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Making Meaning in Life

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The annals of global exploration are peppered with amusing stories about seafaring captains who were convinced they had discovered some new world, or a new route to a well-known world. A flotilla of ships would drop anchor and the explorer would row ashore and declare to the perplexed local inhabitants that they had been discovered. As in the case of Christopher Columbus and North America, it seems that the narrative and purpose of the voyage neatly and resiliently framed his experience. The comedian Louis CK jokes about the first meeting between Columbus—who intended to reach India—and the Caribbean inhabitants who greeted him:

We came here, and they're like, "Hi."
And we're like, "Hey, you're Indians, right?"
And they're like, "No."
"No, this is India, right?"
"No, it's not, it's a totally other place."
"You're not Indians?"
"No."
"Naahhh, you're Indians."

Part of Louis CK's joke is that, of course, we *still* call indigenous Americans "Indians."

These explorers seem to exemplify a tendency ancient fabulists and religious scribes had warned of for centuries: People adeptly discover or even manufacture evidence for their beliefs. From the elephant and the blind men, who describe a different beast for the body part each happens to feel, to the mythological Greek and Old Testament people who are ever accidentally procreating with swans, sisters, and other people's disguised spouses, the human tendency to assert the inner world of beliefs, ideas, and meanings onto the external world has fascinated us.

Many of us social scientists imagine that we are researching unique, noble constructs, each representing a singular slice of the human experience. That cannot be true for all of us, so the task and challenge of learning more about the phenomena that fascinate us is always accompanied by the task and challenge of learning how to unite our research with other research in the field. As such, our field always needs new frameworks—dare I say meaning frameworks?—for integrating our work. It is very worth considering the meaning maintenance model (MMM) proposed in the target article by Travis

Proulx and Michael Inzlicht (this issue) as one such framework.

Almost as if they were subjects in their own experiments, Proulx and Inzlicht assemble disparate threads from many different psychological disciplines into a new, but familiar, fabric. Their central argument, that many psychological phenomena can be explained by a basic tendency for people to engage in compensatory psychological actions to remedy violations of their understandings of the world, resonates with much research in my own field. Those who study meaning in life often have argued that people seek to build meaning in their lives, defend it from threats, and repair it from damage (e.g., Battista & Almond, 1973; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Reker & Wong, 1988; Steger, 2009, 2012; Steger & Frazier, 2005; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). Scholars have sought to articulate the kinds of meaning people experience at varying levels of abstraction—from the meaning of words to the meaning of "life, the universe, and everything" (Park, 2010). My commentary considers the contribution of Proulx and Inzlicht from the perspective of meaning in life research. In particular, I wish to consider (a) how the MMM might be used to help identify and test the building blocks of meaning in life and (b) ways in which the MMM might be developed to move beyond a reactive perspective of meaning maintenance to a proactive perspective of meaning creation.

Meaning in Life

Viktor Frankl (1963) is commonly cited in meaning in life research as a founding inspiration. Frankl argued that people function best when they perceive a sense of meaning and possess a life purpose, a unique mission to strive for throughout their lives. Frankl's early example has stimulated hundreds of research studies (for reviews, see Steger, 2009, 2012; Steger & Shin, 2012), and meaning in life is widely considered to be a critical ingredient in human well-being and flourishing (Kobau, Snizek, Zack, Lucas, & Burns, 2010; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Samman, 2007; Seligman, 2011; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008).

There are several different models and theories of what meaning in life is. Scholars have argued that meaning is making sense of life (Battista & Almond, 1973), and also that there is an affective quality to

meaning (Reker & Wong, 1988); that meaning is primarily nurtured by goal-directed behavior (Klinger, 1977; Ryff & Singer, 1998); that meaning is linked to transcendent or spiritual concerns (Emmons, 2003; Mascorro, Rosen, & Morey, 2004; Reker, 2000); or that meaning comes from a sense of self-worth, efficacy, self-justification, and purpose (Baumeister, 1991). Further confusing things is a tendency in the field to use the terms “meaning” and “purpose” interchangeably. However, despite this array of ideas and a lack of precision in terminology, scholars do not consider meaning and purpose to be equivalent. Rather, meaning is seen as a superordinate term that encompasses two main dimensions (Steger, 2009; Steger et al., 2006). The first dimension is comprehension, which is the ability to make sense of and understand one’s life, including one’s self, the external world, and how one fits with and operates within the world. In essence, comprehension refers to an interconnected network of schemas crafted into a meaning framework for life. The second dimension is purpose, which is one or more overarching, long-term life aspirations that are self-concordant and motivate relevant activity (Steger, Sheline, Merriman, & Kashdan, in press).

The Building Blocks of Meaning in Life

If we accept that the principle dimensions of meaning in life are comprehension and purpose—and perhaps future research will establish other dimensions as well—the MMM organizes a wealth of information and insight that can be brought to bear on identifying how people achieve and maintain their comprehension of their lives. Some of these ideas have been proposed before. For example, following a traumatic event, people are thought to engage in a struggle to reconcile the immediate, situational meaning of the event with the more enduring, global meaning that corresponds with meaning in life (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Park, 2010; Steger & Park, 2012). When people reframe their situational meaning to fit with their global meaning, it is called assimilation; when people are forced to revise their global meaning in the face of trauma, it is called accommodation (Park, 2010).

These are versions of the first two “A”s of the MMM. In innumerable small ways, we might anticipate that people are interpreting their circumstances in light of their life’s meaning framework. Through iterations of assimilation and accommodation, comprehension of life ought to be honed, improved, tested, and optimized to fit with actual experience. One benefit to meaning in life research of the MMM is that it points to the need to do a better job of tracing the contents of people’s meaning frameworks and assess their development over time. Even when the contents of meaning frameworks are assessed, as in sources

of meaning research (e.g., Schnell, 2009), it is common to treat assessments as providing stable information about what aspects of life help create meaning. Very little is known, however, about whether people’s sources of meaning reflect their behavior, change over time and in response to which kinds of experiences, or whether successes and failures relevant to sources of meaning impact perceptions of meaning in life.

There is more research supporting the role of the third “A” of the MMM, affirmation, in people’s experience of meaning in life. As Proulx and Inzlicht review, research driven by several fluid compensation theories show that people will affirm values and other aspects of meaning, such as self-worth or cultural worldview, when they encounter violations of their meaning frameworks. The work of Hicks and colleagues (e.g., Hicks & King, 2007; Hicks, Schlegel, & King, 2010) shows that this affirmation appears to happen when it comes to meaning in life judgments, as well.

There does not seem to be any published research that can link the postulated processes of abstraction and assembly to meaning in life research. Part of the disconnect between MMM and meaning in life may come from the emphasis of the MMM on existing meaning frameworks, as well as on fairly concrete and discrete units of meaning. Major questions in meaning in life research focus on how people develop their sense of meaning over time and how people access and utilize their sense of meaning in life. There is an assumption in this field that the meanings people find in their own lives are legitimate and substantive, not illusory cognitions that arise to prevent the disorientation of meaning violations. Where learning artificial grammars and enhanced creativity in response to lab-induced meaning violations suggest that the brain is working to resolve a momentary blip, meaning in life researchers presume they are studying a fundamental orientation of the person to the world, embracing all that is important and vital to someone’s past, present, and future. What is most interesting to me is that we, as meaning in life researchers, have not yet fully established that this is true. Yes, meaning in life is linked concurrently and prospectively with a huge range of desirable psychological and physical outcomes (including living longer; Boyle, Barnes, Buchman, & Bennett, 2009). However, there have been no tests of whether the way the brain strives to restore meaning in low-stakes lab experiments is sufficient to account for the kind of meaning and purpose in life that Frankl argued inspired his survival of Nazi concentration camps.

The MMM should help direct meaning in life research to focus on the contents of meaning frameworks, how and when people acquire and maintain them, and whether the contents or sources of meaning in life bear on overall well-being. Some research

has used daily experience sampling methods to better understand the day-to-day dynamics of meaning in life judgments (e.g., Steger & Frazier, 2005; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008). No research has used similar methods to peer into how people's sources of meaning manifest in daily life, however.

One can also infer from the MMM that we should be open to the possibility that the judgment of meaning in life that we are researching is nothing more or less than an "all-clear" signal from the brain's meaning violation detector. Essentially, this would suggest that if the brain is not being challenged to make sense of a simple, discrete stimulus or experience, then it emits the signal that it has made sense of life, the universe, and everything.

Proactive Versus Reactive Meaning Making

Meaning in life research initially seemed most attracted to outlining the perils of meaninglessness. The heritage of existentialism pushed to the fore questions of death, isolation, uselessness, experiential relativism, the pointlessness of violence and suffering, and the impossibility to ever really know what was true in life or death. The focus was on how people would respond to violations of centuries-old assurances about what was true and dependable. There seemed to be an assumption that people would be perpetually searching for meaning in their lives in response to these vexing problems (Frankl, 1963; Maddi, 1970). The MMM also focuses on how people respond to meaning violations. Proulx and Inzlicht argue that meaning violations create physiological arousal. The observed effects reviewed in the target article appear fairly nonspecific and consistent with mild stress or perhaps even mental effort. Nonetheless, if meaning violations do create mild stress, and the accompanying physiological arousal is aversive, then people who frequently encounter violations may be carrying a greater stress load (cf. "allostatic load"; McEwen, 1998). Several studies have linked stress to worse physical and psychological health (e.g., Justera, McEwen, & Lupien, 2010). The consequences of chronic stress may be one way in which to link the discrete meaning violation compensation efforts targeted by the MMM and the preponderance of research linking meaning in life with better well-being and health.

Early theoretical work on people's search for meaning in life was divided on whether it was natural and healthy to search for meaning or whether searching for meaning was an indicator of psychological dysfunction (for review, see Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008b). One inference that can be drawn from the MMM is that people who frequently encounter meaning violations, or struggle to ameliorate the aversive psychological and physiological arousal that ap-

pear to accompany such violations may be those who are most likely to be searching for meaning. This idea would help explain why research often finds positive correlations between searching for meaning and psychological distress and negative correlations between searching for meaning and well-being indicators such as life satisfaction (e.g., Park, 2010; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, et al., 2008). At the same time, similar research also suggests that the search for meaning is not related to distress and a lack of well-being among people who also feel life is highly meaningful (e.g., Cohen & Cairns, 2012; Park et al., 2010; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, et al., 2008; Steger, Oishi, & Kesebir, 2011), or people from some non-Western cultures (i.e., Japan; Steger, Kawabata, Shimai, & Otake, 2008). Perhaps these are people who feel confident about, or even excited by, the prospect of resolving meaning violations.

In the past few decades, however, meaning in life research has shifted focus to identifying the presumed benefits of operating of finding one's life to be meaningful. As such, recent theory has striven more to describe how positive meaning in life develops than to describe how meaning fails to develop or how it is lost (e.g., Wong, 2012). Is there a way in which the MMM could generate hypotheses about the development of positive meaning in life? Can the MMM be adapted to help predict how people proactively develop meaning rather than reactively defend and restore meaning? The research cited in defense of the MMM suggests that meaning systems liberally borrow from cultural beliefs and worldviews, as well as personal attitudes, a sense of self-worth, perceived control over one's fate, and reliance on our sensations and perceptions. These constructs are not so different than the foundations for meaning in life that have been implicated (e.g., Baumeister, 1991; Steger, 2009; Steger et al., in press). Yet, one impression of the MMM is that it proposes that making meaning is fairly passive, that meaning violation detection is subconscious, and that compensation and restoration are similarly automatic. It would be very informative to see what the effects of instruction would be. Would informing research participants of the research on efforts to compensate for meaning violations reduce their reactivity to perplexing stimuli? Would helping them practice the five "A"s of meaning maintenance help them effectively redress meaning violations?

Framing the MMM in this way clarifies a strong resemblance to the way in which cognitive therapy views human vulnerability to psychological disorders. Cognitive therapy perceives psychological disorders as arising from maladaptive and self-defeating thoughts that both consciously and automatically magnify problems and diminish one's perceived capacity to solve them (Beck & Weishaar, 2008). Cognitive therapy works with clients to solve problems by identifying

maladaptive and self-defeating thoughts and helping them create and practice more adaptive and effective thoughts and self-talk. This is an oversimplification of a rich therapeutic modality, yet it adds another point of convergence with the MMM. The psychotherapeutic literature often has danced around the idea that people's habitual, ingrained meaning systems set them on a path to distress and that avoiding such distress means rehabilitating the underlying meaning systems that are endangering them (Steger et al., in press; Wong, 1998). The MMM is consistent with this idea, and the notion that people who have developed maladaptive meaning in life frameworks have an increased likelihood to struggle, as their comprehension of existence or their purpose in life crashes headlong again and again into the immovable reality of their own capacity and the nature of the world (Steger & Park, 2012; Steger et al., in press).

Toward the end of their article, Proulx and Inzlicht muse on the relationship between the content of the meaning framework that is violated and the nature and effectiveness of compensation efforts that follow. It seems likely that helping people to understand the contents of their meaning frameworks would provide them with a basis for experimenting in their own lives. Using methods developed in cognitive therapy and other psychotherapies, this new understanding of the mechanics of meaning maintenance could generate new and improved interventions for proactively building meaning in life.

Conclusion

The MMM elaborated upon by Proulx and Inzlicht is highly appealing to meaning in life researchers. After all, many of us have been drawn to this area of research and application because meaning in life seems to hold so much potential for integrating the most vital and generative aspects of the human condition. Meaning in life research gazes up the hierarchical ladder of abstraction to notions of cosmic meaning, self-transcendence, spirituality, and universality. By helping the field of meaning in life research climb down the ladder a little bit and focus on questions of how the brain makes, detects, defends, and repairs meaning, the MMM provides a promising perspective on revitalizing our scientific quest to understand how people gather myriad streams of experience into the catch basin of consciousness.

Note

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