Meaning/Purpose in life and related constructs: A literature review

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INTRODUCTION

Psychology, the science that studies human behaviour and attempts to describe, explain and change behaviour, has for many years, directed its attention to things that can go wrong in the human mind. In other words it followed the pathogenic orientation. The emphasis on mental dysfunction or illness developed such significance that a discrete field of study, “psychopathology” was developed. In simple terms psychopathology is understood as “the study of the illness of the mind” (Basson et al., 2001, p.4).

The focus of this one-sided, however important, field of human functioning has brought about a highly developed knowledge of people’s mental vulnerabilities, deficiencies and ultimate illnesses. The knowledge about what can go wrong in people’s minds is so extensive that volumes of descriptive manuals exist containing every category of mental disturbance, described in its finest details. This indeed is very impressive, however on the flip side of the coin is the fact that the discipline of psychology knows very little about what keeps people mentally well and flourishing (Wissing, 2000).

As a result academics and practitioners realised the need for additional knowledge, research into and practical methods to sustain people’s inner strengths, growth, adaptive resources and overall well-being. This led to the development of the paradigm of positive psychology. According to Strümpfer (2005), this paradigm is fairly ancient. In his recent work, Strümpfer (2005) referred to publications by authors who cited Jung, Terman, J. B Watson, Maslow, Frankl and Assagioli as early examples of positive psychology. He went further to indicate that a large number of other predecessors are also exemplary of the underlying principles of positive psychology. However literature on people’s psychological health and adaptive strengths is very limited. From this perspective the important questions on a theoretical and practical level will be: How is it possible that people survive and some even grow irrespective of the trials and tribulations of life? Where does the biopsyo-social well-being and strengths originate from, and how can they be enhanced? (Strümpfer, 1990, 1995).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the construct of meaning in life and its relationship to four constructs that enhance psychological well-being; namely, sense of coherence, emotional intelligence, hardy personality and self-efficacy.

These constructs, and many others not mentioned in the current discussion, are of fundamental importance for research and practice in positive psychology, due to the focus on
health, strengths, capacities and well-being. Most of these factors are linked to the humanistic perspective, which is very influential in psychology as a discipline.

CONCEPTUALISING THE TERMS MEANING IN LIFE AND PURPOSE IN LIFE

The concepts “meaning in life” and “purpose in life” are core constructs for existential psychology, and have more recently influenced the mainstreams of psychiatry and psychology. In the next section the relationship between these concepts and related concepts are explored. To achieve this, the broader definitions of both concepts will be dealt with before the focus narrows down to specific elements entailed in the definitions.

Purpose in life has been defined by Ryff (1989), as having goals in life and a sense of directedness, a feeling that there is meaning to present and past life, harbouring a belief that gives life purpose, and having aims and objectives for living. Central to the definition of purpose in life is a feeling that life has meaning.

On the other hand, the concept meaning in life has been defined as, “the cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfilment” (Reker & Wong, 1988, p.221). Central to this definition of meaning in life, is seeing purpose in one’s existence. As a result, the concepts meaning in life and purpose in life seems very similar.

In looking at the elements of the above-mentioned definitions, one realises that both concepts have an emotional and a cognitive component. The emotional component alludes to what Shek (1992) named quality of existence, for example feeling that there is meaning to present and past life, sense of fulfilment, coherence; while the cognitive component touches upon the purpose of existence (Shek, 1992), referring to having goals in life, a sense of directedness, harbouring a belief that gives life purpose, cognizance of order, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals.

As a result, the elements entailed in the definition of both constructs seem to suggest that a person who has a sense of purpose in life experiences life as meaningful, and that a person who has a sense of meaning in life experiences life as purposeful. Both definitions emphasise that one has to feel that life is meaningful (quality of existence); besides feelings one should also establish beliefs and goals to bring the feelings to life or actualise them (purpose of existence) (Shek, 1992).

After conceptualising the constructs of meaning in life and purpose in life, in the next discussion the construct of meaning in life is compared to the four constructs that enhance well-being; that is, sense of coherence, emotional intelligence, hardy personality and self-efficacy. Besides these factors, there are others that are still relevant to well-being not included in this chapter.

MEANING IN LIFE AND RELATED CONCEPTS

One of the objectives of this paper is to discuss psychological well-being, with specific
pose certain challenges, however resources (mental and emotional) are readily available to meet the demands (Antonovsky, 1993).

The construct of sense of coherence is divided into three main components, which contain some elements similar to meaning in life. The first component is comprehensibility, which places an emphasis on the cognitive (thinking) component. In similar ways, meaning in life also emphasises the cognitive component by encouraging people to take a stand towards their predicaments and by maintaining positive attitudes (Antonovsky, 1993; Frankl, 1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997).

The second component is manageability, the instrumental (action) component. Similarly meaning philosophy states that life never runs out of choices and that people should learn to make choices. Meaning philosophy also talks about the ability-to-respond (responsibility) to situations.

Lastly, Frankl’s (1967) concept of meaning/purpose in life and Antonovsky’s (1979) concept of sense of coherence (SOC) are similar in the sense that, Antonovsky’s SOC also includes a “Meaningfulness” dimension and was intended to describe a personality construct that “insulates people against the potential harm of stressors of health” (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992, p.134). However, in Frankl’s literature, the meaningfulness dimension of SOC is considered the most important dimension. In a South African study on first-year university students, Hutchinson (2005), reports significant correlations between meaning in life and various aspects of sense of coherence, especially the meaningfulness aspect.

According to Antonovsky (1993) people’s “way of seeing the world” or their internal orientation (point of reference) had much to do with their strengths. He then introduced the construct “sense of coherence”. Similar to Antonovsky, Frankl (1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997) states that the human “will to meaning” is the basic motivation for living, and in the same way the construct “meaning in life”, originates from this. Therefore, both authors believed that, behind each and every individual there is an internal constructive force that gives their lives direction. This force is believed to generate and promote mental and physical vitality.

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Meaning in life and sense of coherence

The first relationship we will explore is between the constructs of meaning in life and sense of coherence. Both constructs emerged out of studying experiences of people who survived traumatic events. With meaning in life, Frankl wrote the theory based on his subjective experiences, and with sense of coherence, Antonovsky wrote his theory from the subjective experiences of people he studied. Irrespective, a number of similarities emerged from the two constructs.

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Antonovsky (1987) maintained that there are four spheres that cannot be excluded if the person is to maintain a strong SOC, namely, his/her own feelings, immediate interpersonal relations, the major sphere of activity (work, really) and existential issues of death, inevitable failures, shortcomings, conflict and isolation. Antonovsky’s (1987) four spheres, and especially the last three, are closely related to what Frankl (1967) terms, the three ways in which meaning and purpose can be found, namely; meaning can be found in what you do (work), what you experience (interpersonal relations), and the attitude one adopts towards unavoidable suffering (pain, guilt and death).

Both theories cover most of the divisions of well-being as outlined in section 2.3.1, that is, divisions of self, cognition, emotion, behaviour, social interaction and value directedness.

The focus now shifts to the relation between meaning in life and emotional intelligence.

Meaning in life and emotional intelligence
The first similarity observed between meaning in life and emotional intelligence is that, both constructs emphasise that at the centre of personal wellness lies self-responsibility, which entails self-control and taking responsibility for one’s own choices, emotions and actions.

Secondly, while emotional intelligence is a trait that can be acquired and developed, sense of meaning is a trait that can also be discovered and strengthened. Both constructs are concerned with how individuals respond to their immediate environment. They are also both concerned with two related facts, that is, the challenge of the situation and how one understands him/herself or what a person thinks and feels in terms of who they are or should be. Lastly, both constructs emphasise the inner and outer realities of a person adjusting to life circumstances. A study by Kanne (2002) demonstrated that emotional intelligence is linked to developing more advanced meaning structures.

However, the two constructs focus on totally different domains of functioning. Sense of meaning places a stronger emphasise on the human spirit or the soul while emotional intelligence focuses more on human emotions and the importance of emotional awareness and self-regard as determinants of well-being.

In the next section focus is on the relationship between hardy personality and meaning in life.

Meaning in life and hardy personality
One of the components of hardiness is commitment, this component is closely related to Frankl’s construct of meaning/purpose in life which also emphasises that meaning can be found through task commitment, such as (a) what you do, (b) what you experience, and (c) the stand you take in a situation of unavoidable tragedy (Frankl, 1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997; Kobasa, 1982; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992).

Similar to Frankl (1988), who recognised that human beings are subjected to a wide variety of limiting conditions and influences (biological, psychological, and socio-cultural), but did not believe that these limiting conditions and influences totally determine an individual’s response to his or her life situation, Kobasa
(1979) also emphasised that individuals can and should take control of their lives.

Lastly, both constructs acknowledge that no human life is free from suffering and that problems or challenges present people with opportunities for growth. What is important is not the challenges people come across, but how people respond to them, and with the right attitudes they are likely to overcome such challenges (Frankl, 1967, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1997; Kobasa, 1979, 1982).

The differences between the two constructs is that, hardy personality seems to focus more on adjusting to stressful situations while the construct of sense of meaning is concerned with finding meaning in everyday life and in every situation, be it in the meaning of the moment and/or in the ultimate meaning.

In the next section focus is on the relationship between self-efficacy and meaning in life.

Meaning in life and self-efficacy

Literature on self-efficacy and meaning in life indicate that individuals who score high on the two constructs mobilise their cognitive and emotional resources effectively in dealing with challenges. At the centre of both self-efficacy and meaning/purpose in life, is the right “attitude”. Positive attitudes cultivate success. Their approach is one of how to deal with demands/situations rather than worrying about what can go wrong. In a study conducted by Dewitz (2005), a positive relationship was found between self-efficacy beliefs and purpose in life.

According to Savolaine and Granello (2002) an individual’s belief system can influence and enhance his or her sense of meaning, while simultaneously an individual’s sense of meaning may guide the person towards adopting certain beliefs. In a study conducted by Skrabski (2005), sense of meaning was positively related to self-efficacy.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it is evident that some degree of similarity exists between meaning in life and each of the four constructs included in this paper. This occurs despite the fact that these constructs emerge from quite different philosophical roots and were developed from research on widely different kinds of samples. The language used in these theories is quite different, however all of them emphasise capabilities, strengths, and potentialities. In addition to the prevention and treatment of illness, their primary concern is with maintenance and enhancement of well-being.

There is no one theory or philosophy that can explain human behaviour with certainty. All theories by themselves are incomplete, and so is the construct of meaning/purpose in life. As a result, the chapter is concluded with a critical evaluation of this construct.

From literature on psychological well-being (for example, sense of coherence, hardy personality, and the like), one realises that, even though a wide variety of concepts are used to explain the different characteristics of well-being; there are many similarities between them. The importance of finding meaning seems to be a critical component in most of these constructs.
The construct of meaning in life offers a holistic view of the entire being in the here and now. It emphasises that, although meaning is subjective, it cannot be found in one place. Meaning can be found everywhere, even in the face of difficulties. It encourages people to transcend their biological, environmental and historical influences. Therefore meaning-philosophy is optimistic and constructive. Thus, it is open to integration with other constructs.

The main goal of the construct of meaning is to help people find meaning or recover meaning in their lives. A meaning centred approach focusing on meaning centred creatures will naturally embrace spiritual matters. In this sense the theory seems to be too religious and not sufficiently scientific or rigorous. We do not deny that the construct of meaning in life is spiritual, however it is not spiritual in a religious context but in a pure human context. Deep inside of themselves, people know what is right and wrong; it does not require a specific religious denomination to teach them that. This is something that resides inside of each an every human being, that is, in their conscience.

One of the criticisms against the construct of meaning in life is that it is too dependent on Frankl and his intuitions. Frankl himself has emphasised that the construct of meaning in life does not belong to him. He encourages other people to build on this construct; and by integrating other constructs in the domain of positive psychology, as it was the case in this chapter, the construct can be expanded.

It is an undisputed fact that one cannot focus on meaning alone, because this will be equivalent to following a narrow path. Individuals should be aware that they are physical, intellectual, spiritual, emotional, social, as well as contextual beings. They are dynamic and thus should be treated that way.
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