IS SEARCHING FOR MEANING IN LIFE ASSOCIATED WITH REDUCED SUBJECTIVE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING?

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ABSTRACT

Over the past forty years research has attempted to understand and define the concept of meaning in life. A variety of definitions of meaning in life have been proposed but all theories agree that meaning in life is an important factor which contributes to well-being. Studies have endeavoured to identify what gives meaning to life, to whether having meaning in life brings positive returns and to what life is like without meaning. Factors such as being in a stable relationship, having experienced a loss or being involved in a religion, have been suggested as possible influences on how individuals experience meaning in life and why they may search for meaning. Theory has speculated that if an individual is searching for meaning in life, that they may be distressed. Not having meaning in life has been shown to impact negatively on well-being, but what is happening for an individual who is searching is unclear. This study investigated the hypothesized two-dimensional typology of the presence and searching subscales in the Meaning in Life Questionnaire and examined the relationship between presence of, and search for meaning in life and subjective and psychological well-being. Utilizing a survey design, 106 participants completed the Meaning in Life Questionnaire and the Depression Happiness Scale. Pearson’s correlation and a bivariate scatterplot support the independence of the two-dimensional typology. Statistical analysis revealed significant main effects for presence of, and search for, meaning in life on depression/happiness scores as well as for the interaction between presence, search and depression/happiness levels. Participants who reported high levels of search for meaning and low levels of presence of meaning in life recorded clinical levels of depression. Surprisingly, participants who reported high levels of presence of, and search for meaning in life also recorded high subjective well-being. Only when presence of meaning in life is low does searching appear to impact on recorded levels of well-being. Possible theoretical frameworks which may explain these results and suggestions for future research are discussed.

“Man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a ‘secondary rationalization’ of instinctual drives” (Frankl, 1959/2006, p. 99).

Over the past forty years research has attempted to understand and define the concept of meaning in life. A variety of definitions of meaning in life have been proposed but all theories agree that meaning in life
is an important factor which contributes to well-being. Studies have endeavoured to identify what gives meaning to life. Ryff and Singer (1998) purport that meaning in life comes from goal directedness or purposefulness, whilst Battista and Almond (1973) contend that meaning in life grows from having a sense of coherence in life and Kenyon (2000) equates meaning in life with living authentically.

Positive benefits of having meaning in life have been reported by Zika and Chamberlain (1987, 1992), Garcia Pintos (1988), Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema and Larson (1998) and DeBats, Drost and Hansen (1995). Lack of meaning in life has been shown to impact negatively on well-being (Newcomb and Harlow, 1986; Harlow, Newcomb and Bentler, 1986; Nicholson, Higgins, Turner, Stickle and Pruitt, 1994). Other factors such as being in a stable relationship (Khaleque, 2004), having experienced a loss (Gillies and Neimeyer, 2006) or being involved in a religion (Wong, 1998; Koenig and Larson, 2001), have been suggested as possible influences on how individuals experience meaning in life and why they may search for meaning. Theory has speculated that if an individual is searching for meaning in life, that they may be distressed (Frankl, 1959/2006; Maddi, 1970; Yalom, 1980; Steger, Frazier, Oishi and Kaler, 2006) but little attention has been directed to understanding what occurs when an individual searches for meaning in life. This study investigated the hypothesized two-dimensional typology of the presence and searching subscales in the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al, 2006) and examined the relationship between presence of, and search for meaning in life and subjective and psychological well-being. Utilizing a survey design, 106 participants completed the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, the Depression Happiness Scale and General Background Questions.

**Method**

As this study was exploring meaning in life, attempts were made to collect a sample of Australian residents across a wide age range. To gain access to such a sample, and to also utilize the internet for the data collection, Research Now, www.researchnow.com, an international research company was approached to upload the surveys, send them out to their panel members and to collect the data. This company utilizes the “Valued Opinions” family of on-line panels across Australia and Europe which comprises over 900,000 members.

**Subjects**

A total of 106 participants volunteered to take part in the study, with the minimum age for completion being set at 18 years of age. The sample was obtained across Australia and consisted of 43 females and 63 males. The most frequent age category for the sample was ‘60+’ with 27.4% of the respondents falling into this category, followed by ‘up to 29’ with 23.6% of respondents, then ‘30-39’ with 17.9% of respondents, then ‘40-49’ with 16% of respondents and ‘50-59’ with 15.1% of respondents.

**Measures**

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire

Steger et al (2006) developed a new measure, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) which contained two subscales: presence of, and search for, meaning in life, allowing
researchers to be able to measure these two constructs independently. The final form of the questionnaire consisted of 10 questions. Respondents are asked to think about what makes their life feel important to them and rate each question utilizing a seven point scale.

The Depression Happiness Scale (DHS)
The Depression Happiness Scale (DHS) was developed by McGreal & Joseph (1993) to measure a continuum of depression-happiness (Robak & Griffin, 2000). The DHS consists of twenty five items and is a self report measure containing thirteen items addressing negative affect and twelve items which focus on positive affect. Items concerning negative thoughts, feelings and bodily experiences are reverse-scored so that respondents can score between 0 and 75, with higher scores indicating greater frequency of positive thoughts and feelings and lower frequency of negative thoughts and feelings (Joseph & Lewis, 1998). Lewis, Joseph & Shelvin (1999) suggest that a score of 42 on the DHS suggests mild, but clinically relevant depression.

General Background Information
Demographic information including age, gender and education levels were obtained. General background information on the involvement in a religion, the experience of a significant loss and whether the respondent was currently in a stable relationship were also obtained.

Results
Pearson’s correlation (r = -.19, n = 106, p = .054) and a bivariate scatterplot support the independence of the two-dimensional typology. Statistical analysis revealed significant main effects for presence of (p.000), and search for (p.002), meaning in life on depression/happiness scores as well as for the interaction between presence, search and depression/happiness levels (p.006). No significant results were found for any of the demographic variables.

Discussion
Participants who reported high levels of search for meaning and low levels of presence of meaning in life, recorded clinical levels of depression. As searching declined, presence of meaning in life and happiness scores rose. Surprisingly, participants who reported high levels of presence of, and search for meaning in life also recorded high subjective well-being. Only when presence of meaning in life is low does searching appear to negatively impact on recorded levels of well-being.

A major limitation of this study was the reliance on self report measures and the use of correlational analyses. Understanding what is driving an individual’s search for meaning may not be able to be identified by a series of questions with a rating scale. The use of open ended questions and interviews may enable researchers to gain a clearer understanding of the process involved with searching for meaning in life.

A further limitation of this study was the lack of cultural comparisons. It is possible that the concept of meaning in life may hold different levels of importance within a diverse range of cultures and that the definition and understanding of this concept may vary across societies (Constantine & Sue, 2006; Steger, Kawabata, Shimai, and Otake, 2007).
REFERENCES


