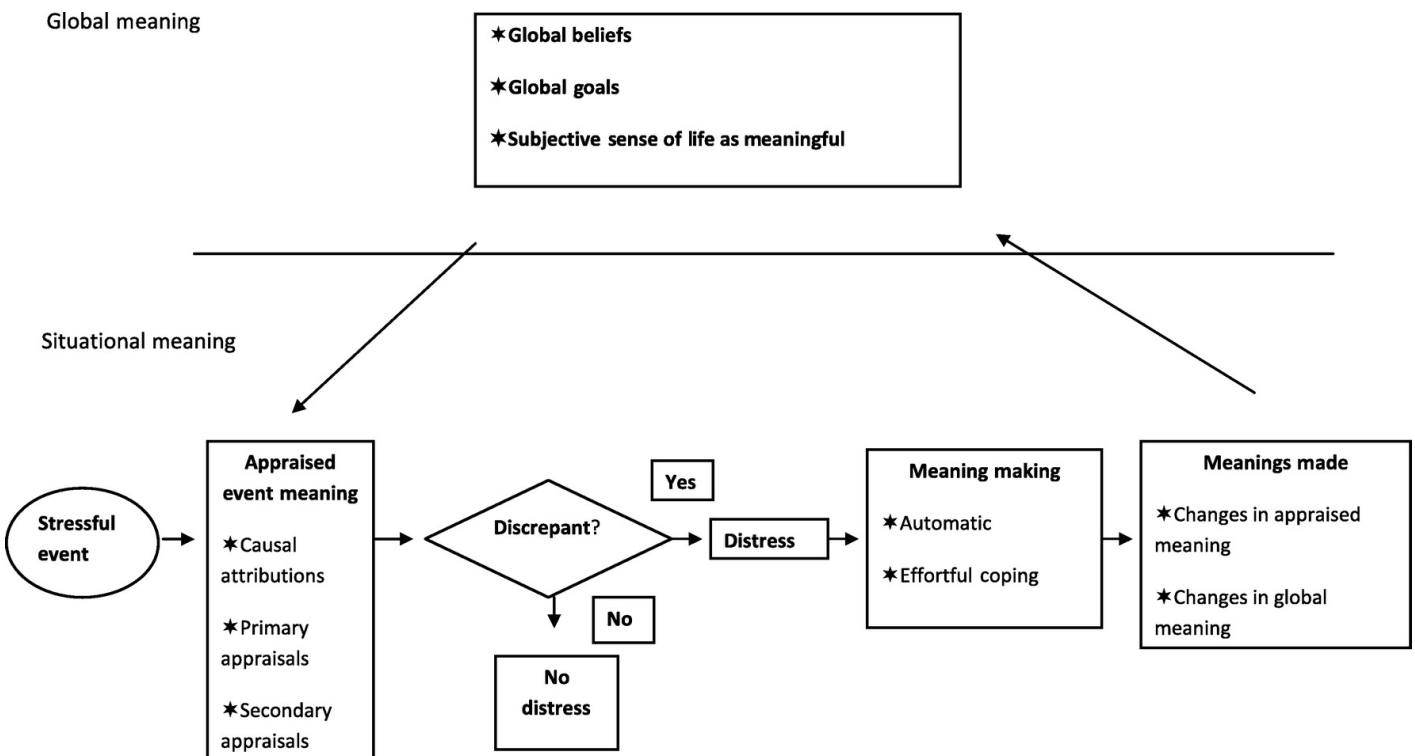
Drawing on the work of several meaning-making theorists (see Park (2013) for greater detail) Park describes a detailed model of **meaning making**. Here, there are two levels of meaning; **Global and situational**.

- **Global meaning** references an individual's system of beliefs about the world and themselves, in addition to their life-goals, and their subjective sense of meaningfulness.
- **Situational meaning** refers to meaning in the context of particular environmental encounters. It is essentially how individuals understand and construe specific events.

The meaning-making framework can be described in stages (**See figure 1**):

1. The individual encounters a **severe stressor**, leading to **situational appraisals** and **causal attributions**. These appraisals often lead to the belief that the individual's sense of global meaning has been violated.
2. When global meaning is violated, this initiates cognitive processing, or meaning-making efforts, so as **to incorporate appraisals of the stressor into the global meaning framework**. Meaning-making can either be **automatic**, or **effortful**.
3. **Meaning-making processes result in better adjustment, particularly if the individual manages to afford sufficient meaning to the stressful event**. The meanings-made can be assigned into two categories; **changes in appraised meaning**, and **changes in global meaning**.

Fig. 1: Park (2013) Meaning-making framework (Park, 2013).



In this class of meaning-making framework, one of its core assumptions is that discrepancy and violation are central to the meaning-making process (Park, 2013). In the case of a severe stressor, such as severe illness, this may result in trying to find the positives of the situation, or learning to use the experience

ness, this may result in trying to find the positives of the situation, or learning to use the experience positively, such as undertaking charity runs to raise money for awareness etc. However, whilst the theory has **received high support** in the literature, a key counterpoint could be raised here. **If meaning making primarily relies on stressful events, does this mean that a happy life is thus less meaningful?**

## Gaps Between Theory and Empirical Evidence

With any theory in psychology, it is always wise to see just how well theory can match the evidence gathered in its favour. Especially so with meaning; it is after all a multidimensional construct, and has only seen attention in the literature in recent decades. A good starting point is that **studies regarding the meaning-making framework have often found contradictory results**, with support for its specific predictions being either weak, or absent (Park, 2013). For example, some studies have found that searching for meaning is related to lower levels of distress (Sears, Stanton, & Danoff-Burg, 2003), whereas others have reported it is related to higher distress and dysfunction (Roberts, Lepore, & Helgeson, 2006). Theories about the sources of meanings can also often fail to be supported. Emmons (2003) noted 4 primary domains of meaning making (e.g. achievement/work), however, Bundick (2011; see below for summary) found that high school students involved in the creative arts, who did not find them personally meaningful were more likely to feel they were more fully achieving their potential, compared to students who rated them as highly meaningful. One would expect that finding an activity meaningful would result in greater positive feeling regarding it. Such spurious results in a relatively new topic area are not entirely unexpected, but it is troubling nevertheless. What could be producing this?

### Methodological issues

- **Studies on meaning often opt to employ only one or two measures, whilst ignoring others** (Park, 2013). Failing to study meaning in all its complexity impoverishes the concept of its depth and breadth (Leontiev, 2013), leading some commentators to claim that **such inadequate measures restrict our current knowledge of meaning** (Park, 2013).
- **Issues with discriminant validity are massively problematic.** Whilst studying one domain of meaning making, e.g. religious/spiritual beliefs, measures employed often measure related constructs, e.g. religious commitment (Park, 2013). When subjective measures of meaning are used, you are only studying one facet of the phenomenon – how participants experience it, how it ‘feels’. This measure shares a great deal of variance with the common measures of positive affect, satisfaction, and happiness (Leontiev, 2013).

Only a few problems with the study of meaning are listed here, for a broad review of the methodological issues, see Leontiev (2013), and Park (2013). One thing that is clear is that, at present, these issues make the study of meaning at best difficult. This either explains the gap between theory and empirical evidence, or strongly suggests the theories we presently hold are inadequate. Either way, it is clear that meaning and its associated phenomena remain far from resolution.

## Papers for further reading

### Study 1



# Sources and motives for personal meaning in adulthood

Fave, A. D., Brdar, I., Wissing, M. P., & Vella-Brodrick, D. A. (2013). Sources and motives for personal meaning in adulthood. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 8*(6), 517-529

([http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17439760.2013.830761#.Uu\\_hCfl\\_tvQ](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17439760.2013.830761#.Uu_hCfl_tvQ))

- **Aim**

This study had a couple of key aims

1. To gain an insight in to the sources and motives underlying these sources of meaning in personal life of adults.
2. To investigate whether these sources and motivations of meaning differed across age groups.
3. To determine the extent to which meaningfulness and life satisfaction are correlated.

The study involved 666 participants from seven different Western countries. It is the first and only study in to meaning which has utilised an international sample. Three different age groups were set

- Group 1 - 30-34 years old
- Group 2 - 35-44 years old
- Group 3 - 45-51 years old

Both quantitative and qualitative information were investigated.

- **Methodology**

**Eudaimonic and Hedonic Happiness Investigation** (EHHI) :Participants were asked to state 3 prominent **THINGS** in their life which had meaning (**sources of meaning**). They were then asked **WHY** these things were meaningful to them (**motives for meaning**).

Participants were then asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 7, **HOW** meaningful **10 different domains** of their life were. These domains were: work, family, standard of living, interpersonal relationships, health, personal growth, leisure, spirituality/religion, society and community, as well as in life in general.

The five-item **Satisfaction with Life Scale** (SWLS) was then used to determine participants **subjective well-being on a cognitive judgement level**.

- **Results**

## **Sources and motivations**

The vast majority of participants stated that **family** was a major source of meaning.

Also frequently mentioned sources of meaning were

- **work**
- **interpersonal relations**
- **and health**

The majority of participants referred to **personal life** in terms of **growth, life engagement, goal commitment and self-actualization** as a **reasoning** for meaning. **Family** was also a common motive underlying sources of meaning with respect to **responsibility** towards and **sharing** with members.

## **Age differences**

In the youngest group, **personal growth** was much more meaningful than in the other two older groups.

Whereas **family related meaningfulness** was much more important to the **older groups** (2&3) in comparison to the younger group (1).

### Life Satisfaction

Meaningfulness actually only explained a very **small percentage** of the **variance in life satisfaction**.

Hierarchical regression of the domains of meaning showed that **only three contributed significantly** to the **variability in life satisfaction**.

- **family**
- **work**
- **& social relations**

- **Strengths**

- **Cross cultural** sample is the first of its type in meaning research.
- The **open ended questions** used in the EHHI allow for detailed, comprehensive answers about the sources and motives of meaning.

- **Limitations**

- The study only looked at people aged between 30 and 51. It would perhaps be interesting to consider how the sources and motivations behind sources of meaning differ across a much wider age range.
- Some perhaps may criticise the life domains chosen to be included in the analysis as it is a subjective and complicated choice.

## Study 2

# Meaning in life, anxiety, depression, and general health among smoking cessation patients

S ([http://www.jpsychores.com/article/S0022-3999\(09\)00079-8/abstract](http://www.jpsychores.com/article/S0022-3999(09)00079-8/abstract))teger, M. F., Mann, J. R., Michels, P., & Cooper, T. C. (2009). *Meaning in life, anxiety, depression, and general health among smoking cessation patients.* *Journal of psychosomatic research*, 67(4), 353-358 ([http://www.jpsychores.com/article/S0022-3999\(09\)00079-8/abstract](http://www.jpsychores.com/article/S0022-3999(09)00079-8/abstract)).

- **Aim**

The aim of this experiment was to investigate the relationship between meaning in life, depression, anxiety, and social support with self-reported general health. In particular, they examined the relationship between the **presence of meaning** (POM) in life and the **search for the meaning** (SFM) in life with **mental and physical health indicators** in participants who were seeking treatment to **aid their cessation of smoking**. The study involves 99 participants.

- **Methodology**

Participants were asked to complete **5** anonymous **questionnaires** at the beginning of the third smoking

cessation class.

## Questionnaires

1. The first questionnaire assessed **general demographic information** and medical history.
2. The second questionnaire was the **ENRICHD Social Support Instrument**. It measures **social support using six questions** which assess the availability of others to provide the individual with emotional support, companionship and practical assistance.
3. The third questionnaire was the **Meaning in Life questionnaire**. It measures an individuals' meaning in life using **10 questions** which measure both **POM and SFM**.
4. The fourth questionnaire was the **Hospital and Anxiety Depression Scale**. It has 14 items which assess an individual's **depressive and anxiety symptoms**.
5. Finally, participants' **general health** was based on a self report **5-point Likert scale**.

### • Results

- Those who reported **lesser POM and greater anxiety and depression** reported **worse perceived health**.
- There was **not a significant linear correlation between SFM and perceived health**. However, the **interaction between SFM and POM was significant**.
- Results suggest **that POM and SFM interact to predict health and anxiety** above and beyond depression scores.
- **POM** seemed to buffer the **harmful relation** between **SFM** and **health and anxiety**.

### • Strengths

- It was the **first study** to look at the relationship between **meaning of life and physical and mental health** outcomes in terms of **substance abuse**.
- The use of a **sample who are trying to quit smoking is interesting** as smoking is associated with higher levels of poor mental health than the general public, and poor mental health has strong links with meaning in life. Therefore it can be determined whether **meaning in life is serving its hypothesised protective role**.

### • Limitations

- The **cross-sectional design** limits the study as it is not possible to determine whether the relationships that exist between the variables were caused by each other or in which direction. Future studies may benefit from longitudinal designs.
- It only used measures of **self-report** which are **subjective** and can be **unreliable**.

## Study 3

# Extracurricular activities, positive youth development, and the role of meaningfulness of engagement

**Bundick, M.J. (2011). Extracurricular activities, positive youth development, and the role of meaningfulness of engagement. The Journal of Positive Psychology, 6(1), 57-74.** ([http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17439760.2010.536775#.Uu\\_hb\\_I\\_tvQ](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17439760.2010.536775#.Uu_hb_I_tvQ))

- **Aim**

The aim of this study was to investigate the longitudinal relations among extracurricular participation and multiple indicators of positive youth development (PYD), and explored whether the personal meaningfulness of these domains moderated these relations. The study involved 201 ninth-graders across several different school districts in America on both the West and East coasts of America, in different demographic regions.

- **Methodology**

Participants were required to complete a battery of questionnaires and demographic items, which was repeated 2 years later to provide longitudinal measures.

### Questionnaires

1. *Participation in and personal meaningfulness of extracurricular activities:* 16 different extracurricular activities spanning 6 different domains (volunteering, religious, academic clubs, creative arts, sports and student leadership) were assessed. For each activity, participants were required to respond to two questions; 'How often are you engaged in this activity?', and 'How meaningful is this activity to you?'. Responses were given on 9- and 5-point Likert scales respectively.
2. *Life satisfaction:* To assess life satisfaction, the *Satisfaction with life scale* (SWLS) was used. The purpose of this test is to assess one's cognitive appraisal of the current status of one's life compared to one's self-defined ideal life, and is designed to be global, rather than domain-specific measure of life satisfaction. Participants were required to respond to 5 items on a 7-point Likert scale.
3. *Purpose in life:* The Purpose in Life subscale of Ryff's (1989) Scales of Psychological Well-Being was employed to assess the degree to which participants have a general sense of purpose, meaning, and goal-directedness in their life. Nine items were assessed on a scale of 1-7.
4. *Hopeful Future:* Participants were required to respond to 3 items designed to measure the degree they feel they are on path to a hopeful future (e.g. "When I think about the future, I am not very hopeful that things will work out")
5. *Fulfilment of Potential:* Participants were asked to respond to two items designed to capture the degree to which they believe they are living up to their personal potential, on a seven point scale (1-7).

- **Results**

- Only **student leadership** and **volunteering positively predicted** any of the **PYD variables longitudinally**, and engagement in the **creative arts was negatively associated with a later sense of purpose in life**.
- Participation in the activity domain was on average **more likely to lead to later positive development when the perceived meaningfulness of that domain was relatively low**.
- The degree of perceived personal meaningfulness of an activity domain did moderate the relations between engagement in that domain and indicators of PYD, though only in certain circumstances, and often in an expected way.
- Participants who did not take part in the creative arts but found them to be highly meaningful were more likely than non-participants who did not find the creative arts meaningful to be higher in purpose in life
- those who participated in the creative arts but **did not find them very meaningful** were more likely than those **who participated but found them highly meaningful to be high in perceived fulfilment of potential**
- For the three significantly moderated relations in the sports domain (participation with life satisfaction, hopeful future, and overall PYD), **the general trend showed that meaningfulness**

**of the domain made a difference primarily for non-participants**

- The effect of meaningfulness of student leadership appeared to be contingent on what level of leadership the participant was involved in, i.e. **the higher their position, the higher the effect of meaningfulness on other outcomes.**
- **Strengths**
  - The study had a large number of respondents across different demographics and racial backgrounds, making the data more applicable to generalize from.
  - The study of the interaction between meaningfulness and PYD is not a particularly well explored area. Whilst the results were often counter to prediction, they are indicative that this is still a fertile area for research.
  - The study applied to a wide range of extracurricular activities, whereas most previous investigations in the area are restricted to a smaller set of activities
- **Limitations**
  - The potentially highly important variable of academic achievement was omitted from the study. As noted in the theories section, a large part of meaning is its relation to the outside world. To a high-school student, it is likely that academic achievement will strongly inform their view of objective meaning. This is most easily characterised as *omitted variable bias*.
  - All measured were self-report, which as noted above may serve better to only capture one aspect of meaningfulness; the subjective. Failing to capture the others may result in an unclear picture of the phenomena. Furthermore, issues may have arisen that are common to all self-report measures, such as a desire to uphold what is seen as socially acceptable, rather than actually experienced.

## Practical Exercise

Interested in trying to find meaning in your life? Here is a quick exercise that can help!

The first step to finding meaning in your life is to determine **which aspects of life are most important to you**. This is an exercise from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) for Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) that is designed to help identify what is meaningful to the patient.

1. Write down the following list on a blank piece of paper

- **Intimate Relationships**
- **Parenting**
- **Family**
- **Friendships/Socializing**
- **Education/Personal Growth**
- **Career**
- **Recreation**
- **Spirituality/Religion**
- **Physical Health**
- **Helping Others**

2. With 5 representing extremely important and 1 representing not at all important, write a number next to each item which corresponds to **how important you feel each item is to you**.

- Remember that there are **no right or wrong answers**, if you are unsure simply put a question mark

and move on.

3. Select the two or three domains that you have rated as being most important to you. Write down a couple of sentences about how you would like to **behave** in each domain (not how you would like to think or feel, but more importantly how you would want to **act**.)

4. The sentences you have written can now help you to find meaning in life – these **behaviours and actions show how you would like to be in areas of your life that you feel are most important to you.**

(Hayes, 2005).

## Closing Remarks

What then, is the take-home message of this wiki? **Meaning presents a difficult case for psychology; traditional methods of measurement seem to miss its essential aspects.** It is multi-dimensional, both subjective and objective, it is neither trait nor state. Commentators in the field have noted that our current methods of measurement constrain our understanding of it. One thing that is certain is that meaning is seeing more attention in positive psychology than it has previously; it is one of the core aspects of our lives. Moreover, having a sense of a **'meaningful life' is assumed to have a positive, preventative psychological effect.** In modern times, we are met with rising rates of depression worldwide. Though it is always difficult to predict trends in literature, it is most likely a safe bet to say that in the next decade we will see a greater deal of research on meaning, and the development of techniques appropriate to its study.

## References

- Adler, A. (1980). What life should mean to you. London: George Allen & Unwin. (Originally published 1932).
- Aslan, R. (2006). *No God But God*. London: Arrow Books
- Baumeister, R. F. (1991). *Meanings of life*. Guilford Press.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Vohs, K. D. (2002). The pursuit of meaningfulness in life. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 608–618). Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Bundick, M.J. (2011). Extracurricular activities, positive youth development, and the role of meaningfulness of engagement. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 6(1), 57-74.
- Emmons, R. A. (2003). Personal goals, life meaning, and virtue: Wellsprings of a positive life. In C. M. Keyes & J. Haidt (Eds.), *Flourishing: Positive psychology and the life well-lived* (pp. 105–128). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association
- Fave, A. D., Brdar, I., Wissing, M. P., & Vella-Brodrick, D. A. (2013). Sources and motives for personal meaning in adulthood. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 8(6), 517-529.
- Frankl, V. (1967). *Psychotherapy and existentialism*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster
- Hayes, S. C., & Smith, S. (2005). *Get out of your mind and into your life: The new acceptance and commitment therapy*. New Harbinger Publications
- Heintzelman, S. J., & King, L. A. (2013). On knowing more than we can tell: Intuitive processes and the

experience of meaning. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 8(6), 471-482.

King, L. A., Hicks, J. A., Krull, J. L., & Del Gaiso, A. K. (2006). Positive affect and the experience of meaning in life. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 90(1), 179

Klinger, E. (1977). *Meaning & void: Inner experience and the incentives in people's lives*. U Minnesota Press.

Leontiev, D. A. (1996). Dimensions of the meaning/sense concept in the psychological context. In C. Tolman, F. Cherry, R. van Hezewijk, & I. Lubek (Eds.), *Problems of theoretical psychology* (pp. 130-142). NY: Captus University Publications.

Leontiev, D. A. (2005). Three facets of meaning. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, 43(6), 45-72

Leontiev, D. A. (2013). Personal meaning: A challenge for psychology. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 8(6), 459-470.

Reker, G. T., & Wong, P. T. (1988). Aging as an individual process: Toward a theory of personal meaning. In J. E. Birren, & V. L. Bengston (Eds.), *Emergent theories of aging* (pp. 214-246). New York, NY: Springer.

Reker, G. T., & Wong, P. T. P. (2012). Personal meaning in life and psychosocial adaptation in the later years. In P. T. P. Wong (Ed). *The human quest for meaning* (2nd ed.). (pp. 433- 456). Routledge.

Roberts, K. J., Lepore, S. J., & Helgeson, V. (2006). Social-cognitive correlates of adjustment to prostate cancer. *Psycho-Oncology*, 15, 183-192

Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57, 1069-1081

Sears, S. R., Stanton, A. L., & Danoff-Burg, S. (2003). The yellow brick road and the emerald city: Benefit finding, positive reappraisal coping and posttraumatic growth in women with early-stage breast cancer. *Health Psychology*, 22, 487-497

Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic Happiness*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

Steger, M. F. (2009). Meaning in life. In S. J. Lopez (Ed.), *Oxford handbook of positive psychology* (2nd Ed.). (pp. 679-687). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Steger, M. F., Mann, J. R., Michels, P., & Cooper, T. C. (2009). Meaning in life, anxiety, depression, and general health among smoking cessation patients. *Journal of psychosomatic research*, 67(4), 353-358.

Steger, M. F. (2012). Experiencing meaning in life: Optimal functioning at the nexus of well-being, psychopathology, and spirituality. *The human quest for meaning: Theories, research, and applications*, 2.

Volz, K. G., & von Cramon, D. Y. (2006). What neuroscience can tell about intuitive processes in the context of perceptual discovery. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 18(12), 2077-2087

Wong, P. T. P. (1998b). Implicit theories of meaningful life and the development of the personal meaning profile. In P. T. P. Wong & Prem S. Fry (Eds). *The Human quest for meaning* (pp. 111-140). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

Yalom, I. D. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy*. Basic Books.