The Commonplace Experience of Meaning in Life

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Abstract

Popular and scholarly treatments of meaning in life often focus on this aspect of experience when it is missing, searched for, or in need of creation. In this article, I propose that if, as many believe, meaning in life is essential for human adaptation, it must be commonplace, just as other necessities are commonplace. I assert that, at least in terms of its cognitive component, meaning in life is, in fact, the default of human existence: Like oxygen, our bodies are wired to procure it from an environment that is filled with it. I review research that shows the sensitivity of meaning in life ratings to manipulations of variables that are themselves potentially trivial (such as positive mood) or quite common (the presence of pattern and coherence in stimuli). I review, as well, evidence for the notion that meaning in life levels, as endorsed by participants in a range of studies, is not horrifically low, but rather moderately high. I close by considering the implications of this approach for the apparently insatiable human need for meaning in life.

The Commonplace Experience of Meaning in Life

“The human needs a framework of values, a philosophy of life...in about the same sense that he needs sunlight, calcium, and love” (Maslow, 1968, p. 206).

Any walk down the self-help aisle of a bookstore (or quick search on Amazon.com) will give the strong impression that a meaningful life is commonly viewed as something that is longed for and sought after, an ineffable mystery. Even the verbs we use to talk about meaning in life (in science and in life) suggest that it is a rarity, that it is difficult to come by, devastating in its absence, and often the product of great human effort. It is telling that Frankl’s landmark volume was entitled Man’s Search for Meaning. Since the beginning of scientific interest in the experience of meaning, it has been something that we search for. More recently, the Meaning Maintenance Model (MMM), (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006), has defined meaning as “the expected relationships or associations that human beings construct and impose on their worlds” (p. 90, emphasis added). Within the MMM, as well as in research on narrative constructions of life experiences (e.g., King, Scollon, Ramsey, &Williams, 2000) and studies of coping with traumatic life events (Park, 2010), humans are often dubbed “natural meaning makers,” emphasizing the ways that meaning comes from human effort. Similarly, in everyday life, we often speak of “making sense” of experience or struggling to “find meaning” in life and life events.

Yet, consider that many scholars agree that the experience of meaning in life is adaptive—that is, it is proposed to play a role in survival. Clearly, nothing that human beings require to survive can be an abject rarity, chronically missing from our existence, or we would all be dead: Homo sapiens would have been rendered extinct long, long ago, brought down by our unfortunate need for meaning. If meaning in life is vital to survival, “in about the same sense” as the necessities described by Maslow, then it must be something that can be obtained without buying a self-help book, attending a workshop, or hiring a particularly effective life coach.

If we wish to take seriously the notion that the experience of meaning in life plays a role in adaptation, and if it has a role to play in survival, meaning in life must be taken off its pedestal in the pantheon of the Goods of Life, and rendered, instead as commonplace as all of the other things we need to survive, such as air, water, food, and each other or, in Maslow’s words, “sunlight, calcium, and love.” If meaning in life is as essential to our existence as these various nutriments, then it must be as common as they are. Anything that is adaptive (i.e., not just nice to have but essential to survival) must be commonplace, and so it must be for meaning in life (Halusic & King, in press). The challenge would seem to be to come up with a way to think about meaning in life not so much as a hotly sought after but little found commodity, but rather an inherent aspect of life, like water or air.

The language we use to talk about meaning often involves searching, seeking, struggling, and creating. Certainly, these verbs reveal that meaning is a vital human motivation. The loss of meaning is felt keenly, perhaps nearly as keenly as the loss of oxygen or water. The ways we talk about meaning suggest that it is certainly important to us, but also that it is something we create. The implication is clear: Meaning comes (perhaps only) from human beings and their effortful activity. In this sense, then, the experience of meaning in life is a true and at times extraordinary human accomplishment.
Under normal circumstances, we do not talk about water or air (or calcium or sunlight) in this way. Unless we have just been rescued from near drowning, we do not think of our capacity to breathe as an accomplishment or even a very big deal. In everyday life, getting oxygen from the air is something we do without thought or effort. Generally, we go about our lives without thinking very much about getting oxygen. In many ways, under normal circumstances, breathing is experienced as simply happening. If our attention is drawn to breathing, we might notice that it is happening. We might occasionally open a window in a noticeably stuffy room but, generally, when it comes to this thing that is vital to our survival, our bodies are wired to procure it from an environment that is filled with it. What if meaning were in some real ways like oxygen? What if, similarly, our bodies were wired to procure it from an environment filled with it? This “what if” is precisely what I think represents an unspoken and largely unnoticed aspect of meaning in life. This very possibility is my focus in this article. If meaning in life is even a little like oxygen, we ought to be able to use different verbs to talk about it. Interestingly, Frankl (1963/1984) himself used a potentially unexpected verb in describing meaning in life, “The meaning of our existence is not invented by ourselves, but rather detected” (p. 101, emphasis added). Can we hold with conviction some faith in Frankl’s words? Can we come to understand the experience of meaning in life not simply as a human invention, not only as something that is searched for but something that is found? To begin thinking about meaning in life in this way, let’s consider an apt analogy for the scientist interested in understanding meaning in life, Isaac Newton’s discovery of gravity.

Meaning in Life and Gravity

In 2010 to commemorate their 350th anniversary, the Royal Society released digital versions of a number of documents online providing public access, for the first time to a veritable treasure trove of the history of science. Among the documents was a biography of Sir Isaac Newton, by William Stukeley (1752). In it, Stukeley described Newton’s experience of the discovery of the law of gravitation (as conveyed to Stukeley by Newton himself), “Why should that apple always descend perpendicularly to the ground, thought he to himself.” These thoughts, wrote Stukeley, “were occasion’d by the fall of an apple as he sat in a contemplative mood.”

Like typical seekers of meaning (e.g., Park, 2010), Newton asked “Why?” Importantly, though Newton’s experience demonstrates that at least sometimes, the answer to this question can be found outside of the confines of the human skull in the lawfulness of the natural world. Newton did not search for, struggle over, or construct gravity. Newton did not invent gravity, he detected it. Put simply, he noticed it.

Consider that, at least on Earth, gravity is the default. Here on Earth, objects have been falling down since the beginning of time. It is difficult to notice those things that are always around; these are the things we take for granted. And so it is not surprising that it took a genius of Newton’s caliber to draw attention to what everyone had always seen but not particularly noticed. Undoubtedly, all of humanity had witnessed objects falling down but it was Newton who attended to the phenomenon, gave it a name, and documented its lawfulness.

What are the lessons of Newton’s experience for the science of meaning in life? I believe that gravity presents an excellent heuristic for understanding the human experience of meaning in life. Although it may not be quite as commonplace as gravity, I argue that the presence of meaning in life is, like gravity, the default. When meaning is absent, that absence is surely noticed. But those vivid times when we do search for or struggle to create meaning ought to be recognized as exceptions to the rules of life (e.g., King & Hicks, 2009). These are exceptional times and certainly scientists can learn from such exceptions. But to understand meaning in life as an adaptive experience we must confront a comforting truth: Very often, life makes sense (King, 2012). Perhaps, to learn about the experience of meaning in life when it is present, we must like Newton, attend to the commonplace, to what perhaps, we all know, see, and experience, but have not particularly noticed. Drawing on the lessons of Newton, we might come to recognize meaning in life as part of our relationship with the natural world, embedded in commonplace processes, not so much as a rare achievement but part and parcel of everyday life. I suggest that the answer to the problem of meaning in life may be partially found in the recognition that this important experience is not always or inherently a problem to be solved. At least sometimes, the answer to the question “Why?” that is, the answer to the question of meaning may be found not in intense introspection but in the world outside of our heads and in our adaptive relationship with it.

What kind of evidence exists for these ideas? To answer this question, I first briefly turn to a discussion of the definition of meaning in life. With definitional issues relatively settled, I then review evidence that meaning in life can be the product of commonplace processes and as such can play an important adaptive functioning. Second, I consider one implication of the connection between relatively mundane processes and meaning in life, namely that meaning in life is not
as rare an experience as we might assume. Finally, I close with some consideration of various additional issues as well as
the potentially insatiable quality of the human longing for meaning in life.

The Meaning of Meaning in Life

Conceptually defining meaning in life has long been a dilemma. A variety of definitions have been proffered by
many outstanding scholars (see Heintzelman & King, in press, for a review). Generally speaking, these definitions of
meaning in life share some common features. These features include a cognitive component, the notion that meaning is
about connections or coherence, about the presence “sense” in experience; and motivational components, that meaning is
about a sense of purpose, goals, and aims, and that meaning concerns a sense of personal significance or mattering. These
features are well represented in the definition below, eloquently proposed by Steger:

Meaning is the web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our
experience and formulate plans directing our energies to the achievement of our desired future. Meaning
provides us with the sense that our lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are more than the sum
of our seconds, days, and years. (Steger, 2012, p. 165)

Perhaps this definition falls short of some of the more mysterious aspects of the experience of meaning in life, but
at least it provides a workable conceptualization of the construct.

Importantly, although there is no consensually agreed upon conceptual definition of meaning in life, there is greater
agreement on its operational definition. Essentially, if one wants to measure meaning in life, the literature is replete with
questionnaires asking folks to rate the meaningfulness of their lives (McDonald, Wong, & Gingras, 2012). These scales
generally ask individuals to rate items like, “My life is meaningful and purposeful” on a scale from 1-7. Though there likely
will always be those who argue against the use of such homely measures to study the grand construct of meaning in life, it is
important to appreciate that research using such measures is the science that supports the notion that meaning in life is, in
fact, important to survival. These ratings are correlated with a litany of very good things, ranging from quality of life, to
lower incidence of psychological disorders, and even to decreased mortality (see Steger, 2012, for a thorough review). If
we throw out the bathwater of self-report measures of meaning in life as inadequate, we lose as well the baby of all of this
science.

So, accepting perhaps, begrudgingly that we are limiting ourselves to research that uses such measures, we can
begin to answer the remaining issues posed previously. First, I review social cognitive research that embeds meaning in life
in everyday processes. Then, I briefly consider evidence for the notion that meaning in life is a commonplace experience.

The Trivial, the Mundane, and the Meaning of Life

If meaning in life is indeed common or even, as I have argued, the default, then we must consider that sources of
the experience of meaning in life are similarly widely available. This means that meaning in life cannot be limited to those
with the capacity to apply sophisticated cognitive arguments to the problem of meaning. It might also imply that oft-
recognized sources of meaning, such as religious faith, may well contribute to the experience of meaning in life but they
cannot be essential to that experience. Meaning in life must be possible without such faith. Further, it must be possible even
in the context of belief that life is not inherently meaningful. Belief in oxygen is not required to breathe. If the experience
of meaning in life is as essential as oxygen, then it cannot require such belief either. If meaning in life plays a role in survival, it ought not to require very much in terms of the psychological mechanisms within the human organism to experience it. At this point, it might be helpful to consider a quote from William James.

All Goods are disguised by the vulgarity of their concomitants, in this work-a-day world; but woe to him
who can only recognize them when he thinks them in their pure and abstract form! (James, 1890, p. 125)

James’ sentiments are quite relevant to meaning in life. If meaning in life is a Good then, like all Goods, it must be
embedded in everyday existence, couched in its own vulgar concomitants. Over the last several years, my collaborators and
I have examined one of these vulgar concomitants, positive mood.
Positive Mood and Meaning in Life

Positive mood or positive affect refers to the extent to which a person is experiencing mild pleasant feelings, i.e., the extent to which he or she is happy, pleased, cheerful, or experiencing enjoyment. Many would agree that the experience of meaning in life ought to be pleasant and positive affect is strongly related to meaning in life. Indeed, depending on the specific measure used that correlation can be so high as to suggest redundancy. For example, in a sample of adults, positive affect and scores on the meaning factor of Antonovsky’s Sense of Coherence scale, \( r = .71 \) (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006, Study 3). In a daily diary study, we found that the strongest predictor of a day being considered meaningful was the amount of positive mood experienced that day, even relative to variables, such as goal directed behavior, thought and goal progress (King et al., 2006, Study 2).

Scholars from the eudaimonic approach to well-being would agree that positive affect is a likely outcome of meaning in life, and so these correlational findings are not especially challenging. However, our research shows that positive affect is not simply an outcome of meaning in life. The causal direction runs the other way, as well: Positive mood leads to higher meaning in life.

Using a variety of mood induction techniques and examining college students (Hicks & King, 2009, 2010; King et al., 2006) and community adults (Hicks, Schlegel, & King, 2010; Hicks, Trent, Davis, & King, 2012), my colleagues and I have found that induced positive mood enhances judgments of life’s meaning. In addition, just priming individuals with words related to positive emotion led to higher meaning in life, even in the absence of effects on explicit mood (King et al., 2006).

Further, our work has shown that when other sources of meaning in life, such as religious faith, and social relationships are threatened or absent, induced or naturally occurring positive affect predicts meaning in life more strongly (Hicks & King, 2007; Hicks, Schlegel, & King, 2010). For instance, individuals who report themselves as high on loneliness, who also happen, nevertheless, to be in a good mood, endorse levels of meaning in life that are on par with those who have plenty of friends (Hicks, Schlegel, & King, 2010).

Perhaps, when answering these meaning in life questionnaires, people just are not paying that much attention. Surely if we instructed them to take this questionnaires seriously, they would not rely on something as trivial as positive mood to judge meaning in life. Jason Trent and I did a study in which participants completed measures of positive mood and then rated their meaning in life according to one of two instructions: Either as quickly as they possibly could, or taking their time and really thinking about it. The relationship between positive mood and meaning in life was higher when people took their time and thought those ratings through carefully (Trent & King, 2010). Apparently, when prompted to think carefully about meaning in life, one’s happiness is considered quite relevant to that thoughtful judgment.

Our findings suggest a central role for the common (even trivial) experience of positive mood in meaning in life. However, and crucially, they do not imply that meaning in life is the same thing as happiness. Without question, our research has shown that there are unhappy people who maintain a high sense of meaning in life, through such resources as religious faith (Hicks & King, 2008) or social connections (Hicks, Schlegel, & King, 2010). Moreover, consider the very fact that we have a word for meaning to describe a subjective state. If meaning in life was synonymous with pleasure, surely, someone would have noticed. When we report our lives as meaningful, then we are signifying something beyond our levels of pleasure.

One thing that meaning in life shares with pleasure is that it is a private state. As defined by Klinger (1977), “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” (p. 10). In its essence, meaning in life is a subjective mental state. Consider for a moment subjective mental states and their potential role in adaptation.

Subjective states and adaptation

States like happiness, sorrow, or meaningfulness occur, we might say, “in our heads.” They can be pleasant or unpleasant. We can prefer some of these feelings to others. We like being happy and dislike being sad, but this liking or disliking does not explain the value of these states to survival. If we wish to impart some survival value or adaptive significance to such states, we must uncover a role for them to play not simply on the inside, but on the outside—in our behaviors, and our interactions with the world.

As we construct an understanding of the potentially adaptive quality of the human experience of meaning in life, we can take some valuable lessons from the science of mood. Consider the case of happiness. Research has shown that happy moods lead people to process information heuristically, relying on gut feelings. Early explanations of such results
emphasized the motivational quality of moods (e.g., Mackie & Worth, 1989). People want to be happy. So, when they are happy, they are busy staying happy, maintaining their happy moods, and as such would not have the cognitive resources to carefully process incoming information. But this motivational explanation would not explain why or how feeling happy might serve an adaptive purpose. Similarly, our longing for meaning in life cannot explain its adaptive significance.

Scholars of the effects of mood on cognitive processing have moved away from such motivational accounts of the influence of positive mood on thought and behavior. The feelings-as-information (Schwarz & Clore, 2003) focuses not on the motivational significance of moods but on the information they provide to the person. From this perspective, negative moods tell us that there is problem to be solved, and trigger the use of analytical thinking. Positive mood, in contrast, tells us that all is well and that reliance on default information processing system is appropriate (Huntsinger, Isbell, & Clore, 2012). In this sense, the feelings-as-information account links moods to self-regulation. We feel good or bad as a function of how we are doing in important life domains. Our mood provides information about the quality of our interaction with the world.

**Meaning in life as information**

To apply a feelings-as-information approach to the subjective state of meaning in life, we must answer the question, “What information might the feeling of meaning provide that would play a role in regulating thought and behavior?” A possible answer to this question is provided by the very definition of meaning in life itself, particularly in its cognitive component. Recall that this aspect of meaning in life refers to the sense of the connections among aspects of experience. If meaning in life provides information about the presence of connections, regularities, or patterns in the world, it might have an important role to play in adaptation. Detecting connections, associations, regularities in the environment is an adaptive capacity shared by all creatures (Geary, 2004). If the presence of connections, regularities, or patterns feels like meaning, and influences the experience of meaning in life, we might have landed upon at least one adaptive function for that experience. It tells us when the world is making sense (Heintzelman, Trent, & King, in press).

Recall my earlier analogy to oxygen. With regard to oxygen, our bodies are wired to procure it from an environment filled with it. It is precisely with regard to these two ideas that the cognitive aspect of meaning in life is especially promising. Consider that our visual systems are wired to detect statistical co-variation and such detection occurs in the absence of effortful processing or awareness (Turk-Browne, Scholl, Chun, & Johnson, 2008). Furthermore, the processes of associative learning attest to the existence of automatic detection of reliable connections. Our bodies are wired to procure connections from the environment.

And, it turns out that the environment is indeed filled with such connections, as it must be for these learning processes to be adaptive (Domjan, 2005). Consider that animal learning studies (and the hardware of our perceptual systems) provide an important lesson about the features of objective reality. Certainly, human beings often emphasize the subjectivity of experience, such as “Life is whatever you make of it!” With regard to the experience of meaning, this subjectivity has been especially celebrated, such as “The meaning of anything is all in how you look at it!” We are telling ourselves that the meaning of life events or life itself depends on our attitude. We are meaning-makers! We construct and impose meaning on the world!

Examining closely the behavior of animals without the capacities to construct and impose meaning, animals that lack our propensity for subjective reflection, can teach us something about the properties of the world in which they (and we) live. The behavior of animals, whose “attitude” toward the world is wholly shaped by the singular purpose of surviving in that world, tells us something about the world itself. If one wanted to infer an attitude from such organisms, based on their behavior—it would be a straightforward one. Their behavior reveals a single expectation: On balance, this world will contain reliable connections between stimuli that are important for survival, this world will make sense. Surely, some events might be random, but for the most part, betting on the systematic character of events is a good, survival-relevant bet. So, with regard to the cognitive aspect of meaning in life, at least, not only are we wired for it, the world is filled with it.

Yes, we live in a world filled with regularities. We have sunrises and sunsets, and Mondays, and Fridays, and Januaries and Augusts. We have winters and springs. Might these patterns and routines, these blessed regularities, contribute to the feeling that life is meaningful? Does the existence of pattern and reliable associations in the environment influence the experience of meaning in life?

In our research, Samantha Heintzelman, Jason Trent and I have begun to explore this possibility. In a recent series of studies, we examined whether meaning in life ratings were influenced by exposure to objectively coherent or incoherent stimuli (Heintzelman, Trent, & King, in press). For example, in one study, participants viewed a series of pictures of trees. The 16 photos included 4 for each of the 4 seasons. The participants thought their job was to evaluate the contrast in the
pictures. Unbeknownst to them, the order in which the pictures were shown was systematically varied. In one group, the 16 pictures appeared in a random order. In another, they were arranged so that they followed the change in seasons, over 4 cycles, conforming to Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter. After completing the rating task, all participants rated their meaning in life. We found that meaning in life was rated significantly higher in the seasonal pattern group than in the random group (Heintzelman, Trent, & King, Study 1). In subsequent studies, we found that meaning in life was rated higher after exposure to the same pictures presented in a novel pattern (vs. random order; Study 2), and after reading words triads arranged so that they possessed a fourth common associate (vs. the same words not so arranged; Study 4). These findings support the hypothesis that encounters with regularity, pattern, and overlearned associations can influence evaluations of life’s meaning. Quite simply, when the world makes sense, life feels more meaningful.

Given that human life is generally characterized by regularities, one implication of this research is that life might be somewhat meaningful, as a default. We do have the days of the week, regular appointments, morning coffee, a last glass of wine at night. In such a world, on average, shouldn’t life be pretty meaningful for most people? I now turn to evidence suggesting that indeed, it just might be.

Meaning in Life is Not a Rare Accomplishment

Even a casual perusal of the scholarly literature reveals that meaning in life is important and that self-reports of meaning in life relate to consequential outcomes. One thing that might be missed in this casual perusal, however, is the information that is typically included in every scientific article, but is not particularly relevant to testing that meaning in life predicts some outcome. Yes, here we focus on another aspect of meaning in life that is generally the default but is rarely particularly noticed. For almost every study using these scales, researchers report the descriptive statistics (i.e., the means and standard deviations) for the meaning in life measure. Examining these means suggests that, on average, human life does not appear to be profoundly lacking a sense of meaningfulness (Heintzelman & King, in preparation). For example, in the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) presence of meaning subscale is a well-designed, psychometrically sound, and well-validated measure of meaning in life. Items, such as “I understand my life’s meaning” are rated by participants in terms of how true they are on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). In the initial validation study of the scale using undergraduates, the reported mean was 4.60, on a 7-point scale (Steger et al., 2006).

Since its introduction, this scale has been used in numerous investigations of meaning in life, and this mean is typical. Just how typical? In samples of undergraduates, Boyraz & Lightsey (2012) with \(N = 232\), reported a mean of 4.9; Triplett, Tedeschi, Cann, Calhoun, and Reeve (2012) with \(N = 333\), reported a mean of 4.56. These “at or above the midpoint” means are not unique to undergraduates. In samples of university employees, Schlegel, Vess, and Arndt (2012) with \(N = 173\), found a mean of 5.05; while Steger, Dik, and Duffy (2012) with \(N = 370\), reported a mean of 4.0. In a study of elderly adults (over 65), McMahah and Estes (2012) with \(N = 60\) reported a mean of 5.7. Such results are not unusual to American samples. Among Indian college students (Dogra, Basu, & Das, 2008), the mean was 5.23, with \(N = 320\). In a study of Australian adults, Cohen and Cairns (2012) with \(N = 500\), reported a mean of 4.88. In a sample of 34 Japanese adults whose grandparents were exposed to the nuclear attack during World War II, the mean was 4.06; among 88 not so exposed, the mean was 4.14 (Palgi et al., 2012). Only a sample of Japanese undergraduates produced a mean lower than 4.0. For this group (Steger, Kawabata, Shimai, & Otake, 2008), the reported mean was 3.94, \(N = 982\). Finally, consider the mean scores from individuals rating meaning in life in actual life contexts that are potentially profoundly troubling. In a study of Spanish college students following a terrorist attack in Madrid (Steger, Frazier, & Zacchini, 2008), the mean was 4.23, \(N = 46\). In a study examining the effects of an intervention on meaning in life in women coping with breast cancer, the means were 4.66 and 5.22, \(N = 18\) for each group, prior to the interventions (Hsaio et al., 2012). In a sample of adults diagnosed with serious psychological disorders for at least one year (Schulenberg, Strack, & Buchanan, 2011), the reported mean was 5.63, \(N = 96\). This very brief summary suggests that, on a 1 to 7 scale, life is generally rated at or above the midpoint of meaningfulness. Apparently, for all of our bellyaching about meaning being missing from our lives, when people from a variety of walks of life are asked to rate their life’s meaning, the answer is clear: On average, life is “somewhat” or “moderately” meaningful for most samples, and “quite” meaningful for other samples. These simple means suggest that meaninglessness is not a problem of epidemic proportion.

Where are the abjectly meaningless lives that psychologists have bemoaned for so long? In some of my research, we asked a sample of undergraduates (\(N = 562\)) to rate the item, “My life is very purposeful and meaningful” using a 1-7 scale. We found that only 28 participants (about 5% of the sample) gave this item a 1 or 2 (King, Mescher & Hicks, 2009).
Meaningless lives do exist but they are not as common as meaningful lives. I do not mean to dismiss or belittle the problem of meaningfulness, for those who experience their lives as severely lacking in meaning, it is clearly an important and serious problem. Indeed, I believe that thinking about the meaningful life as the default helps illuminate why meaningfulness is so very troubling.

**Implications for Meaninglessness**

Consider again, Isaac Newton and the idea that meaning in life might be like gravity, something we routinely experience but perhaps rarely particularly notice. Now, consider just how shocking, how unfathomable, and how viscerally wrong, it would be to wake up in a world where objects started falling up. Imagine a world where objects lacked constancy, where cause and effect did not apply, where outcomes were not, on balance, predictable. That is not the world we are wired for. I believe that this thought experiment captures precisely the vertigo, the nausea, brought on by the senseless. Meaninglessness, when it happens, holds our attention and occupies our energy not only because it often occurs in traumatic contexts, but because it is actually not what we are wired for or what we typically experience. The ways that meaninglessness captures our attention suggest that it is not typical, that it violates the (potentially unnoticed) default of the presence of meaning in life. Indeed, when life does not make sense, we can be meaning-makers and we can construct and impose meaning on the world. But our experience of meaning in life is not primarily a result of such active efforts. Most of the time, we experience meaning in life in the context of, and as a result of our relationship with a world that makes sense.

**Some Closing Thoughts**

To close, I would like to address a few remaining issues. First, although my own research has focused primarily on the roles of positive mood and the presence of pattern in the environment in the experience of meaning in life, another very crucial variable, perhaps more crucial than these, is social relationships. Ratings of meaningful existence are strongly and consistently influenced by social exclusion (e.g., Williams, 2007). Again, I think such findings help to illuminate the connection between a sense of meaning in life and the necessities of survival.

Second, clearly, simply leading a life characterized by a great deal of routine is not a panacea for meaning in life. Certainly there are individuals who experience very high levels of regularity (e.g., prisoners) whose meaning in life is likely to be lacking. The cognitive aspect of meaning in life is, of course, just one aspect of this important experience. Moreover, even with regard to that aspect, we must consider the importance of novelty and the potential meaninglessness engendered by boredom.

Third, I want to be clear that showing that ratings of meaning in life are influenced by experimental manipulations does not, in my view, trivialize these ratings at all. Anything that plays a role in connecting us to the environment must have the capacity to change: It must retain a responsiveness to events in the environment or it cannot be adaptive. Thus, finding meaning in life ratings to track environmental changes is essential to demonstrating their role in adaptation.

Finally, a rating of 4 on a scale from 1-7 is pretty good but it is not a 7. Life might, on average, be somewhat meaningful, but this does not preclude the human longing for 6’s and 7’s. We do not long for a minimally meaningful life or a somewhat meaningful life, but one that is quite meaningful, extremely meaningful. Perhaps the great mystery of meaning in life is not so much how to find it or create it, but why we seek it so urgently, even when it is, actually, a quiet part of lives most of the time. It may be that beliefs about its rarity or mysterious nature contribute to a sense that it is chronically lacking (Heintzelman & King, in preparation). Then perhaps, the solution to this particular mystery is a simple one: Meaning in life is, indeed, a necessity, just as scholars long have claimed. After all, we will not soon get over our needs for oxygen, water, calcium or sunlight. For these necessities of existence, our appetites are insatiable, our thirst unquenchable. No matter how much I breathe today, I will certainly hope to keep on breathing tomorrow. No amount of oxygen will persuade me away from my energetic dedication to it. Why should meaning in life be any different?
References


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