Clarifying Personal Meaning: Reflections on the 2012 International Meaning Conference of the INPM

Gordon Medlock
The Wright Graduate Institute

Abstract

This article was inspired by the questions and themes at the Meaning Conference organized by the International Network on Personal Meaning (INPM) in 2012. It identifies an emerging consensus regarding the meaning of personal meaning as a motivational construct, and demonstrates its connection to other closely related motivational theories, including self-determination theory, positive psychology, humanistic psychology, interpersonal neurobiology, and narrative approaches to self integration. Specifically it explores the definition of personal meaning as involving a sense of purpose and coherence in orienting individuals to future possibilities and providing a basis for hope in the fulfillment of their aspirations. It identifies a cognitive-behavioral bias in the field, focusing on goal-focused behavior and neglecting the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of personal meaning. The article demonstrates how the relationship factor, specifically self-defining dialogue with significant others, needs to be considered as an essential component of personal meaning. This includes experiences of communicative interaction with others, through which individuals construct personal meaning and come to a clearer understanding of who they are and what they believe and value. The article goes on to demonstrate how a meaning-oriented approach can clarify basic concepts in self-determination theory and positive psychology, particularly the constructs of autonomy, authenticity, relationship, and the actualizing tendency of the human psyche. It concludes with an analysis of the concept of higher purpose as it relates to the ideal of self-actualization, including Frankl’s interpretation of the tension between those two principles.

The 7th Biennial International Meaning Conference in 2012, organized by the International Network of Personal Meaning (INPM), brought together scholars and clinicians from a variety of fields within psychology to explore the nature of personal meaning. Representatives from positive psychology, self-determination theory, existential-humanistic psychology, transpersonal psychology, and other meaning-oriented perspectives convened to share ideas about the nature, role, and importance of personal meaning in our understanding of human motivation and well-being.

The conference was in part an homage to the work and life of Viktor Frankl, who first identified personal meaning as an explicit focus for therapeutic practice and research. A film of Frankl’s life, produced by his grandson Alexander Vesely, a distinguished film producer, was shown at the conference as a tribute to the man behind the work (Vesely, 2012). The conference was also an expression of Paul Wong’s dedication to expand upon and refine Frankl’s work by bringing together diverse voices to explore the importance and implications of meaning-oriented therapies and research for the field of psychology (Wong, 2012c).

Coinciding with the conference was the publication of Wong’s 2nd edition of The Human Quest for Meaning: Theories, Research, and Applications (Wong, 2012a). This work represents the current state of research on the topic of personal meaning, and helps to clarify the central themes and findings that were at the heart of the discussions at the conference.

Both the conference and the book raised numerous questions about the nature of personal meaning, two of which I shall address in this paper: (1) Can we agree on a precise definition of “personal meaning” that could serve as a foundation for coordinated research and practice in this field? (2) Can we establish the usefulness of this construct in explaining important aspects of human motivation, development, and human flourishing, particularly as it relates to motivational constructs from other theoretical orientations, such as self-determination, self-actualization, well-being, narrative coherence, and interpersonal neurobiology?

To anticipate answers to these questions, a strong case has been made for distinguishing a distinct need for personal meaning from other motivational constructs. The emerging consensus is that the defining characteristics of personal meaning include: (a) a sense of purpose that orient individuals toward a hopeful future, and (b) a sense of self-coherence.
and integration that ties together aspects of one’s experience into a unified whole (McAdams, 1990; Steger, 2012). This construct of personal meaning is limited, however, in an important respect, by not adequately including (c) an account of the emotional and relational aspects of personal meaning. Several presenters at the conference presented the case for the importance of emotional and relational factors in providing a complete account of personal meaning (King, 2012; King & Hicks, 2012; Medlock, 2012a; van Deurzen, 2012a, 2012b; Wong, 2012c). One of the main purposes of this paper is to build on those insights and to demonstrate the central role of relationship and dialogue as essential elements of the construct of personal meaning.

Regarding the second question, the construct of personal meaning is integrally related to a number of other related motivational constructs, including autonomy, authenticity, relationship, self-integration and self-actualization. By focusing on the meaning component in these related needs, we deepen our understanding of the various ways that the search for meaning play out in our lives, while also deepening our understanding of these related motivational constructs. This paper reflects the intent of the conference in identifying points of intersection among meaning-oriented approaches and other related approaches to the study of human motivation and well-being.

The Search for Meaning

It was clear from the conference panel discussion on “What Makes Life Worth Living,” that there was no clear agreement regarding how to frame the question of what makes life worth living or how it might be answered. Speakers approached the question from their own theoretical or personal understandings of what the question meant, without necessarily attempting to arrive at a shared understanding of the field of personal meaning itself.

Serving as panel moderator, Todd Kashdan pointed out that we don’t appear to be making any progress in establishing a shared understanding of the meaning of our basic terms that could provide a basis for a collaborative research agenda in this important area of human motivation and well-being.

The question of what makes life worth living is of course inherently open-ended and invites a multiplicity of responses. The notion of personal meaning is inherently vague and subject to multiple interpretations from multiple perspectives. Theological, spiritual, and philosophical perspectives consider the nature and source of meaning and explore how questions of ultimate meaning and purpose relate to psychological motivations and therapeutic approaches (Bellin, 2012; Friedman, 2012; Kashdan, 2012). The notion of life purpose is considered by many to be a central component of a meaning-oriented framework (Klinger, 2012; Steger, 2012; Wong, 2012b, 2012c; Wright, 1997). The notion that we are all embedded in everyday meaning contexts, by virtue of being language users immersed in socially defined language games, provides broader philosophical and sociological contexts for approaching questions of meaning (Peterson, 2012; Habermas, 1984, 1987; Klinger, 2012; Wittgenstein, 2009). How are we to find an agreed upon foundation within the field of psychology for a shared understanding of what we want to study and facilitate?

It is helpful to take Frankl’s advice in approaching this question regarding the meaning of life. He observes that the question cannot be usefully considered in the abstract, but needs to be viewed in the context of a unique person facing a unique existential situation. In his words:

I doubt whether a doctor can answer this question in general terms. For the meaning of life differs from man to man (sic.) from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general, but rather the specific meaning of a person’s life at a given moment . . . Everyone has his (sic.) own specific vocation or mission in life; everyone must carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus everyone’s task is as unique as his specific opportunity to implement it. (Frankl, 1970, pp. 171-172)

Frankl’s suggestion enables us to avoid going down the rabbit hole of philosophical and theological speculation about the ultimate meaning of life – satisfying as such speculations may be. His advice is to explore questions of meaning in connection with the specific life choices that people make in concrete situations – a suggestion which has resonated with other researchers and practitioners (Glasser, 1998; Maddi, 2012).

His suggestion also raises a more radical question, which I believe needs to be asked in the context of the current confusion about the meaning of personal meaning as a psychological construct. Given that discussions of meaning in the abstract are generally not fruitful for psychological inquiry, and that the construct of personal meaning is inherently abstract and tends toward vagueness and ambiguity, do we even need the construct of personal meaning at all to explain human
motivation and the needs and yearnings that drive our specific choices in unique situations? Or to frame the question more specifically: Is a drive toward meaning already implied in other current theories of human motivation, so that there is no real need to call it out as a separate area for research and practice?

Certainly the existence of the conference itself and the broad representation of schools of thought suggest that a meaning-oriented theory of human motivation offers something over and above other approaches and theories. But just what that something is, in the light of current research and practice, is worthy of further reflection if we are to create a broadly shared understanding of the importance of personal meaning as a unique and useful factor in explaining human motivation.

**Personal Meaning as a Motivational Construct**

The emerging consensus within the tradition of meaning-oriented research appears to be that we do in fact have a distinct need for a sense of purpose and coherence in our lives. Michael Steger (2012) summarizes four decades of research on the nature of personal meaning as he provides “an overview and a conceptual framework for viewing what the field has learned about the well-being, psychopathology, and spirituality correlates of meaning in life” (p. 165). He acknowledges that this body of research is “often accumulated in the absence of a unifying theoretical framework” (p. 176), but his work makes a significant contribution toward providing that framework.

Steger (2012) identifies two factors that are central to our understanding of personal meaning, a cognitive component and a motivational component. He recognizes that an orientation toward meaning is inherent in the very nature of our experience, and that it includes “a web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our experiences and formulate plans directing our energies to the achievement of our desired future” (p. 165). He recognizes that we have a natural tendency to seek coherence in our experiences and in our accounts of our lives, making sense of apparently disparate moments and choices, and attempting to create a unifying sense of meaning and purpose to our lives.

The motivational factor of personal meaning relates to this notion of having a unifying sense of purpose and mission in life. Steger (2012) observes that when people talk about meaning in their lives, they typically are raising questions about what life is for or what they hope to accomplish in life. He views the concept of purpose as relating to the notions of intention and goal setting, and cites a variety of researchers who have identified this goal-oriented, purpose-oriented way of living as fundamental to personal well-being and authenticity. He concludes that “together the cognitive (comprehension) and motivational (purpose) aspects of meaning in life distinguish meaning from other psychological constructs” (p.166).

The focus on a sense of purpose that instills hope and a reason for living—especially in situations of adversity or suffering – was explored in several of the conference presentations, and appears to be generally recognized in the field as a fundamental theme (Bonanno, 2012; Frankl, 1970; Neimeyer, 2012a, 2012b; van Deurzen, 2012b; Wong, 2012c, 2012d). Conference presentations focused not only on the broader context of meaning that characterizes all human activity, but particularly on the discovery of a sense of purpose in the midst of suffering and adversity. Wong (2012b) emphasizes a sense of Purpose and the capacity for Understanding as fundamental to his account of personal meaning. His PURE model also emphasizes personal Responsibility, further developing the insights of Frankl on the importance of being responsive to one’s unique calling in specific circumstances, to realize a sense of personal meaning and ultimately deeper emotional fulfillment.

Frankl’s (1970, 1973) seminal works in logotherapy postulated a need for personal meaning as a fundamental human need, and centered on the quest to discover the unique tasks which life calls us to take on in specific situations. Frankl’s logotherapy guides individuals to discover the tasks that life situations call them to perform – tasks that meet a fundamental human need in the world and also fulfill the individual’s need for personal meaning. He recognized that this task would often be related to a need to connect with and care for significant others – including specific loved ones and broader human communities (Frankl, 1970, pp. 176-177). But in his writings he tended to focus on the cognitive dimension of logos or meaning, rather than on the emotional and relational components that appear to be equally important to the construct of personal meaning.

Seligman’s (2006) work in positive psychology and well-being theory also includes a focus on personal meaning that is consistent with Frankl’s account. Seligman’s early research originated with the study in depression and analysis of the cognitive factors that undermined a sense of optimism and hope. He noted that the meaning frameworks we use to make sense of our lives have a profound effect on whether we will flourish or fall into depression. His insights about the
cognitive orientation of learned helplessness and the corrective meaning-orientation of optimistic thinking, led to the emergence of positive psychology and his theories of well-being (Seligman, 2006). He includes meaning as a distinct dimension of well-being – irreducible to the dimensions of relationship, positive emotion, engagement, accomplishment, and positive relationships (Seligman, 2011). He defines meaning in terms reminiscent of Frankl – with no apparent acknowledgement of that source – as “belonging to and serving something you believe is bigger than the self” (Seligman, 2011, p.17). The sense of serving a cause or finding a purpose to which one can commit is central to the need for meaning, as both Seligman and Frankl view it. This basic need for meaning also relates to the needs for authenticity, self-integration, and self-actualization – needs which are not addressed in Seligman’s framework but which are deserving of further analysis (Medlock, 2012b).

Peterson (2012) expressed a concern in his presentation at the conference about the lack of emphasis on personal meaning in positive psychology, and the importance of giving it a more prominent role in the theory of well-being. His seminal work with Seligman (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) on the theory of character strengths gives considerable attention to the importance of the world’s religions and spiritual and ethical traditions in defining contexts of meaning for understanding specific character strengths. It also has important implications for our understanding of personal authenticity and the choices individuals make about self-defining values (Medlock, 2012a).

What is missing in this emerging consensus regarding the meaning of personal meaning, however, is an adequate appreciation of the role and the importance of relationship as a constitutive dimension of personal meaning. We witnessed this emphasis on relationship throughout the INPM conference. Paul Wong brought together diverse points of view for the explicit purpose of facilitating dialogue between various traditions to enhance our understanding and appreciation of the meaning perspective in psychology. His desire to connect with others and to bring them into constructive dialogue with one another was apparent throughout the conference. I was personally struck by the experience of warmth and caring conveyed by his presence – as I believe all the participants would acknowledge. What stands out above all else in the specific situation of the conference, was the drive to share points of view, to understand and to be understood across differences, in the pursuit of greater clarity and coherence within the profession regarding meaning research and applications.

The film Viktor & I (Vesley, 2012) about Frankl’s life, presented at the conference by Alexander Vesely, likewise, emphasized the quality of caring relationships as foundational to Frankl’s personal and professional life. The film illustrated what was not explicitly expressed in Frankl’s writings: How important his experience of interconnectedness with others was to defining and fulfilling his life purpose. We are reminded that his decision to not flee Austria prior to the German occupation was motivated by his desire to remain close to his family where he hoped to be of help. As a teacher, speaker, and therapist, he was continually engaged in helping others discover meaning and purpose in their lives. As a husband, the deep healing connection with his second wife, who was also the nurse who cared for him during his recovery from the concentration camps, speaks to a level of mattering to another that was undoubtedly foundational to the meaning he experienced in life. Frankl implicitly acknowledges the importance of relationships in his theory of logotherapy as he emphasizes the need to orient to a cause or purpose beyond oneself, but the defining role of relationships in establishing a sense that life matters, is not fully developed in his work.

Steger (2012) acknowledges the important connection between personal meaning and relationships in his account of the emerging consensus regarding personal meaning as a motivational construct. He indicates that the sense that life matters may help people see their connections with others in ever expanding circles, to include “romantic partners, family and friends, neighborhood, social causes, religious movements, humanity . . .life . . .[and] a sense of spiritual connectedness” (p.168). That is to say, he recognizes that the experience that life matters is grounded in our experiences of mattering to one another as persons. But he stops short of including this dimension of connectedness to others as part of the core concept of personal meaning. He restricts that core meaning to the cognitive-behavioral components of purpose and comprehension, and considers relatedness as a variable that can be directly correlated with meaning but not a defining factor. In his words, “…we can account for the positive relationship of meaning in life with relatedness (Ryff, 1989; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008) by arguing that having high quality relationships indicates an effective ability to understand how one fits with the world around one” (Steger, 2012, p.177). While this view acknowledges the close connection between personal meaning and relatedness, it fails to recognize that relatedness is an essential component of personal meaning and is actually an indispensable foundation of the ability to understand how one fits with the world in the first place.

This cognitive-behavioral bias found within the meaning-oriented tradition, including existential and positive psychology, fails to appreciate the importance of emotion and connectedness with others as part of the definition of a meaning orientation. The bias that needs to be addressed here is one which begins with a view of the self as an individual consciousness or “meaning-maker” who discovers specific life purposes and tasks, sets goals, and pursues a life course,
without any inherent reference to the relational context within which those purposes and goals emerge. This bias was fundamental to the original frameworks of existential and humanistic psychologies, but has been superseded over the past 30 years by a new conceptual paradigm in philosophy, sociology, and psychology that focuses on the social/dialogical character of the self as foundational to the emergence of the individual self (Gergen, 1985; Habermas, 1984, 1987; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2005; Kegan, 1982; Natanson, 1970, 1974; Raskin, 2002; Taylor, 1989, 1999).

To fully appreciate the meaning-orientation in life, we need to understand in what way it is inherently interactional, as a process existing between persons experienced as meaningful to one another. Questions of personal meaning arise fundamentally in our communications with others, as we explain what we mean, why we act, what matters to us, and what gives our life meaning. These are essentially acts of interpersonal communication, wherein we clarify our unique sense of purpose and meaning through engagement with others who take an active interest in understanding our inner worlds (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2005).

This dialogical framework reflects what was already understood in psychoanalytic and humanistic psychology, that our unique individual identities are defined by the quality of our relationships with significant others. These insights are now being further substantiated by work in interpersonal neurobiology, which is deepening our understanding of attachment schemas in early childhood, the processes of differentiation and individuation, the integrative role of emotion in processing of information, and the integrative qualities of emotion and personal narratives in clarifying personal identity and memory (Neimeyer, 1999, 2012a; Siegel, 1999, 2010). Our first experiences of personal meaning are defined by our interactions with caregivers and the recognition that we are seen and affirmed – or not – in those early communicative interactions. Experiences of secure attachment, empathic connection, positive regard, and congruent communications all contribute to a core sense of self and facilitate the capacity for health differentiation and individuation. These relationship factors have also been shown to facilitate ongoing inner exploration of inner potentials of the organism and the emergence of the authentic self (Carkhuff, 2009; Rogers, 1961/2004).

This experience of personal meaning is integrally infused with the experience of mattering to others and the development of the capacity to allow others and one’s own inner self to matter (Frankfurt, 1988; Peterson, 2012). Disruptions in this process inhibit the capacity for empathy, altruism, and genuine concern for the well-being of others – the very attitudes that are essential to the quality of personal responsibility emphasized by Frankl and Wong (2012c). Unfortunately, the personal responsibility dimension is often not emphasized in the commonly acknowledged definitions of meaning in life.

All this is to say that an appreciation of the dialogical nature of the self and the fact that meaning is created through communicative interactions with others – and ultimately with oneself through the process of inner dialogue, speaking, and writing – is essential to deepening and expanding our understanding of the core construct of personal meaning. The experience of mattering to one other, expressed through a deep interest in understanding and being understood, is a constitutive factor in the nature of personal meaning. It is an essential element of the construct of personal meaning, along with the more generally recognized elements of life purpose and coherence in our understanding of ourselves and our worlds. By expanding our research and practice agendas to include this dimension of dialogical relationships with others and the experiences of mattering to one another, we not only enrich our understanding of personal meaning as a motivational construct, but also enhance its relevance to related research in the fields of interpersonal neuroscience, positive psychology, self-determination, and self-actualization.

**Personal Meaning and Autonomy**

What about the relevance of a need for personal meaning to self-determination theory? We have seen that it does have a significant place within the theory of well-being and in our understanding of relationship, but how does a need for personal meaning relate to the need for autonomy, competence, and the actualizing tendency observed in the human organism?

I posed the question to Richard Ryan at the conference as to whether he needed to include a drive toward meaning as part of self-determination theory, in addition to the drives toward autonomy, competence, and relationship. I noted that Daniel Pink, a well-known interpreter of his work, chose to include the drive toward meaning as part of his account of self-determination theory (Pink, 2009). Ryan’s response was that he felt that meaning was already implicit in the other needs, most specifically the need for autonomy, and that it wasn’t needed as an additional construct to account for human motivation.
Reviewing self-determination theory, we find that autonomy refers to actions that are either pursued strictly for their own sake, as in free play, or those where the individual internalizes and integrates an externally defined value orientation as their own (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 15). In either case, autonomous action is experienced as self-chosen rather than dictated by others, precisely because it is experienced as personally meaningful. It is distinguished from externally motivated behavior by the fact that the individual reflects upon the meaning of the behavior and wholeheartedly endorses it as an expression of his or her core sense of self (Ryan & Deci, 2006, pp. 1560 – 1568; Taylor, 2005, pp. 4-5).

Ryan’s point is certainly well taken with regard to his interpretation of personal autonomy. But his theory of autonomy implies some notion of how we come to understand our true selves – that is to say, some theory about the nature of authenticity. The concepts of autonomy and authenticity are closely related in self-determination theory, but they are not identical (Ekstrom, 2005; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Medlock, 2012b). Autonomy relates to the locus of motivation – intrinsically versus extrinsically motivated action. Authenticity relates to questions of identity – who one is as this unique individual. Questions of identity concern our relationships with others, and how we attach to and differentiate ourselves from significant others.

Self-determination theory references how autonomous action rests on an understanding of our authentic selves – insofar as it is grounded in values and preferences that we wholeheartedly affirm as expressive of our core sense of self. But it stops short of exploring how we come to define our core values and preferences through our communicative interactions with others. The processes of internalization and integration of experience are not only intra-personal processes, but also interpersonal processes – a fact with which I am sure Ryan would agree. We internalize and internally integrate a belief or value by articulating it in communication with others and clarifying it in relation to other perspectives, beliefs, and values. We reflect upon it and make it our own through an interactive process of meaning-making with others. This interactive process includes the dialectic of attachment and individuation, through which we define ourselves in terms of our connectedness to others as well as through our difference from others. But it includes more than what is typically understood as a relationship dynamic. It is also a meaning-making dynamic that involves dialogical interaction among significant others, each involved in a process of self-definition.

This dynamic of interpersonal interaction and dialogue regarding matters of personal meaning is what gives rise to our sense of authentic selfhood, which in turn gives rise to the possibility of autonomous action. This need for personal meaning is thus as fundamental to self-determination theory as is the need for autonomy and relationship. The meaning-orientation serves to deepen our understanding not only of the purposes, beliefs, and values to which we ultimately commit ourselves, but also of the interactive process by which we define those purposes and commitments as expressions of shared meaning contexts as well as expressions of our unique selves.

Self-determination theory does of course recognize relationship as a fundamental human need; so Ryan can claim that this need to share our life stories and reasons for acting is already addressed under the heading of the need for relationship. But the analysis of relationship within self-determination theory is not nearly as robust as is the theory of autonomy. In most cases relationship is considered primarily in connection with autonomy, exploring the ways that relationship and autonomy needs are inter-dependent (Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2006). What is missing in that account is the specific need to articulate one’s feelings, beliefs, and values in dialogue with others, for the purposes of clarifying who one is and what gives one’s life the unique meaning that it has. The need for intimate dialogue that facilitates the emergence of personal meaning is more than a relationship need – though it certainly is a key element in marriage and in other intimate relationships (Berger & Kellner, 1964). It is closely associated with the search for narrative coherence and integration as we create our personal narratives about why we act and how we make sense of challenging or traumatic events (Drewery & Winslade, 1997; Neimeyer, 1999; Siegel, 2010). The need to share one’s personal narrative, and to co-create stories with significant others that enable us to make sense of our lives, is a dimension of experience that goes beyond what is generally understood by relationship needs in the field of psychology. It represents the dialogical aspect of personal meaning.

All this is to say that there is a specific need for personal meaning, expressed in our dialogue with others and our internal dialogue with ourselves, that enables us to arrive at a clear understanding of who we are and what constitutes our core, authentic self. This need for personal meaning is distinct from the need for autonomy, in that it involves clarification of who we are vis-à-vis our relationships with others, rather than the internal vs. external locus of action. It is also distinct from the need for relationship as generally understood, in that it involves a process of creating shared meanings that occur within the context of relationship but which also transcend that context. The needs to be affirmed, to securely attach to others, to experience a sense of wholeness and okayness, are all important relationship needs. But beyond that, the need to collaborate with significant others in defining who one is, what one believes, what one ultimately cares about, and what

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ultimately matters, is a distinct need over and above what is generally included under the rubrics of relationship needs or autonomy needs. This is also to say that personal meaning involves not only the affirmation of value orientations that are wholeheartedly affirmed upon reflection – as the notion of autonomy requires – but also involves the authenticity of our ways of relating to others. Certainly part of that process of emerging authenticity comes from understanding what actions and purposes and goals can be wholeheartedly affirmed by the individual. But an equally important part of the story is the process of interaction with significant others through which one comes to define those purposes and goals as integral to one’s sense of self.

I would like to suggest that once meaning-oriented approaches recognize this relational/dialogical aspect of meaning making as a defining characteristic of personal meaning, then self-determination theorists might also recognize the role which personal meaning plays in explaining human motivation – over and above the needs for autonomy, competence, and relationship.

Personal Meaning and Self Actualization

Self-determination theory also postulates a self-actualizing tendency in the human organism, drawing on the insights of Rogers and Maslow and humanistic psychology (Hodgins & Knee, 2002; Maslow, 1968/1999; Rogers, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2002). This actualizing tendency is associated with the notion of autonomous action, in that it originates from within the organism rather than from external sources. Researchers in the tradition of self-determination theory distinguish defensive behavior that is associated with rigid adherence to external standards and values, from autonomous action that is characterized by openness to experience and the flexibility to modify fixed habits, beliefs, self-concept in light of changing circumstance and experiences, and an interest in learning and growth (Hodgins & Knee, 2002).

It is interesting that self-determination theory does not include self-actualization as a fundamental human need. It describes the actualizing tendency of the human organism as a propensity of the human organism when fundamental needs are being met, specifically the needs to autonomy, competence, and relationship. But it considers self-actualization as a desired outcome of need gratification, rather than a distinct need unto itself. In the words of Ryan and Deci:

SDT begins by embracing the assumption that all individuals have natural, innate, and constructive tendencies to develop an ever more elaborated and unified sense of self. That is, we assume people have a primary propensity to forge interconnections among aspects of their own psyches as well as with other individuals and groups in their social worlds . . . Social environments can, according to this perspective, either facilitate and enable the growth and integration of propensities with which the human psyche is endowed, or they can disrupt, forestall, and fragment these processes resulting in behaviors and inner experiences that represent the darker side of humanity. (Ryan & Deci, 2002, pp. 5-6)

They refer to this framework as a “dialectical view which concerns the interactions between an active, integrating human nature and social contexts that either nurture or impede the organism’s active nature” (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 6). This way of thinking about self-actualization is highly consistent with the construct of personal meaning as described in this paper. It assumes a natural tendency to integrate meaning contexts, including specifically social meaning contexts, as part of the natural process of self integration and actualization.

A meaning-oriented perspective strongly suggests that self-determination theory includes this actualizing tendency in the human psyche as a fundamental human need. It implies as much as when it indicates that the stifling of this basic human tendency toward self-actualization results in “inner experiences that represent the darker side of humanity.” Certainly, the human costs of not addressing this need for growth and self-integration are considerable, in the rigidities that lead to human intolerance and violence toward others who represent competing and threatening perspectives. The need to create more inclusive contexts of meaning through constructive dialogues with others is more than simply an outcome of the needs for autonomy, competence, and relationship – as important as these are. It can certainly be regarded as a distinct and indispensable human need, without which the conditions for human flourishing could not be met.

A fundamental need for meaning as a human motivation in its own right includes the discovery of a sense of purpose for oneself and an appreciation of the interconnections and interpretations of experience that bring a sense of coherence to one’s life, as we referenced earlier. This sense of purpose and coherence emerges through the narratives individuals co-construct with significant others. These key components of purpose, coherence, and dialogue help to orient
the individual to the specific potentialities to be actualized in a given situation. By focusing on this inherent actualizing tendency in our cognitive, emotional, and motivational frameworks, we can more clearly see how the needs for meaning and self-actualization are integrally related.

Cognitive-developmental psychology and theories of transformational learning have made similar points about the evolution of cognitive and normative frames of reference from childhood egocentricism to more mature and inclusive meaning contexts (Habermas, 1990; Kegan, 1982; Mezirow, 2000). Broader socio-historical developmental frameworks also describe stages in the evolution of society and culture, demonstrating how more complex and inclusive structures can evolve from earlier social forms (Beck & Cowan, 2006; Habermas, 1987; Hegel, 1910/1967). These developmental frameworks complement and enhance the research agenda of meaning-oriented research, identifying stages in the evolution of our meaning frameworks as aspects of the natural actualizing tendency of the human psyche and culture.

This need for personal meaning is also expressed in the study of personal narrative as a vehicle for integrating memories, current experiences and projected futures into a unified life story (Drewery & Winslade, 1997; McAdams, 1990; Neimeyer, 1999). Recent studies in the field of interpersonal neurobiology also emphasize the importance of personal narratives in integrating our sense of self and defining the fundamental attachment schemas which characterize our relationships with others and with ourselves (Siegel, 2010). This integrative tendency is grounded in the nature of our emotional lives, which establish patterns of self-regulation and ways of relating with others and with ourselves. These emotionally grounded narratives serve to define who we are as individuals in relationship with significant others, enabling us to both differentiate from and attach to significant others as we define our authentic sense of self.

The research agenda of meaning-oriented approaches to human motivation becomes more focused and ultimately more fruitful by collaborating with these other traditions in developmental psychology, transformation learning theory, self-determination theory, humanistic psychology, and interpersonal neurobiology – all of which are endeavoring to discover the key elements of the integrative and actualizing tendencies of the human psyche.

Higher Purpose and Self Actualization

This integral relationship between personal meaning and self-actualization has not always been clearly understood. There has been a tendency in Frankl’s work to define meaning as an essentially ethical construct and to distinguish it from self-actualization, which was perceived as self-focused and therefore incompatible with higher meaning. This potential interpretation of higher purpose as incompatible with self-actualization can lead to misunderstandings of both constructs, and deserves some attention in concluding these reflections. The notion of higher purpose is also important in clarifying the construct of personal meaning, as it is clearly a central component of what is usually meant by living a meaning-oriented life.

Frankl suggests at various points that a meaning-oriented approach to psychotherapy (e.g., logotherapy) is fundamentally incompatible with an approach focused on self-actualization. In Frankl’s words:

. . .the real aim of human existence cannot be found in what is called self-actualization. Human existence is essentially self-transcendence rather than self-actualization. Self-actualization is not a possible aim at all, for the simple reason that the more a man would strive for it, the more he would miss it. For only to the extent to which man commits himself to the fulfillment of his life’s meaning, to this extent he also actualizes himself. In other words, self-actualization cannot be attained if it is made an end in itself, but only as a side effect of self-transcendence. (Frankl, 1970, p. 175)

He appears to be rejecting a drive toward self-actualization as a legitimate psychological construct, much as one might reject a fundamental drive toward happiness. Both have the ironic and paradoxical quality that by pursuing them directly, we are less likely to achieve them.

Frankl focuses on the notion of responsibility as the key to accessing and fulfilling one’s will to higher meaning. For him responsibility is primarily a spiritual and ethical response to the demands of a given situation and what it asks of us (Frankl, 1973, pp. xv – xvi; Schweiker, 1999; Wong, 2012c). But it is also a response to the potentials and yearnings which arise within us – “what the patient [or individual] actually longs for in the depth of his being” (Frankl, 1970, p. 164). The issue here is one of discernment – how one recognizes one’s deepest yearnings for self-expression and fulfillment, coupled with a responsiveness to how others and our situation present opportunities for the expression and fulfillment of those
yearnings in service to others. The motivation begins from within, and finds opportunities for expression in the external needs and demands of the situation. As the educator Parker Palmer puts it:

True vocation joins self and service, as Frederick Buechner asserts when he defines vocation as “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.” Buechner’s definition starts with the self and moves toward the needs of the world: it begins wisely where vocation begins – not in what the world needs (which is everything) but in the nature of the human self, in what brings joy, the deep joy of knowing that we are here on earth to be the gifts that God created. (Palmer, 2000, pp. 16-17)

Palmer is clearly expressing his views from a spiritual perspective, which Frankl does as well in a more secular language. Both are addressing the spiritual need of the individual to serve others and some higher purpose, through the expression of one’s talents, yearnings, and sense of vocation.

What I believe Frankl is advocating is not a rejection of the notion of self-actualization, but rather a fuller interpretation of what that involves. If the self is equated with the ego and self-actualization is simply the fulfillment of ego-interests and desires, then this is indeed not true self-actualization. But if the self is understood as being-in-relationship with one’s world and specifically with other persons, then self-actualization is both the fulfillment of one’s unique individuality and the realization of the potentials for meaning and fulfillment inherent in the relationships and social contexts that define one’s specific situation. This notion of vocation and service is what Frankl calls out as the ethical/spiritual motivation toward meaning. It is oriented toward service and contribution, rather than ego-gratification. At the same time it is an aspect of the actualizing tendency of the human being to realize this notion of a higher self beyond instinct gratification and the pursuit of pleasure. This potential is inherent in situations where we are called upon to respond to the needs of those who matter to us.

A more inclusive and integrative view of higher meaning and purpose needs to acknowledge the integral connection between the need for personal meaning and the actualizing tendency in human life. This actualizing tendency, as we observed above in the discussion of developmental frameworks of meaning-making, includes a natural progression from more egocentric to more inclusive and universal perspectives of meaning and purpose. This represents a natural progression toward a sense of higher purpose and meaning, considered as part of the process of self-actualization.

This ethic of responsibility is also grounded in our interpersonal and social connectedness with one another. The tasks which life requires of us are communicated to us primarily through the voice of the other – either in the person of a loved one, a community, a group, a company, or a nation. The other in this sense is not an entity that is external to us or unrelated to our sense of self; it is actually through our connection with the other that we discover who we are at the core of our being (Friedman, 1955/2002; Kierkegaard, 2008; Lacan, 1998; Levinas, 1996). This point has been made among existentially-oriented philosophers and theologians who see a spiritual/ethical dimension in our relationship to the Transcendent Other and the basic integrity of life (Klemm & Schweiker, 2008). These reflections demonstrate the inherent sense of higher purpose and coherence in life that are implicit in our self-defining relationships with others.

This experience of intimate, engaged dialogue has been described throughout these reflections as a fundamental human need – one of the key components of this ethical dimension of personal meaning. It is an experience that is both other-oriented and inwardly oriented at the same time, putting us in touch with our deeper spiritual yearnings that lead us to desire connectedness with others and with the sense of unity in life. At this spiritual level all the dimensions of personal meaning come together – the search for purpose, coherence, and connectedness – in a unified sense that life has a sustaining meaning that enables us to endure even the most extreme challenges and inexplicable suffering.

**Conclusion**

This article has been an extended reflection on themes that were raised at the 7th Biennial International Meaning Conference, which have also been articulated in recent publications summarizing the research in this area. The reflections for the most part avoided philosophical and theological speculations about ultimate meaning and purpose, except to indicate briefly how notions of higher purpose and meaning may be grounded in our everyday experiences of personal meaning. They focused instead on personal meaning as a fundamental human need, and the role and importance of this need in motivating choices and actions in specified situations.

The article identified an emerging consensus regarding the definition of personal meaning as involving a sense of purpose and coherence in orienting individuals to future possibilities for hope and fulfillment. The argument was made that
this consensus reflected a cognitive-behavioral bias in the field, focusing on cognitive and goal-focused experiences and behaviors and neglecting the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of personal meaning. The main thrust of the article has been to show how relationship factors, and specifically self-defining dialogues with significant others, need to be included as essential components of personal meaning. It showed how this interpersonal dimension of personal meaning included more than is traditionally associated with a need for relationship per se – i.e., experiences of being affirmed, accurately seen and heard, and valued – and thus warranted being considered as a separate factor associated with the need for personal meaning. The experiences of communicative interactions with others were shown to be essential to the construction of personal meaning, as the vehicle through which individuals come to a clearer understanding of who they are and what they believe and value.

The article then explored the interconnections between the need for personal meaning and other closely associated needs defined in self-determination theory, positive psychology, humanistic psychology, interpersonal neurobiology, and narrative approaches to self integration. It showed how a meaning-oriented approach pointed toward a deeper understanding of personal authenticity and its relationship to autonomy, and also demonstrated directions for fuller analysis of relationship needs within the traditions of self-determination theory and positive psychology. It then explored the claim that self-actualization needs to be considered as a distinct need, including a fuller understanding of self-actualization as an aspect of personal meaning. Finally, it examined the notion of higher purpose and meaning as it relates to the ideal of self-actualization, including a reconsideration of Frankl’s views on the subject. My hope is that this paper serves to further that work by demonstrating the integrative possibilities of meaning-oriented research in relation to other prominent approaches to the study of human motivation and well-being.

References


Medlock, G. (2012a). *Authenticity as a core virtue within the normative framework of positive psychology*. Presentation at the 7th Biennial International Meaning Conference, Toronto, Canada.


