THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MEANING, HOPE, AND PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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SUMMARY

Existential psychology is concerned with enhancing psychological well-being through the awareness of Frankl’s concepts on meaning and purpose in life. Positive psychology supports this view and emphasizes that both meaning and hope are essential to mental health. Similarly, successful resolution of Eriksonian psychosocial issues promotes healthy growth and development. This study investigated the relationships between meaning in life, hope, and psychosocial development. Subjects were asked to complete measures of personal meaning, psychosocial development, and two measures of hope. Correlational analyses revealed noteworthy correlations between meaning, level of psychosocial development, and hope. Although comparisons of scores on all four measures generated statistically significant correlations, the Herth Hope Scale consistently produced higher correlations with the two other measures than the scores from the Snyder Hope Scale. These results suggest that the Herth Hope Scale, which contains a spiritual component, may relate better to constructs of meaning and successful psychosocial development, which also reflects a sense of integrity. Given the large number of statistically significant correlations between meaning and psychosocial development, these relationships were also examined at a multivariate level using canonical correlation analysis.

Keywords: meaning, hope, psychosocial development, integrity

The existential concepts of meaning and purpose in life have been scientifically studied in relation to mental and physical health (Ryff & Singer, 1998) and successful aging (Wong...
According to Viktor Frankl (1984), the developer of a system of existential psychotherapy known as “logotherapy”, humans strive to find meaning and purpose in their lives. Frankl maintained that one’s search for meaning is crucial for personal fulfillment and psychological well-being. In addition, Frankl postulated that an “existential vacuum,” or a feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness, is an obstacle to achieving a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Empirical evidence has suggested that the lack of a strong sense of meaning and purpose is associated with psychological problems such as depression, addiction, and aggression (Frankl, 1992; Mascaro & Rosen, 2005). Therefore, through logotherapy, patients are guided towards finding inherent meaning in their own lives, with the goal of eliminating the existential vacuum.

The Personal Meaning Profile (PMP; Wong, 1993) yields scores reflecting the strength of an individual’s general sense of meaning and purpose in life as well as subscale scores for meaning in seven specific life domains (achievement, relationship, religion, self-transcendence, self-acceptance, intimacy, and perceived justice). Wong (1993) divided this measure of meaning into seven dimensions because of the tendency for individuals to ascribe varying amounts of meaning to different areas of life. In other words, a person may attribute their sense of meaning and purpose in life to just one or any number of the dimensions. Therefore, when studying meaning, it is useful to study the construct at the level of specific life domains, in addition to the higher-order level of overall meaning. Related to meaning, five of the PMPs seven subscales were negatively correlated with the Beck Depression Inventory (r’s ranging from -.37 to -.64), and all seven were related to a measure of perceived psychological well-being, (r’s ranging from .22 to .44; Wong, 1998). The Life Regard Index (LRI) is another instrument which assesses perceived purpose or meaning in life, and it too evinces a role for meaning in the enhancement of mental health. It has been shown to predict psychotherapy outcome (Debats, 1998) and to correlate in expected directions with measures of anxiety, depression, and elation (Debats, 1990; Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Wong, 1998), as well as with life satisfaction, psychological distress, psychological well-being, negative affect, and positive affect (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Related to development in later life, Reker (1997) found that for community elderly, optimism, personal meaning, and responsibleness predicted self-reported symptoms of depression, even after controlling for social resources and physical health. Responsibleness had the largest unique relationship. However, in institutional settings, the variables predicted depression even better, with personal meaning this time being the best unique predictor. Such results lend empirical support to Frankl’s (1984) proposition that personal meaning becomes increasingly important as an individual’s options for power or pleasure seeking are limited (e.g., in situations like nursing homes or when physical health is declining).

Within the recently explicated field of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), meaning and hope are well-studied variables with extensive data supporting their positive relationships with mental health. Hope has also been linked to a variety of mental health variables (see Arnau, 2002;
Herth, 1991; Snyder et al., 1996; Whisman & Kwon, 1993). For example, level of hope has been found to be negatively related to maladaptive coping styles (Jackson, Taylor, Palmatier, Elliott, & Elliot, 1998), general maladjustment (Cramer, & Dyrkacz, 1998), and suicidal ideation (Range & Penton, 1994). Hope has also been linked to grades in college students and athletic performance in athletes (Curry, Snyder, Cook, Ruby, & Rehm, 1998). In a three-month longitudinal study, it was found that baseline levels of hope were related to decreases in both anxiety and depression one and two months later (Arnau, Rosen, Finch, Rhudy, & Fortunato, 2007). Further, hope is emerging as one of the predominant variables the lack of which mediates symptoms of depression. Vatz, Winig, and Beck (1969, as cited in Beck et al., 1974) found that depressed clients had higher than normal scores on Beck's hopelessness scale, and these scores decreased as clients recovered from depression. Similarly, Beck et al. (1974) found that level of hopelessness was related to BDI scores ($r = .49$) in clinically depressed patients and was significantly decreased upon patient discharge. More recently, Whisman and Kwon (1993) found that hopelessness as measured by Beck's hopelessness scale was predictive of change in dysphoria over a three-month time period. Further, hopelessness mediated the effects of self-esteem and life stress on dysphoria.

Everyday events and life experiences that potentially contribute to the realization of meaning also influence psychological and social development. Erikson (1982) maintained that within the span of a lifetime, individuals progress through a series of eight developmental stages, each characterized by a unique psychological issue. The extent of resolution (or unresolution) of each stage shapes the characteristics of individual personality and also influences the extent of resolution (or unresolution) of subsequent stages. Depending on the degree of successful (or unsuccessful) resolution, an individual develops either favorable or unfavorable personality traits. According to Erikson, the personality attributes resulting from successful resolution of each of the stages are, respectively, trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy, generativity, and integrity, which are related to the following virtues: hope (faith), will power, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care, and wisdom. These stages and their associated personality and virtue outcomes are summarized in Table 1. Conversely, the unfavorable attributes resulting from unsuccessful resolution are mistrust, shame and doubt, guilt, inferiority, identity confusion, isolation, stagnation, and despair. An individual is not likely to exclusively attain the positive or negative attributes. Instead, positive and negative resolution achieved at each stage is actually a matter of degree.

Brammer (1984) noted that developmental counseling with older adults is often shaped by Erikson's eighth and final stage of psychosocial development, integrity versus despair. Brammer argued that positive resolution of this stage towards integrity gives meaning to all the other stages and, ultimately, meaning to life. On the other hand, negative resolution of this last stage leads to meaninglessness, emptiness, and despair.

Frankl maintained that a high degree of hope is conducive to the awareness of purpose. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl
(1984) wrote about his painful, yet meaningful, experiences in a concentration camp and outlined the development of logotherapy. Frankl conveyed the importance of hope when he expressed his opinion about his fellow inmates. He wrote, “They must not lose hope but should keep their courage in the certainty that the hopelessness of our struggle did not detract from its dignity and its meaning” (Frankl, 1984, p. 104). Interestingly, Erikson (1982) proposed that the development of hope occurs through successful resolution in the first stage of trust versus mistrust and it provides a good foundation for a positive outcome of other stages.

Although theory suggests conceptual association between purpose in life and psychosocial development, no empirical studies, to date, have examined this issue. In the present study, the relationship between purpose and meaning, Eriksonian psychosocial development, and hopefulness were examined. It was predicted that a sense of purpose and meaning in life would be associated with degree of successful resolution of Erikson’s eight stages of development. It was also hypothesized that meaning and positive psychosocial development would be related to higher levels of trait hope. This hypothesis was examined by way of predicted zero-order correlations, as well as through an exploratory analysis at the multivariate level, using canonical correlation analysis.

To operationalize hope, two different measures were used, which were developed from two different theoretical perspectives of hope. One measure, the Snyder Hope Scale (SHS; Snyder et al., 1991), is based on a cognitive theory of hope and measures an individual’s positive goal-oriented thinking. By contrast, the Herth Hope Scale (HHS) was designed to tap into several different dimensions of hope, including goal-oriented cognition, but also non-goal oriented optimism and perceived social and spiritual support (Farran, Herth, & Popovich, 1995). Given the different theoretical conceptions upon which these two measures were developed, it was decided to test the current hypotheses using both of these operationalizations of hope. Given the additional social and spiritual support components tapped by the HHS, it was hypothesized that scores from the HHS may be more highly related to external variables such as meaning and psychosocial development than scores from the SHS. Therefore, another objective of the present study was to directly compare the magnitude of correlations of the SHS with external variables to those of the HHS.

METHOD

Participants

The participants included 301 (144 male, 157 female) undergraduates who participated in partial fulfillment of course requirements for an introductory psychology course. They ranged in age from 17 to 42 years (M = 19.07, SD = 1.68).

Materials

Personal Meaning Profile. Scores on the Personal Meaning Profile (PMP; Wong, 1988) reflected the participants’ responses on a 7-point Likert scale to 57 test items. The PMP is divided into seven subscales, which reflect each of the following seven potential
sources of personal meaning: achievement, relationship, religion, self-transcendence, self-acceptance, intimacy, and perceived justice. The subscales were empirically identified via exploratory factor analysis (see Wong, 1988). Initial evidence for the validity of scores from the PMP include noteworthy correlations with a measure of psychological well-being and negative correlations with the Beck Depression Inventory (Wong, 1988). In addition, Mascaro and Rosen (2005) found PMP scores to be negatively correlated with depression and positively correlated with hope. For the present study, the internal consistency reliability of the PMP subscale scores ranged from .61 to .92, with a coefficient alpha of .95 for the total score.

**Measures of Psychosocial Development.** The Measures of Psychosocial development (MPD; Hawley, 1988) is a 112-item self-report questionnaire, with a 5-point Likert scale response format. The measure yields scores which reflect degree of positive resolution and degree of negative resolution of each of Erikson’s eight psychosocial stages, as well as overall level of development. Good temporal stability of MPD scores has been demonstrated, with test-retest correlations over a period of 2 to 13 weeks ranging from .67 to .91 for both the positive resolution and negative resolution scores (Hawley, 1988). In addition, Hawley (1988) reported the results of a multitrait-multimethod analysis of MPD scores, which provided strong evidence for the convergent and discriminant validity of scores from the MPD. For the present study, internal consistencies of scores from the positive stage resolution subscale scores ranged from .66 to .81.

**Herth Hope Scale.** The Herth Hope Scale (HHS; Herth, 1991) is a 30-item self-report instrument designed to measure hope. Each item is rated on a four-point Likert scale indicating how often each statement applies to the respondent (1 = Never applies to me, 4 = Often applies to me). The measure was designed to tap into the following theoretically-derived dimensions of hope: (a) cognitive-temporal (i.e., perceptions that a desired outcome is realistically probable), (b) affective-behavioral (i.e., confidence in the initiation of plans to attain desired outcomes), and (c) affiliative-contextual (i.e., perception of spiritual and social support) (Farran, Herth, & Popovich, 1995, p. 62).

For the initial development of the measure, it was administered to 185 general adults (Herth, 1988, as cited in Herth, 1992), 180 cancer patients (Herth, 1989), 40 elderly adults (Herth, 1988, as cited in Herth, 1992), and 75 widows and widowers (Herth, 1990). In these studies, the reliability of HHS scores ranged from satisfactory to excellent, with coefficient alpha between .75 and .94, and temporal stability coefficients between .89 and .91 across three-week intervals. Herth (1991) documented convergent validity of HHS scores with a correlation of -.69 with the Beck Hopelessness Scale. Evidence for the factorial validity was provided by an exploratory factor analysis that yielded factors corresponding to the three dimensions described previously (Herth, 1991). In addition, Arnau and Rosen (2005) demonstrated strong evidence for the construct validity of HHS scores through univariate and multivariate correlations with anxiety, depression, coping styles, and personality. In the present study, the internal consistency of scores from
the HHS was excellent, with a coefficient alpha of .89.

**Snyder Hope Scale.** The Snyder Hope Scale (SHS; Snyder et al., 1991) was designed to tap into two cognitive components of hope, Agency and Pathways (Snyder, 1994). Agency is considered the driving force of hope and refers to an individual’s sense of having important goals as well as confidence in their ability to initiate and sustain action towards those goals. Pathways refers to an individual’s perceived ability to find one or more effective ways to reach his or her goals, as well as the perceived ability to formulate alternative plans when obstacles get in the way of goal attainment. A number of studies have documented the reliability and construct validity of SHS scores through factor analysis and relationships with other constructs such as psychopathology, hopelessness, and coping strategies (see Snyder, 2000; Snyder et al., 1991). In the present study, scores from the SHS had good reliability, with a coefficient alpha of .76.

**Procedure**

Participants were tested in groups of sixty. After giving written informed consent, they completed a packet of questionnaires, containing the PMP, MPD, HHS, and the SHS. Students read standard instructions printed at the beginning of the test packet. The task took about one hour to complete.

**RESULTS**

**Zero-Order Correlations**

The overall meaning scores from the PMP were strongly correlated with the overall psychosocial development scores on the MPD (\( r = .71, p < .001 \)). Table 2 presents the correlations between overall meaning scores from the PMP and stage-specific positive resolution scores from the MPD. As seen in Table 2, there were noteworthy and statistically significant relationships between positive resolution scores for each of the Eriksonian stages and overall PMP meaning scores, with correlations ranging from .33 to .66. These results support the hypothesis that meaning is related to psychosocial development. These results also lend some support to Erikson’s claim that successful resolution of stage 3 (initiative) is associated with the basic virtue of purpose. However, the four highest correlations were actually between meaning and the positive resolution of stages 7 (generativity), 8 (integrity), 1 (trust), and 5 (identity), which are associated with these respective virtues: care, wisdom, and hope, and fidelity. Table 3 depicts the correlations between hope scores (from both the SHS and HHS) and overall and predicted subscale scores from the MPD and PMP. Once again, all correlations were statistically significant and were noteworthy in size, with magnitudes ranging from small to large. Results from both hope scales support the hypothesis that meaning and successful psychosocial development are positively related to hope. However, as seen in Table 3, the relationships between hope scores from the HHS and meaning and Eriksonian development were consistently larger than the relationships with hope measured by the SHS.

**Statistical Differences Between Hope Scales**

Given the differences in relationships be-
between the two hope scales and external variables, statistical tests of the differences in the obtained correlation magnitudes were performed. These t-tests are presented in Table 4. As seen in Table 3, the HHS demonstrated significantly higher correlations with external criteria than did the SHS. These results indicate that the HHS scores are more related to meaning and psychosocial development than SHS scores.

Canonical Correlation Analysis

Given the number of statistically significant zero-order correlations between meaning and Eriksonian development, it was deemed appropriate to examine these relationships at a multivariate level, using canonical correlation analysis (Thompson, 1984, 2000). The PMP subscale scores were entered as one variable set, and the positive resolutions scores from the MPD were entered as the second variable set.

Result interpretation was guided by the amount of variance accounted for by each of the canonical functions, as well as by the magnitude of the function and structure coefficients for each equation. Only canonical functions explaining at least 10% of the variance were deemed worthy of interpretation. Function and structure coefficient magnitudes of an absolute value of at least .40 were interpreted as salient, given the recommendation of Stevens (1996) for interpreting structure coefficients from principal components analysis. Steven’s recommendation is also relevant for a canonical analysis, given that canonical function and structure coefficients are ultimately derived from a principal components analysis (Thompson, 1984).

The results of the canonical correlation analysis of meaning and Eriksonian development are presented in Table 4, along with various interpretive aids. Before discussing the results, the interpretive aids presented in the table will be discussed briefly. First, note that in the middle of the table, the squared canonical correlations (Rc2) for each function is presented, which represents the percentage of variance in one variable set that is accounted for in the second variable set. For each measured variable, the standardized function and structure coefficients are presented, where the function coefficient is analogous to the standardized Beta weight in a regression equation, and the structure coefficient is the correlation of the measured variable with the canonical variate score. The squared structure coefficient (rs2) represents the percentage of variance in the measured variable that is captured by the canonical function.

Two other summary statistics are also presented. The adequacy statistic is, mathematically, simply the average of the squared structure coefficients, which conceptually represents how well a given function, on average, reproduces the variance of a given set of measured variables (Thompson, 2000). The communalities (h2) are found at the far right of the table. The communality represents the percentage of variance in a measured variable that is captured by all of the retained canonical functions, as a whole. Mathematically, it is the sum of the squared structure coefficients of a given measured variable across all of the retained canonical functions.

For the present analysis, based on the percentage of variance accounted for by the functions, the first three functions were deemed
In the first canonical function, Eriksonian resolution scores accounted for 61.62% of the variance in the PMP subscale scores. Based on the salient function and structure coefficients, all of the Eriksonian stage resolutions scores, except autonomy, were important in defining this function, but the most important being the generativity and integrity resolution scores. Likewise, all of the meaning subscales were also important in this function, with the most highly related being self-transcendence and achievement. Essentially, this function indicated that a combination of higher resolution of all of the Eriksonian stages (except autonomy) was strongly related to a combination of a high sense of meaning in all of the meaning domains tapped by the PMP.

In the second function, Eriksonian stage resolution scores accounted for 44.22% of the variance in the PMP subscale scores. Rather than all the variables loading positively (which occurred in the first function), the second function highlighted differences between variables, with both positive and negative loadings. The important Eriksonian stage resolution scores in this function were intimacy and trust, in a positive direction, and initiative and industry in a negative direction. The important meaning subscales were intimacy and relational, in a positive direction, and achievement in a negative direction. Therefore, this function indicated that a combination of higher resolution of intimacy and trust stages, but relatively lower positive resolution of the initiative and industry stages, was associated with a higher sense of meaning in the intimacy and relational domains, but a lower sense of meaning in the achievement domain.

In the third function, Eriksonian stage resolution scores accounted for 25.40% of the variance in the meaning subscale scores. The important Eriksonian stages in this function were all of the first four stages as well as the intimacy stage, in a positive direction, and generativity and identity in a negative direction. The important meaning domain scores were achievement and intimacy in a positive direction, and self-transcendence in a negative direction. Therefore, this function indicates that higher resolution of the Eriksonian stages of trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, and intimacy, in combination with relatively lower resolution of the identity and generativity stages is associated with a lower sense of meaning in the domain of self-transcendence, but a higher sense of meaning in the achievement and intimacy domains.

**DISCUSSION**

The primary aim of this study was to assess the relationship between the following psychological constructs: meaning and purpose in life, psychosocial development, and hope. Although these constructs theoretically and intuitively appear to be related, to our knowledge, this is the first empirical study analyzing these relationships.

**Overall Psychosocial Development and Meaning and Purpose in Life**

The present study demonstrated that there are moderate to large correlations between positive resolution of Erikson’s eight stages and one’s perception of meaning and purpose in their lives. In other words, the greater someone’s positive resolution of the stages of development, the more strongly they perceived their own life to have meaning and purpose.
Hope.
Scores from two trait hope scales, the SHS and HHS, were found to be related to Eriksonian development and a sense of meaning and purpose, indicating that level of hope has a positive relationship with positive psychosocial development and a strong sense that life is meaningful. Although these relationships were found with both the HHS and the SHS and measures of hope, there were some differences across the two measures. As hypothesized, the HHS scores yielded higher correlations with selected MPD and PMP scores than did the SHS scores. Typically, thoughts of meaning and purpose in life stimulate contemplations about existential and religious issues. Therefore, the higher correlations yielded by the HHS may be due, in part, to the spiritual nature of some HHS items.

Differences between the relationships of the HHS and SHS with external criteria have also been found in previous research. For example, Arnau, Rosen, and Green (2006) found that the HHS was superior to the SHS in predicting certain types of adaptive coping styles, such as emotion focused and social-support focused coping. However, Arnau they also found that the SHS was superior to the HHS in predicting a problem-focused coping style. Therefore, further research comparing the performance of the HHS and SHS as measures of hope is warranted, especially in reference to other constructs, such as self-esteem, persistence in goal-directed motivation, or recovery from depression. Such research would also provide evidence addressing the question of whether perceived spiritual and social support should be considered core features of the construct of hope.

A strong relationship between psychosocial development and meaning was also demonstrated through multivariate analyses. In general, a high sense of meaning in all of the meaning domains of the PMP was strongly related to higher resolution of all but one (i.e., autonomy) of the Eriksonian stages. However, the multivariate analyses also revealed some other interesting patterns of relationships among the meaning domains and Eriksonian stages. For example, when one is more positively resolved in the intimacy and trust stages, but lack resolution of the initiative and industry stages, this combination is related to a profile of a stronger perception of meaning in the intimacy and relational domains, but a lower perception of meaning in the achievement domain. Another interesting combination that emerged was the situation where there is higher positive resolution of the Eriksonian stages of trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, and intimacy, but a lack of resolution of the identity and generativity stages. A combination such as this one is associated with a higher sense of meaning in the achievement and intimacy domains, but less meaning in the domain of self-transcendence. These findings are consistent with Frankl’s (2000) notion that a person is initially characterized by their search for meaning which surpasses a person's search for himself/herself. Therefore, in seeking meaning beyond oneself through self-transcendence, perceived meaning in personal achievement would lessen.

Overall, the univariate and multivariate analyses presented in the present study also demonstrate that a strong relationship exists between the constructs of Eriksonian psychosocial development and meaning in life.
Future Research

Results of the present study suggest several possibilities for further research. One limitation of the current study was that the sample was only comprised of college students. Therefore, it would be interesting to conduct a similar study with other populations, such as with middle-aged and older adults. Considering that psychosocial development does not stop at young adulthood, the results of future research could reveal even more noteworthy results regarding the relationships between psychosocial development, meaning, and hope in mature adults and the elderly. Also, cross-cultural research would be valuable in order to see if these findings are consistent in other societies. In addition, it would be worthwhile also to study these relationships in samples with lower socioeconomic status or even in poorer populations such as third-world or underdeveloped areas.

Finally, although the present study indicated strong relationships between meaning, hope, and psychosocial development, longitudinal research will be important for determining causal influences. For example, longitudinal research could address the question of whether positive psychosocial development influences the later development of perceived meaning in life. In addition, it may be the case that stronger hope emerges out of positive psychosocial development, or it may be that hope is either necessary or facilitates further psychosocial development. The results of such longitudinal research will potentially have important clinical implications, as further information will be known about factors that facilitate (or inhibit) a sense of hope, meaning in life, and psychosocial development, all of which are related to a greater sense of well-being and satisfaction with life. The present study has set the stage for testing some of these causal hypotheses.

REFERENCES


