

Life Meanings and Goals: The Core Stone of Positive Well-being and a Flourished Life

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Abstract

“What is the meaning of life?” is probably the most cherished question ever asked by human beings. This paper aims to discuss this question from a psychological perspective and elucidate the importance of life meanings and goal pursuit in our psychological well-being and positive mental health. A meaning-oriented mindset is found to be the core stone of positive psychology and flourished living. It is necessary to distinguish the different meanings of meaning, such as meaning-as-significance and meaning-as-comprehensibility, as well as the global meaning of life and the situational meaning in life. Life meanings are often actualized through concrete goal pursuits which are shown to be a major benchmark for the experience of well-being. The differences between intrinsic goals and extrinsic goals, as well as approach goals and avoidant goals were highlighted. Lastly, the clinical implications and applications of life meanings and goals with reference to various meaning- or goal-oriented psychotherapies were discussed in this paper.

Keywords: meaning of life, goal striving, positive well-being

Introduction

“What is the meaning of life?” is probably the most cherished question ever asked by human beings. However, there is no easy answer and it involves multi-dimensional considerations including cultural, social, economic, philosophical, psychological, moral and spiritual. Solomon, one of the wisest persons who ever lived, had pondered upon this challenge thoroughly a long time ago in the book of Ecclesiastes. This paper attempts to address this question mainly

from a psychological perspective relying on the literature of psychological theories and studies. I would argue that the meaning of life is both global and situational, and is actualized through the individual’s pursuit of life goals, and both meaning of life and life goals are the core stone of the well-being of an individual and a flourished life.

Why is the meaning of life so important?

Meaning of life has not been the central theme in the psychological studies of well-

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being. In the recent positive psychology movement, happiness, not meaning, has all along been the spotlight of attention. Martin Seligman, the founder of this movement, has chosen 'authentic happiness' for the title of his first positive psychology book. There has been numerous number of books on happiness since the inauguration of the positive psychology movement, such as "Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment" (Ben-Shahar, 2007), "How of Happiness" (Lyubomirsky, 2007), "The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology that Fuel Success and Performance at Work" (Achor, 2010), etc. Happiness is regarded as the ultimate concern of the individuals, and the authors often postulated different levels or kinds of happiness, some being more gratifying and long lasting than others.

This trend of happiness mindset has been recently challenged and a more meaning-oriented mindset was advocated by some authors in the pursuit of well-being and a flourished life (cf. Wong, 1998, 2012). Even Seligman himself (2011) has modified his previous happiness model to a well-being model of positive psychology, recognizing the importance of meaning as one of the five pillars of well-being. Indeed, research shows that indicators of meaningfulness of life predict positive functioning such as happiness and life satisfaction, whereas indicators of meaninglessness are often associated with psychological distress and pathology (Baumeister, 1991; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). It seems to suggest that a meaningful life is the pre-requisite for a genuinely happy and satisfying life.

The distinction between global meaning and situational meaning of life

People usually have an intuitive sense that the term life meaning refers to the degree to which individuals are living (or have

lived) their lives in meaningful, fulfilling, and satisfying ways. These individuals usually possess a valued life purpose whose fulfillment would lead to life satisfaction and well-being. It is important to distinguish though the difference between global meaning and situational meaning of life. The global meaning of life refers to "the existential belief that life has purpose and coherence whereby the individual attempts to understand how life events fit into a larger context" (Reker & Wong, 2012, p. 433). It addresses the experience of meaning and asks such questions as "What is worth living for?" and "What is the purpose of life?"

The second term situational meaning refers to "the attachment of personal significance to specific experiences in life whereby the individual tries to make sense of that experience" (Reker & Wong, 2012, p. 434). It involves the process of assigning or structuring meaning and addresses the meaning of experience. I believe that these two aspects of meaning represent the top-down and bottom-up approaches of personal meaning, both of which are essential to the full understanding of human experience and well-being.

There are other scholars who have postulated similar concepts of personal meaning. Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Larson (1988) differentiated between two construals of meaning or ways of understanding: sense making and benefit finding. The former is more closely tied to the concept of global meaning' and the latter to the concept of situational meaning. Similarly, Janoff-Bulman and Frantz (1997) distinguished between meaning-as-significance (the value or worth of life events) and meaning-as-comprehensibility (making sense of life events).

Reker and Wong (1988) postulated that the global meaning consists of three interrelated components: cognitive, motivational, and affective. There are a large number of studies

demonstrating the importance of global meaning in the buffering of stress; in the enhancement of physical, psychological, and mental well-being; and in transcending negative life experiences (e.g. Fry, 2000, Newcomb & Harlow, 1986). On the other hand, the situational meaning making process attempts to understand the value and purpose of specific experiences in life on a day-to day basis. This ongoing quest for meaning in daily events serves as a source of the development of a higher, ultimate, or global meaning. Reker and Wong (1988) maintained that a full understanding of personal meaning requires both a top-down (holistic) and a bottom-up (elemental) view of life. The meaning of life contains only meanings that are actualized through specific activities, quests and goals. On the other hand, specific sources of meaning need to be integrated into a larger and higher purpose, i.e. global meaning of life.

Moreover, Reker and Wong (1988) further contended that a contextual model of personal meaning should consist of four levels: 1) self-preoccupation with hedonistic pleasure and comfort; 2) devotion of time and energy to the realization of personal potential; 3) service to others and commitment to a larger societal or political cause; 4) the entertainment of values that transcend individuals and encompass cosmic meaning and ultimate purpose. The first level belongs to the shallow end, whereas the third and the fourth levels are at the deep end which are deemed more conducive to the development of well-being and a flourished life. In addition, while individuals can create meaning through making choices, taking actions, and entering into relationships, they can also discover meaning through reflection on the givens of life, such as the existence of the universe.

This contextual model of meaning has been tested in empirical studies. Results showed that individuals who experience meaning at deeper levels through personal

growth and self-transcendence score higher on a measure of global meaning and are more fulfilled and satisfied with life compared to individuals who experience meaning through self-preoccupation and individualism. These findings provide strong support for Frankl's (1963) proposition that a deeper sense of meaning can be discovered only when an individual moves toward a self-transcendent state.

What are the themes of transcendent values and beliefs in the pursuit of existential, ultimate meaning of life? Wong (2010) postulated that existential meaning is related to seven core questions about life: 1) Who am I? 2) What should I do with my life to make it worthwhile? 3) What can I do to find happiness and life satisfaction? 4) How can I make the right choices in the age of moral ambiguity and conflicting values? 5) Where do I belong and where do I call home? 6) What is the point of living in the face of suffering and death? 7) What happens after death? These questions are concerned with one's philosophy of life and worldviews in making sense of life. Wong argued that not everyone is conscious of the quest for these philosophical or existential meanings of life, but the lacking of such meanings would produce emptiness and superficial gratification, which would compromise one's sense of well-being and fulfillment. Such quest for existential meaning will be more prominent and revived in the midst of life adversity and trauma when the pre-existing beliefs of the individual are often challenged or even shattered.

Goal striving and meaning in life

It should be noted that some scholars are quite skeptical of the above quest for existential meaning of life as it is deemed too elusive and philosophical and no true answer can be possibly attained. They would rather advocate finding meaning in life through the development of a structure to everyday life

that consists of various ways of engaging the self with the world (Klinger, 1977). In this way, the focus is on meaning in life rather than the meaning of life, which refers to beliefs of the ultimate meaning of life or existence (King, Eells, & Burton, 2004). King postulated that there are 3 universal routes to acquiring meaning from life experiences: through belonging, doing, and understanding. These three aspects of meaning are fundamental because they reflect the spheres of life, the basic ways people interact or engage in the world, and fundamental human needs.

Research shows that engagement in meaningful activity and commitment to important life situations provide a strong sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 1987) and contribute to hardiness, resilience, and a sense of self-efficacy (Kobasa, 1979). Emmons (2003) illustrated how meaningful living can be expressed through the pursuit of personally significant goals which is conducive to positive well-being. Research indicates that goal pursuit and attainment is a major benchmark for the experience of wellness. For many people, the primary goal in life is to be happy; however, happiness is often a by-product of participating in worthwhile projects and activities; for instance, Frisch (1998) defined happiness as ‘the extent to which important goals, needs, and wishes have been fulfilled’ (p. 35).

Therefore, meaning in life is mainly actualized through the pursuit and attainment of specific life goals. Without goals, life would lack structure and purpose. Goals are the concretized expression of future orientation and life purpose (Emmons, Cheung, & Tehrani, 1998). Goals, according to Klinger (1998), serve as ‘the linchpin of psychological organization’ (p. 44). Goals are signals that orient a person to what is valuable, meaningful, and purposeful. However, not any kind of goals would lead to life satisfaction and well-being; some goals are apparently better than others. We would examine the different types

of goals and motivations and their relationships to physical and psychological well-being in the next session.

Intrinsic vs. extrinsic goals

Although there is little doubt about the psychological benefits of goal pursuing, not all goals are created equal, and not all goal attainment is equally healthy.

The research of Emmons (2003) has shown that three types of goal strivings have consistently related to subjective well-being, including intimacy striving, generativity striving and spirituality striving. Intimacy strivings concern establishing deep and mutually gratifying relationships. Generativity strivings involves giving of oneself to others and having an influence on future generations. Spiritual strivings refer to goals that are oriented around the sacred and the ultimate purpose of life. This involves the recognition of a transcendent dimension of reality and the desire to establish a relationship with that reality. In contrast, people with power strivings reflecting a desire to impress or control others and together with self-sufficiency strivings are found to be at risk for lower well-being and poorer physical health (Emmons, 2003).

The benefits of goal striving is found to be much related to the types of needs being satisfied by the goal attainment. Kasser and Ryan (1993) have distinguished between goals that serve intrinsic needs and goals that are extrinsic in that they serve other less inherently satisfying needs. This is often associated with the theory of intrinsic and extrinsic motives (Ryff, 1989). Research shows that rated importance of extrinsic goals was positively associated with measures of anxiety, depression, narcissism, and physical illness symptoms, whereas people who possessed the intrinsic goals of personal growth and community

contribution reported higher level of subjective well-being.

Goal striving and need satisfaction

This theory of intrinsic vs. extrinsic motives is best conceptualized in the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) which postulates that ‘to find true meaning, individuals must get to know who they truly are – that is, know what is valuable and important to them – and act in accord with that knowledge.’ (Weinstein et al., 2012). Ryan and Deci (2000) contended that only by meeting the intrinsic needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence one can have a true sense of life meaning and fulfillment, whereas extrinsic values, goals, and purposes typically do not yield basic need satisfactions. The need for competence refers to the necessity of people being and feeling effective in acting on the world. The need for autonomy refers to the evolved importance to people of experiencing their behavior as self-organized and, therefore, accompanied by a sense of volition and self-endorsement, i.e. having an internal locus of control. The social environment is most desirable when it supports people’s autonomy by encouraging actions that are in accord with their true needs. The need for relatedness refers to the inherent requirement of feeling close to and connected to others in the world and of caring for and being cared for by them. Life is seen as meaningful and fulfilling when these intrinsic basic needs are satisfied and actualized in the daily living. A life purpose would yield well-being to the extent that the purpose is truly need satisfying.

An interesting study showed that there is a positive relationship between the searching for meaning, need satisfaction, and well-being (Weinstein, Ryan, and Deci, 2008). However, when controlling for the effects of need satisfaction, researchers found that pursuing meaning no longer predicted any of these positive outcomes. This finding

suggests that need satisfaction mediated the relations between pursuing life meaning and the indicators of well-being. The authors conclude that one derives life meaning when he or she engages purposes that satisfy the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Similar conclusions are also drawn from research on people’s narratives. Research on people’s life narratives showed that people whose life stories emphasized intrinsic aspirations (growth, affiliation, and generativity) displayed greater well-being than those whose stories emphasized the extrinsic goals of wealth, status, approval, and physical appearance (Bauer, McAdams & Sakaeda, 2005). It is only those life meanings that are conducive to basic need satisfaction would foster well-being. Therefore, not every meaning or goal a person embraces is beneficial, and some may be empty and compensatory in nature. When basic needs are thwarted individuals would attach themselves to values and purposes that may promote a sense of worth, such as values of wealth, fame, or an attractive external image; however, the outcome would not be positive in the long run as they are not concordant with the intrinsic aspirations of the individual.

Approach vs. avoidant goals

Besides goal contents, the goal orientation is also deemed important to our well-being. In terms of goal orientation, Emmons and Kaiser (1996) maintained that people who are striving to attain positive, desirable goals as opposed to striving to avoid negative, aversive goals reportedly have higher subjective well-being. The difference between these two orientations is whether positive or negative outcomes are used as benchmark for self-regulatory activity. Approach goals are positive incentives to be sought after and moved toward whereas avoidant goals are negative consequences to be avoided or prevented (Elliot & Sheldon, 1998,

Emmons, 1999). For example, a person may strive to ‘spend time with others’ versus ‘avoid being lonely’. On average, between 10 and 20% of a person’s goals tend to be avoidant goals which are associated with less positive psychological outcomes as compared to approach striving (Emmons, 1999). In general, a lifestyle built mainly on avoidant goals is regarded as a psychological vulnerability that places the individual at risk for emotional and physical ill-being. People with distress or pathology are often incapable of formulating positive approach goals. One of the main objectives of counseling and psychotherapy is to help clients re-construct the orientation of their life goals moving from the negative avoidant type to the positive approach type, so that they are not just trying to reduce symptoms or unhappiness but would strive for happiness and good quality of life.

The clinical applications of meaning of life and goal striving

Do the above discussions of meaning of life and goal striving have any clinical implications? The answer is definitely yes. First of all, research shows that the lack of meaning or sense of meaninglessness is correlated with symptomatology and ill-being (Ryff, 1989). Often the shattering of life meaning and goals as in the case of trauma and setback is directly responsible for the development of mental disorders. It is vital to assess and understanding this process of meaning loss or meaninglessness in counseling and psychotherapy. In fact, the theme of meaning exploration and reconstruction is quite common or even central in many psychotherapy models, whether pertaining to global meaning or situational meaning of life. Acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999), a recent development in the camp of cognitive therapies, postulates the importance of valued living for psychological well-being; clients are encouraged to identify their core values in the major life domains and to pursuit the implementation of these values in their daily living. Discrepancies

between the rated importance of life domains and actual time and efforts invested in those domains are highlighted and clients would be encouraged to live according to their committed values. One point worth noting is that in this therapy model there is no discussion of which values are more adaptive or healthy than others; it is totally up to the clients to decide upon their values and life goals. It is assumed that pursuing and committing to one’s own value-based life goals would guarantee a satisfying life and well-being.

It would definitely be incomplete in the discussion of meaning of life in the clinical setting if logotherapy (Frankl, 1946, 1986) and meaning-centered counseling and therapy (Wong, 1997, 1999), a therapy model developed out of logotherapy and existential therapy, were not introduced here. Logotherapy simply means therapy through meaning. Frankl regarded logotherapy a spiritually oriented approach to psychotherapy. Logos signifies ‘the spiritual’ and beyond that ‘the meaning’. Frankl’s own experience in the Nazi concentration camp embodied Nietzsche’s dictum: “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how” (as cited in Frankl, 1946/1985, p. 97). To discover the meaning of suffering is essential to meaningful living. Frankl suggested three ways of finding meaning: 1) giving or contributing something to the world through our work, 2) experiencing something or encountering someone, and 3) choosing a courageous attitude toward unavoidable suffering. The first pathway, the creative pathway, focuses on giving gifts through the work one does. The second pathway, the experiential pathway, focuses on receiving gifts from life, savoring every moment and appreciating the gifts of relationships and gifts from nature. The third pathway, the attitudinal pathway, is especially important in the situation of unavoidable suffering. These attitudinal values and the defiant human spirit are most important to human survival and flourishing in the face of tragedy and adversity. Every crisis can be an opportunity for personal transformation and mature development. This

attitudinal pathway attains to some transcendent, universal values bigger, higher, and more long-lasting than the self. Frankl contended that worldviews and life orientation are far more important to how we live our lives than our cognitions and behaviors in specific situations.

Meaning-centered counseling and therapy (MCCT) represents a “meaning-oriented positive psychotherapy, which taps into people’s innate capacities for self-reflection, meaning construction, responsible action, and personal growth” (Wong, 2012, p. 631). It is integrative in approach, assimilating cognitive-behavioral, narrative, cross-cultural, existential and positive therapies. It helps clients acquire existential insight and psychological skills to transform and transcend unavoidable predicaments and pursue worthy life goals. This approach emphasizes that there is always something worth living for. There is no hopeless case for positive change as human beings have almost unlimited capacity to construct complex meaning systems which can protect them from negative life experiences and empower them to make life worth living in difficult times. Wong has also adopted the concept of tragic optimism in logotherapy in the face of unavoidable suffering and identified the following key ingredients of tragic optimism: acceptance, affirmation, courage, faith, and self-transcendence. Given that negative events and suffering are an inevitable part of human existence, MCCT emphasizes the transformation of problems into positive potentials for clients. A meaning-centered therapist would pay attention to how the interventions can contribute to the underlying processes of meaning seeking, meaning making, and meaning reconstruction.

So far only meaning orientation is emphasized in therapy, but how about the role of goal striving? Hope therapy (Synder, 2000, 2002), a form of positive psychotherapy, is regarded as an exemplar of therapies focusing on goal setting and attainment. Hope therapy is a cognitive-behavioral therapy for a goal-directed living. Synder (2002) postulated hope as “goal-directed thinking in which the

person utilizes pathways thinking (perceived capacity to find routes to desired goals) and agency thinking (requisite motivation to use those routes)” (p. 45). Hope serves to drive the emotions and well-being of people. Only those goals with considerable value to the individual are considered applicable to hope. Hope consists of three essential components: goal, pathways thinking, and agency thinking. There are four categories of hopeful goals: 1) approach goals (moving toward a desired outcome), 2) forestalling negative outcome goals (delaying unwanted occurrences), 3) maintenance goals (sustaining status quo), 4) enhancing goals (augmenting an already positive outcome). In terms of pathways thinking, high hope people are good at finding alternate routes to their goals. In terms of agency thinking, high hope people have self-referential thoughts to move along a pathway and have motivation and persistence to continue to progress along the pathway in the face of impediments and obstacles. They would embrace agentic phrases in self-talk such as “I can do this” and “I’m not going to be stopped”. Research shows that high hope people have higher scores in measures of self-esteem, life satisfaction, meaning of life, happiness and optimism. They also have better social relationships and support and would excel in performance (Synder, 2002). Hope therapy consists of therapeutic strategies of accentuating hope in clients, including hope finding, hope bonding, hope enhancing and hope reminding interventions. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of hope therapy in accentuating hope and well-being in various clientele, including cancer patients (Synder, 2000, Taylor, 2000).

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the importance of life meanings and goals in the development and maintenance of well-being of the individuals. Psychological theories and research show that people who are aware of and committed to their core values, have a sense that their lives are meaningful and

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purposeful, and actively pursue their life goals have higher level of happiness and life satisfaction. They are also more resilient to adversity and setbacks in life and may even have greater chance to have post-traumatic growth experiences (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). Since the search for meaning is such a central and important endeavor in life, we cannot afford to ignore it if we aim to promote positive well-being and mental health. Also, its implications in psychotherapy and clinical work should be further explored. There are already some schools of therapies explicitly focusing on life meanings and goals, such as acceptance and commitment therapy, logotherapy, meaning therapy, and hope therapy. The recent development of positive psychology with its emphasis on meaningfulness and flourished life is also a very positive and promising development.

摘要

人生意義與目標：正向心理與豐盛人生的基石

人生意義乃人類自有文明以來不斷尋索的問題，本文從心理學，尤其是正向心理學的角度來探討這重要課題，並指出生活意義與目標對心理健康極為重要，乃正向心理與豐盛人生的基石。本文嘗試區分生命整體意義與生活中的意義，而目標的追求乃意義的具體體現。目標亦可分為內在目標和外在外在目標，而兩者與正向心理的關係各異。最後，本文介紹各種的意義或目標為本的心理治療手法及其與提升心理健康的關係。

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