

The experience of meaning in life from a psychological perspective

by

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Abstract

Psychological research about the experience of meaning in life and related concepts is reviewed, and an attempt is made to clarify the meaning of these concepts. The thesis is forwarded that the experience of meaning in life can be understood as “being able to perceive opportunities for rewarding emotional experience,” or more simply, as having things one looks forward to. Other topics presented or discussed in this paper include:

- * A chronology of meaning-in-life research.
- * The assessment of meaning-in-life-related concepts.
- * The experiences of purpose in life and psychological well-being.
- * The role of meaning in life throughout the life span.
- * Types of experiences people consider to be meaningful.
- * What it actually is/how it actually feels to experience meaning.
- * Transitions from experiencing life as meaningless to experiencing life as meaningful.
- * The motivation and resolution of concerns about *the meaning of life*.
- * The interaction between culture and the experience of meaning in life.

Throughout the paper, reviews of previous research and theory are used to illustrate the appropriateness of the conceptualization of the experience of meaning in life presented in this paper.

Introduction

The nebulosity of language, which Skinner (1971) and others have harped on was brought home to me in writing this paper. It is not at all easy to understand what people mean when they say they are experiencing meaning in life. While I would like to believe this paper presents a helpful discussion of the nature of meaning in life, you will have to decide whether the interpretation presented here captures some of what is essential about your experience of meaning, or if I succeed only in exchanging some vague words for others. A fuller understanding of meaning will have to wait for an exploration of language, specifically of how it is we can know whether an experience was meaningful or not without reading a treatise such as this, and of the degree to which the concepts discussed here exist only within one particular culture, and perhaps only a subset of that culture. It does seem that we humans use many words which are in fact creating something out of nothing (or very little), and that many devote their lives to pursuing what may exist only in language and in their minds. “Ideal” seems to be an example, as does “true love,” or even “love,” which we might “know” yet not be sure what it is, how it comes about, persists, or ceases to be. However, we do use the words “freedom,” “dignity,” “love,” and “meaning,” and we mean something by each of them. I believe some good can come of trying to understand what we mean by “the experience of meaning.”

In brief, the concept detailed in this paper is that the experience of meaning in life can be understood as “being able to perceive opportunities for rewarding emotional experience,” or more simply, as having things one looks forward to. Throughout this paper that idea, as well as other new concepts presented here, will often be referred to as “the POREE concept,” or “the POREE conceptualization of the experience of meaning in life.”

Perceiving opportunities for rewarding emotional experience involves being aware that certain interactions are important to you. These awarenesses are arrived at through a process which always involves the emotional evaluation of information, and may sometimes involve the application of language-based, rational thought processes. For example, a person might *feel* that spending time with her friends is important to her, which is primarily an emotion-based evaluation. A person could also decide that it is important to go to college *because* going to college could lead to various emotionally desirable outcomes. Such an awareness is arrived at through both the emotional evaluation of possible outcomes and the use of reason to determine how to best achieve those outcomes.

I will not explain the POREE concept further immediately. Instead, I will review research which uses the phrases “meaning in life” or “purpose in life” in expressing its aims or findings. The questions raised by the works reviewed will be used to further clarify the “perception of opportunities for rewarding emotional experience” [POREE] conceptualization of the experience of meaning in life. For those primarily interested in the details of the POREE concept, not the review, a summary of the distinctions provoked by the review begins on page 39.

As you will see, the research on meaning in life is opaque. No researcher is very logically clear about what she or he is writing about. Here are some of the questions that have not been answered satisfactorily: What is the difference between the experience of meaning and the experience of purpose? What is the difference between the experience of meaning and psychological well-being, or between depression and the experience of meaninglessness? What is it like to experience meaning? How does one go from

experiencing meaning to experiencing meaninglessness and vice-versa? Many of these questions will be addressed in this paper.

This review begins with a chronology of past research. The chronology will help to establish a rough awareness of (1) past developments in the research area, (2) which researchers may have influenced each other, and (3) how researchers have attempted to measure meaning or purpose in life. The review then progresses into a more detailed discussion of measurement instruments used in meaning in life research, and a proposal for how to measure the POREE concept is presented. The bulk of this review consists of an exploration of various areas of meaning in life research which include: the relationship between well-being and meaning in life; the significance of meaning in life during different parts of the life span; categories of meaningful experience in the past and present; the nature of the experience of meaning; the transition from experiencing meaninglessness to experiencing meaning; and the “will to meaning”—a hypothesized human motivation to find meaning in existence. In the discussion of these research areas, the helpfulness of the POREE concept for understanding research findings is compared to that of other meaning-in-life-related concepts. This review concludes with a detailed summary of the POREE conceptualization of the experience of meaning in life and a brief summary of robust meaning in life research findings. Finally, possible directions for future research are suggested.

Chronology of meaning-in-life research

In reaction to the nihilistic and mechanistic life-views present in Europe in the early 1900s, Viktor Frankl formulated Logotherapy (Fabry, 1980). Logotherapy consists partly of helping people to find meanings to be fulfilled in the future (Frankl, 1965). Frankl was able to test his concepts during his enslavement in the German concentration camps. He wrote of his experiences there in *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1965).

Based on Frankl’s theories about the experience of meaning in life, Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964) developed the Purpose in Life Test [PIL] to measure the participant’s experience of meaning in life. Their questionnaire has been widely used in meaning in life research. The PIL can be found in Garfield (1973) and in the Appendix beginning on page 47.

In the humanistic atmosphere of the 1970s, Maddi (1967, 1970) constructed a theory about the developmental psychopathology of the existential sickness and about healthy development. Additionally, Battista and Almond (1973) explored different theories about the development of the experience of a meaningful life, and constructed a new questionnaire, the Life Regard Index [LRI], to assess their conceptualization of the meaningful life. The LRI can be found in Battista and Almond (1973) and in the Appendix beginning on page 49. Also within this time period, Novak (1970), and Fabry (1968/1980) explored the historical context of the experience of meaninglessness in the United States, and Blocker (1974) discussed the experience of meaninglessness from a philosophical perspective.

Beginning in the late 60s there have been movements within the field of education which address the experience of meaning. These movements have included values clarification (e.g., Raths, Harmin, & Simon, 1966), and confluent education (see Shapiro, 1976 for references). Shapiro has mentioned that he is developing the details and processes of meanings-oriented education concerned with how experiences facilitate understanding of self, the world, and self-in-the-world (Shapiro, 1988).

Ebersole and his colleagues have been conducting research on meaning in life since the early 80s, primarily on individuals' categorization of meaning in life over the life span, and depth of experience of meaning in life using observer ratings of participants' essays instead of questionnaires. (Ebersole & De Vogler, 1981; Ebersole & Quiring, 1991; Taylor & Ebersole, 1993)

Yalom (1980) discusses the existential anxieties about death, groundlessness, isolation, and meaninglessness, and the implications these anxieties have in clinical work. He has reviewed and synthesized much of the pre-1980 research relating to those anxieties, as well as presented some exploratory research of his own and numerous case studies clarifying and exemplifying the theories of existential psychotherapy.

Coming from the field of sociology, and for the most part independently of previous work on meaning in life, Antonovsky (1987) developed the Sense of Coherence [SOC] construct in an attempt to understand why some people are less likely to be adversely affected by stressful environments than others. The SOC consists of an individual's perceptions of the comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness of her/his environment. Antonovsky has developed a SOC questionnaire which can be found in Antonovsky (1987) and in the Appendix on page 50.

Reker and Wong (1988), in developing their concept of the "personal meaning system," have expanded Maddi's and Frankl's conceptualizations of personal meaning and combined them with Kelly's personal construct theory. Reker and Wong define postulates about the motivation of the construction of the personal meaning system; the breadth, depth, and the degree of differentiation and integration (complexity) of the system; an individual's freedom of choice in the construction of her/his meaning system; the dis-integration of the meaning system during a major change of the system; and they have provided hypotheses about the change in integration of the meaning system over the life span, as well as the difference in complexity between the meaning system of an individualist and that of a conformist.

Additionally, Reker and Wong (1988) have provided measures for many of the aspects of their personal meaning system theory: The Sources of Meaning Profile [SOMP] can be and has been used to test their postulates about the depth, breadth, and complexity of an individual's meaning system; the implication ladder, which they suggest can be used to determine both the structure and complexity of an individual's meaning system; and the Life Attitude Profile [LAP], a questionnaire based on Frankl's theory which has seven dimensions: Life Purpose, Existential Vacuum, Life Control, Death Acceptance, Will to Meaning, Goal Seeking, and Future Meaning. The LAP items can be found in Reker and Peacock (1981), and revisions to the scale are noted in Peacock & Reker (1982); the SOMP items can be found in Prager (1996 or 1997).

Harlow and Newcomb and colleagues have approached the concept of meaning in life using latent variable and structural models. They have assessed the Purpose in Life Test [PIL] (Harlow, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1987) and created a revised version for use in their research. They have examined purpose in life as a mediational factor between depression and self-derogation, and substance use and suicide ideation (Harlow, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1986). They also have examined purpose in life as a mediational factor in the chain of events from [uncontrollable stressful events] to [perceived loss of control] to [meaninglessness] to [substance use] (Newcomb & Harlow, 1986). And they have developed a hierarchical model of meaning and satisfaction in life (Harlow & Newcomb, 1990).

As another means of developing theory about different aspects of meaning in life, several researchers have conducted semi-structured interviews. Denne and Thompson (1991) examined the characteristics of the transition from the experience of meaninglessness to meaning in life. Debats et al. (1995) examined the nature of the experience of meaninglessness and the experience of meaning. O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996) attempt to better organize previous work on "sources" of meaning (e.g. De Vogler & Ebersole, 1981) using Reker and Wong's (1988) theory about the structural components of personal meaning.

The most recently active researchers I am aware of in the area of meaning in life who also have a history of study in the area include Kerry Chamberlain (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996) and Dominique Debats (e.g., Debats, 1990; Debats, Drost, & Hansen, 1995; Debats, 1996). Edward Prager has also been active recently in exploring the types of experiences people find meaningful (1996, 1997).

Clearly, much research in the area of meaning in life has been completed since Frankl first published his ideas about logotherapy. Significant advances have been made in learning what people find meaningful in life, but, as you will see, very little progress has been made in understanding what the nature of the experience of meaning actually is—such as how and why people think they experience meaning. In order to investigate the nature of the experience of meaning through a review of the literature, we should first ascertain whether the instruments that have been used in past research seem valid.

Measurement

Two of the most popular instruments for assessing meaning or purpose in life, the Purpose in Life Test [PIL] and the Life Regard Index [LRI], are presented in the Appendix (p. 46).

The PIL was designed first (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), and has been used more extensively than the LRI. While researchers have attempted to statistically test the PIL's validity (e.g. Chamberlain & Zika, 1988; Dyck, 1987; Garfield, 1973; Reker & Cousins, 1979), for the purpose of this paper it is sufficient to read only the scale (p. 47). Consider the face validity of the scale—whether the questions in the scale appear to measure something called "purpose in life," or many different things, or something else entirely. Consider also the PIL's discriminant validity—whether the PIL assesses a concept distinguishable from, though perhaps related to what measures of other psychological concepts (e.g., depression, self-esteem, and self-efficacy) assess.

In order to address perceived shortcomings of the PIL, Battista and Almond (1973) developed the Life Regard Index [LRI]. Specifically, Battista and Almond thought the PIL (1) failed to control for the effects of social desirability and denial and (2) was confounded with assumptions about the values a person who experiences meaning in life would endorse. Battista and Almond attempted to make the LRI a measurement of only the aspects of the experience of meaning in life they believed were most universal to the experience. Thus, they hoped that the LRI would be suitable for measuring the experience of meaning in life in individuals with very different value systems. The LRI has two dimensions (and scores for both dimensions are usually reported), one purportedly measuring an individual's enjoyment of or fulfillment in life (the fulfillment dimension), and another measuring an individual's belief system and thoughts about existence (the framework dimension). Again, there have been several studies attempting to statistically test the validity of the LRI (e.g., Van Ranst &

Marcoen, 1997; Chamberlain & Zika, 1988; Debats, van der Lubbe, & Wezeman, 1993), but for the purpose of this paper it is sufficient to read the questionnaire (p. 49) and consider its face validity and discriminant validity.

The consideration of the PIL and the LRI leads to the question of whether a scale designed to measure one's perception of opportunities for rewarding emotional experience [POREE] would assess more of what is essential to the experience of meaning in life than either the PIL or LRI. Below, I have written out a rough proposal for a POREE scale, since without a useful operational definition a theoretical concept is not much use. First, I list some of the thoughts/assumptions brought out by attempting to make the scale. Then you will find a diagram of the concepts the proposed scale will attempt to assess. Finally, several potential questions/measurement methods for POREE-related concepts are presented and problems with these questions are discussed.

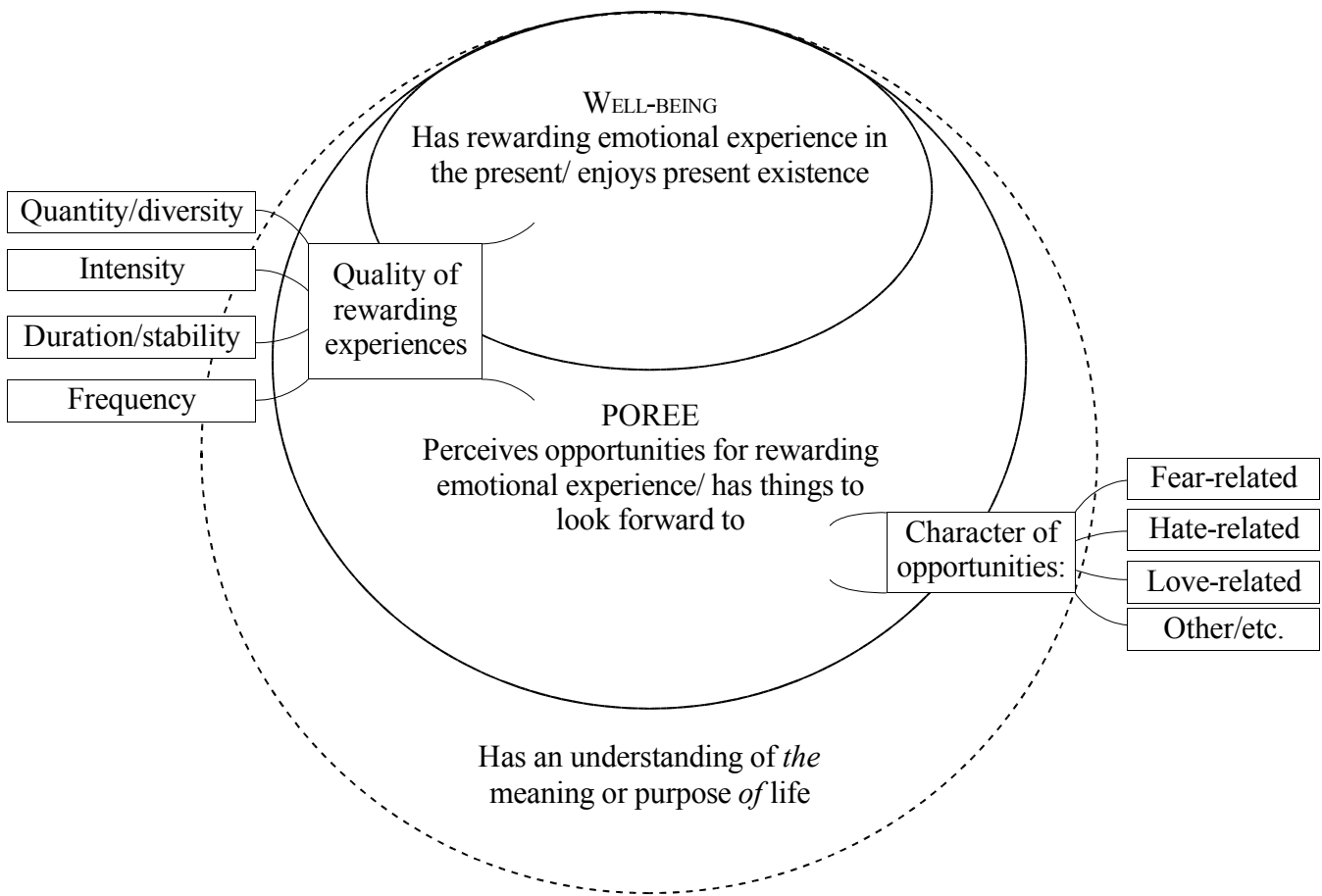
- A good measure of POREE/meaning in life should probably correlate with hierarchical organization of an individual's behavior, i.e., the organization of behaviors in pursuit of valued experience (e.g., sleeping, eating, sex) around the pursuit of a more valued experience or an overall conceptualization of a desirable life. An individual strong on hierarchical organization of behavior would probably exhibit attributes such as steadfastness, constancy, drive, or focus.
- A measure of POREE should not be based on the quality of one's present experience—one could be having a miserable time right now yet still perceive opportunities for rewarding emotional experience.
- POREE is similar to yet more concrete than hope. POREE is not just, "I think things will be better," but "I can think of specific experiences I look forward to."
- A key component of the POREE concept is where it might fit within the conscious experience of a human. It seems that when an individual experiences POREE/meaning in life, her conscious experience is characterized by frequent focus on (1) emotionally rewarding experience or (2) working to achieve emotionally rewarding experiences. On the other hand, when one experiences a lack of meaning in life, it seems that awareness of a lack of experience to look forward to is frequently salient.
- A good measure of *well-being* should not measure just the presence of POREE, but also the extent to which rewarding emotional experience has been realized.
- In assessing an individual's experience of meaning we should probably consider: (1) how many opportunities for rewarding emotional experience she perceives (quantity/diversity); (2) how excited she is about/how much she looks forward to these opportunities (intensity); (3) how long similar opportunities have been/are expected to be rewarding for her (duration/stability/permanence); (4) How frequently these opportunities have been/are expected to be rewarding. (frequency). Each of these attributes is probably considered by people (more or less instantaneously and unconsciously) when evaluating an experience or their life experience.
- The advantage of the POREE concept over previous conceptualizations of the experience of meaning is, I hope, that it is more true to the nature of the actual experience of meaning than any other conceptualization of meaning. If this is so, and if the experience of meaning is a universally important phenomenon, everyone should agree that the POREE concept is getting at something in life that is important to her. More importantly, everyone should feel that the questions asked to assess an individual's POREE are getting at relevant characteristics of her experience.

- It is probably important to assess whether the opportunities people perceive for rewarding emotional experience are due to fear-, hate-, or love-type emotion. It is probably better to be motivated by love than hate or fear—because fear and hate motivate people to escape or destroy what motivates them. However, to anyone who experiences life as meaningless, emotionless, and void of possibility of rewarding emotional experience, fear and hate may be eagerly embraced. Moreover, fear at least can certainly be an appropriate and helpful emotion.
- Finally, not everyone wants to simply be happy. Many people undergo unpleasant experiences (say, being burned at the stake) to create a life that they believe means something—hence the use of “rewarding emotional experience” instead of happiness.

On the following page is a diagram of the concepts a POREE scale should probably assess.

Fig 1. Diagram of the concepts the proposed POREE scale will attempt to assess

This diagram should be read as a sort of Venn diagram in that an individual who exhibits a characteristic in an inner oval of the diagram should also exhibit the characteristics in the outer ovals, i.e., someone who scores high on a measure of well-being should also score high on a measure of POREE, but someone who scores high on POREE will not necessarily score high on well-being. The exception to this is that not everyone who exhibits well-being or who perceives opportunities for rewarding emotional experience will care much about whether she has an understanding of *the* meaning or purpose of life. There does, however, (as will be discussed later) appear to be a subset of the population for whom a time comes in life that they are not able to experience well-being or look forward to anything unless they find an answer to the meaning or purpose of life that satisfies them. The boxes to the sides are further distinctions to be made regarding the center concepts.



Without further delay, here are some questions which may help to assess the concepts diagrammed above:

[10-1 indicates a range of possible labeled choices (as in Fordyce's (1988) Happiness Measures—see Appendix, p. 54), with five being neutral or medium and 10 being the best, one the worst. I have given sample mid and end points for the 10 point scale. You will notice that it would take some work to make questions similar to the ones I've used workable with a 10 point scale. I decided to emulate the Happiness Measures because they are so simple and quick, and appear to be widely regarded as a good scale.]

Questions to assess POREE:

- Are there things you look forward to? 10-1 (general)
 10. Yes, there are things I look forward to very much!
 5. There are things I look forward to a bit.
 1. There is nothing I look forward to.

- Are there a lot of things you look forward to? 10-1 (quantity/diversity)
 10. I cannot count them all!
 5. There are some things I look forward to.
 1. I don't look forward to anything.

- How much do you look forward to the things you most look forward to? 10-1 (intensity)
 10. I look forward to them with all my heart.
 5. Somewhat.
 1. I don't look forward to anything.

- How often will you be able to do the things you most look forward to? 10-1 (frequency)
 10. Every moment.
 5. Sometimes.
 1. I don't look forward to anything.

- How long will you be able to continue to do the things you most look forward to doing? 10-1 (duration/stability)
 10. Always, forever.
 5. I should be able to keep doing them a while.
 1. I don't look forward to anything.

Questions to determine the character of perceived opportunities for rewarding emotional experience:

[A problem with this rationale and the following scale is that emotional experience may be quite varied—people may not consider much of what they feel to fall into the love, fear, and hate categories.]

- Roughly, what percentage of your general emotional involvement in life is *fear*-related (fear of people/ places/ things/ activities/ ideas/ possible future events etc.): _____

hate (or strong dislike)-related (hate of people/ places/ things/ activities/ ideas/ possible future events etc.): _____

love-related (love of people/ places/ things/ activities/ ideas/ possible future events etc.): _____

other (please explain): _____

total: 100%

Questions to assess the degree to which *the* meaning or purpose of life is relevant to/ a part of an individual's emotional experience:

- Do you feel you have an understanding of *the* meaning or purpose of life?
 10. Yes, to the extent that one can.
 5. Sometimes I think about the meaning of life, but I never really get anywhere.
 1. No, and I have not ever thought about it.

- Would you like to develop/further develop your understanding of the meaning or purpose of life?
 10. Yes, *desperately*. I *need* to see a meaning or purpose to life or I cannot go on living—
 5. I would like to get around to thinking about the meaning of life, but I am concerned about other things right now.
 1. Not at all. I don't like to think about the meaning of life/I have already thought about the meaning of life as much as I care to.

Questions to assess well-being (success at achieving rewarding emotional experience):

- Do you enjoy day-to-day life? 10-1 (general)
 10. Yes, very much!
 5. Somewhat.
 1. Day to day life is miserable.

- Are there a lot of things you enjoy each day? 10-1 (quantity/diversity)
 10. Very many!
 5. Well, there are some things I like.
 1. No. I don't enjoy anything.

- How much do you enjoy each day? 10-1 (intensity)
 10. Oh, I love every day.
 5. I like each day pretty well.
 1. I hate each day.

- How often do you enjoy yourself? 10-1 (frequency)
 10. Every moment.
 5. Sometimes.
 1. I never enjoy myself.

- How long have you enjoyed life? 10-1 (duration/stability)
 10. As long as I can remember!
 5. My life's been slowly getting better the last few months.
 1. I have not enjoyed life for years.

Questions to assess the relevance of the scale to participants' experience:

- How relevant do you think these questions are to assessing how you feel? 10-1
 10. Absolutely perfect, right on, I wouldn't change a thing.
 5. It's all right.
 1. You've got it all wrong.
- What questions would you add to this scale to make it better?
- What questions would you change or get rid of?

Also, as a comparison, the Happiness Measures (Appendix, p. 54; Fordyce, 1988), the quintessential measure of subjective well-being, should probably be included with a POREE scale.

Finally, hypotheses could also be tested using the Experience Sampling Method [ESM] (Larson & Csikzentmihalyi, 1983). ESM involves giving participants beepers which randomly signal them to answer certain questions or record certain measures. If one were to use this method, many of the previous questions could be converted to ask how the participant feels at the moment. Also, ESM could perhaps be used to determine the extent to which and manner in which perceiving opportunities for rewarding emotional experience [POREE] is a feature of conscious experience. However, ESM (and any other questionnaire) involves an interruption in and influence of conscious experience. ESM could be more easily used as a measure of well-being or the character of people's emotional experience.

To conclude, the Purpose in Life Test [PIL] and the Life Regard Index [LRI] have been presented, and you have had the opportunity to compare them with my rough proposal for a POREE scale. For the purposes of reviewing past research, I will treat the PIL and LRI as if they are both measuring at least part of the same thing that a POREE scale would measure. Of course, I would hope that a POREE scale would measure something more distinct and universal than either the PIL or LRI, but we will have to wait for future research to determine the quality of a POREE measure. In the next section of the paper, relationships that have been found to exist between measurements of meaning in life (PIL, LRI) and measurements of other concepts are explored. This will provide an introduction to some of the common findings about meaning in life-related concepts.

A myriad of relations

Past researchers have demonstrated that meaning in life is related to a wide variety of constructs. To list just a few, researchers have found the experience of meaning in life or its absence is related to psychopathology (e.g. Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), criminality (Reker, 1977), substance use (Kinnier et al., 1994; Nicholson et al., 1994; Padelford, 1974; Newcomb & Harlow, 1986; Harlow, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1986), and prosocial behavior (Shek et. al., 1994). The list continues. For a review of the older literature, see (Yalom, 1980, pp. 455-460). In selecting which papers to review I chose those which appeared to

offer more of an opportunity to clarify the concept of meaning in life, as opposed to those studies which simply report a correlation between a measurement of meaning in life and another instrument, of which there are many.

One of the more thought-provoking yet also more typical of the correlational studies was done by Debats, Van der Lubbe, and Wezeman (1993). They have examined the properties of the Life Regard Index and its correlations with demographic and personality characteristics. They found no difference on Life Regard Index [LRI] scores by sex, age, or education. The difference between scores of married and unmarried persons was significant, as was the difference between married and divorced persons, and the difference between those with a partner and those without a partner, suggesting that the presence of an intimate relationship might account for higher positive life regard in each of these instances. Additionally they found that the LRI discriminated between persons with high and low well-being. Also, in order to test Battista and Almond's (1973) hypothesis that the LRI would be an "independent" measure of meaning in life, i.e., not being dependent on a particular value system or ideological content for its view of what the nature of meaning in life is, Debats et al. tested whether the LRI showed any substantial associations with the 36 values in the Rokeach Value Survey (RVS; Rokeach, 1973; pp. 44-45). The only value found to have a significant correlation with the LRI was an orientation reflecting an "ambitious, hard-working, or aspiring" mode of conduct (Debats et al., 1993, p. 343).

Debats et al.'s findings are similar to the findings of researchers using other instruments to measure meaning in life in that the only robust finding is that people who have intimate relationships generally experience more meaning in life than those who do not. However it seems unlikely that the experience of meaning in life would not correlate with particular value orientations. For example, Kasser and Ryan (1993) have found that financial success as a central life aspiration correlates with reduced vitality and enjoyment in life. Moreover, while Debats' et al. (1993) downplayed their finding that an "ambitious, hard-working, or aspiring" mode of conduct was positively correlated with the LRI (they note that all the participants in their study were Business or Economics students), their finding is consistent with the POREE conceptualization of meaning in life. Also, as we will see later, people tend to find many of the same things to be meaningful to them (such as intimate relationships). This suggests that certain categories of experience, and therefore certain value orientations, are more likely to be associated with the experience of meaning.

In the next section, the relationship between meaning in life and well being is explored to determine if or how these two concepts might be different.

Well-being & meaning in life

Of all the correlations between meaning and life and other constructs, the relationship that merits further investigation is the one between meaning in life and well-being. A review of the work of several research groups (Debats, Zika & Chamberlain, and Ryff & Keyes), helps to support the view that both meaning in life and well-being are addressing aspects of the same underlying phenomenon.

Debats (1996) attempted to demonstrate that the LRI was a useful predictor of clinical treatment outcomes, independently of well-being measures. Debats found that this was true for the fulfillment dimension of the LRI. Debats also found that during treatment patients' scores on the framework dimension did not improve as much as scores on measures of various psychological symptoms, providing support for the view that conventional psychotherapy does not adequately address existential concerns. Debats operationalized

well-being as an individual's score on a happiness index, a self-esteem scale, and a checklist of psychological symptoms. Debats' research begs the question of whether there is a difference between the fulfillment dimension of the LRI and certain well-being measures, especially the happiness index.

Zika and Chamberlain (1992) have explored the relationship of psychological well-being and meaning in life; well-being being defined by psychological functioning, affect, and life-satisfaction; meaning in life being defined as scores on the Purpose in Life Test [PIL], the LRI, and the Sense of Coherence scale [SOC]. They found in two different samples that there was a strong association between meaning in life and well-being. Additionally, they found that meaning in life has a stronger association with positive than with negative well-being. In their discussion, Zika and Chamberlain comment that their findings raise "the issue of whether the measurement of meaning has sufficient discriminant validity" (p. 143). Zika and Chamberlain believe that meaning in life "focuses on purposeful existence and striving for goals, which are clearly distinct from well-being" (p. 143).

Ryff specializes in her own conceptualization of well-being based on humanistic theory. In a 1995 article, Ryff and Keyes contend that previous conceptualizations of psychological well-being have little theoretical rationale, focusing primarily on affect and the absence of psychological dysfunction, and neglecting to conceptualize what positive psychological functioning may be. Thus Ryff developed and found support for a six-factor model of psychological well-being based on the work of Maslow, Rogers, Allport, Erikson, Buhler, Neugarten, and Jahoda. Allport (1967), for example, believes that psychological maturity is indicated in part by an individual having developed "some form of a unifying philosophy of life" (p. 294). The six factors in Ryff's (1989) model of psychological well-being are self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth.

Commentary

The three papers just reviewed demonstrate that there is confusion about what well-being actually entails, about whether meaning in life and well-being are different, and about how important living purposefully and having achievable goals really is.

It is safe to say that there is considerable overlap between the concepts of meaning in life, purpose in life, and well-being. It is more difficult to determine what the difference between these concepts might be. I would like to suggest that meaning in life is a more mild, general version of purpose in life. Purpose in life refers to having goals that one would like to accomplish—in POREE language, purpose in life involves having very clear perceptions of what kind of far-off yet achievable future experience will bring about rewarding experience. Meaning in life from the POREE perspective would simply involve having the perception that there is rewarding experience to be had in daily or future life, not necessarily involving sustained focus on particular goals.

The similarities and differences between meaning in life and well-being are more difficult to define. I would first say that well-being is a process (of staying well), not an end-state, so any conceptualization of well-being that concentrates on end-states, as Ryff's does, is probably off track. It may be that in some cultures well-being is characterized by self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth, but it is more likely that these are determinations made by a particular person in a particular culture based on her particular situation. Even if each of the aspects of well-being Ryff mentions were important, it is more likely a different aspect would be

important to a person at different times in different situations. It is the individual who is able to focus on the on the appropriate aspects of her situation who is able to stay well.

For that reason, the POREE concept is good for determining whether a person has managed to stay well in her particular situation. I would define psychological well-being as being aware of opportunities for rewarding experience in one's present and future environment *and* experiencing rewarding emotion in much of one's present experience. While this definition does not give us a clear idea of the process whereby rewarding emotional experience was achieved, it does give us a value-free end-state by which to define well-being. It may be generally true that people with intimate relationships experience more well-being than those not so situated, but a definition of well-being cannot be universal unless it allows for all the possibilities that exist—including those people who value their life's work over intimate relationships (c.f. Ebersole & De Vogler, 1986).

As a clue to the process whereby a person achieves well-being, it is instrumental to look to ourselves. It is not unreasonable to say that we are all working to achieve our own particular kind of well-being. The process whereby we achieve well-being is the process of living itself. We have as our inputs all of our memories of our past and present experience, including, for example, what we have read or been told. Our basic evaluatory mechanisms consist of our emotional sense of past and present experience and our language-based attempts to understand our emotional state. From these evaluations, we attempt to form plans of action to achieve a desired emotional state (or, more often, an experience associated with a desired emotional state). The person who achieves psychological well-being is the person who is not stymied in any part of the process. The process of progressing from ill-being to well-being involves either a change in one's environment for the better that one did not cause, or the development of an understanding of how to achieve desired emotional experience by altering the aspects of one's environment one has control over. Needless to say, some environments are easier to have rewarding experience in than others.

To conclude, work addressing the relationship between the experience of meaning in life and the experience of well-being was reviewed. The relationship between these two concepts appears to be as follows: The experience of well-being involves both (1) perceiving future opportunities for rewarding emotional experience, and (2) frequently experiencing rewarding emotional experience in the present. The experience of meaning in life also involves (1) looking forward to something, but does not require (2) enjoyment of present existence. In addition, the suggestion was made that well-being is best understood as a process of staying well rather than the attainment of particular environmental or personality characteristics. Finally, it appears that the difference between the experience of purpose in life and the experience of meaning in life is as follows: Purpose in life involves having clear perceptions of what kind of far-off yet potentially achievable future experience will bring about rewarding experience. Meaning in life, however, does not necessarily involve sustained focus on particular goals.

In the following section of this paper, I move on from considering the relationship of meaning in life to other concepts and review work which addresses the relevance of the experience of meaning in life during different times of a person's life.

Meaning in life throughout the life span

The particular times of life for which researchers and therapists have had the most interest in exploring the relevance of the experience of meaning in life have been

adolescence, old age, and crises or stressful events at any time in life. I will review work concerning each of these times of life, beginning with adolescence.

Adolescence and young adulthood

Adolescence is a time in some individuals' lives in which there is an unprecedented amount of freedom in the life-choices they can make. In addition, in adolescence we may begin to be able to consider the effects our present decisions will have on the rest of our lives (Marcia, 1980). It is not surprising that many researchers believe that existential concerns are particularly salient in adolescence. The first paper I review explores the relationship of existential concerns to self-concept. Much of the other research I review is concerned with the relationship between the experience of meaning in life and drug use, suicide or depression in adolescence. I conclude reviewing research related to adolescence by discussing how the findings give us a clearer understanding of the role of meaning in life.

Adamson and Lyxell (1996) studied a group of late adolescents (age 18-20), and found that the most prevalent questions in the group were those about the future, as opposed to questions about death, religion and philosophies of life, meaning of life in general, or concerns with who they are. While consciously questioning the nature of meaning in life was not the predominant concern of these adolescents, a sense of meaning in life was of definite importance, as demonstrated by the finding that those adolescents who had a "certain" or "great" need of finding something to believe in had a more negative self-concept than those who believed in some kind of higher existence. Adamson and Lyxell also found that a positive self-concept was strongly related to the participants' believing adults to be genuinely interested in their existential questions. Adamson and Lyxell found that even those adolescents who did not feel lonely facing existential thoughts wanted more opportunities to talk about them with adults.

Debats, Drost, and Hansen (1995) in their combined qualitative and quantitative study of meaning in life, found that the experience of meaninglessness was mentioned as occurring most frequently during the period of adolescence relative to pre-adolescence or adulthood. However, their sample consisted of students with a mean age of 23 years, and the experience of meaningfulness was also mentioned as occurring more frequently in adolescence than youth or adulthood. While this finding could be due to the participants remembering their adolescence better than their youth, it may indicate a heightened concern about the meaningfulness of experiences beginning in adolescence.

Most of the research exploring meaning of life in adolescence is related to drug use and other negative outcomes. Padelford (1974) found a significant negative relationship between drug involvement and purpose in life ($r = -0.23$; $p < .001$) for a group of 416 tenth graders. Harlow and her colleagues (1986) found support for their model, which is based on the work of Kaplan and Frankl, that depression and self-derogation serve as a precursor to a lack of purpose in life for young adults. Moreover, they found that purpose in life (as measured by the PIL) mediated between depression and substance use for women, and between self-derogation and suicide for men. In a younger sample, (Kinnier et al., 1994) replicated Harlow et al.'s finding that depression and self-derogation can lead to a lack of purpose in life. They also found that PIL mediated between depression and both suicide and substance use, and was itself a strong predictor of substance abuse.

In two other studies with adolescents and young adults, Newcomb and Harlow (1986) found that the relation between stressful life events and substance use can be partially understood as being due to stressful life events leading to perceived loss of control, which in turn results in feelings of meaninglessness, from which distraction is sought by substance

use. An interesting difference between the two studies was that in the study involving older participants (ages of 21 - 23 years), there remained a direct effect of stressful life events on substance abuse, while in the younger sample (ages of 12, 15, and 18 years), the effect of stressful life events on drug use was mediated by perceived loss of control and meaninglessness. Newcomb and Harlow believed this difference might be the result of the older participants having established substance use as an automatic response to stressful events. This suggests to them that an effective means of reducing substance use might involve addressing alternatives to substance use as means for coping with feelings of meaninglessness early in adolescence.

In addition, there have been several studies demonstrating that adolescents and young adults experience their lives as less meaningful than older individuals (Van Ranst & Marcoen, 1997; Meier & Edwards, 1974). However, Ryff and Keyes (1995) have found the opposite trend. Reker, Peacock, and Wong (1987) have found that while life purpose increases with age, the experience of the existential vacuum (meaninglessness) is greater for both young adults and old-old adults than for the middle-aged. These unusual findings may be due to the construction of the Life Attitude Profile [LAP], Reker et al.'s measurement instrument. Unfortunately, all of these studies are cross-sectional, and many of the effects may be historical artifacts or related to other variables.

Commentary

The reason existential issues are more of a concern during adolescence than earlier in an individual's life may be due partly to the development of the ability to think abstractly (Piaget, 1952) by this age, but it could be primarily a cultural phenomenon (c.f. Fabry, 1980). In industrial/post-industrial society today many adolescents face a huge variety of choices. In considering these choices, it is hard, but possible, to avoid thinking about what life might mean and how life is best lived.

Harlow and Newcomb's work, and other work like it is excellent because it illustrates where meaning or purpose in life fits in a process. They have shown that depression and self-derogation serve as a precursor to a lack of purpose in life for young adults, that purpose in life mediates between depression and substance use for women, and between self-derogation and suicide for men, and that meaninglessness is a mediator between stressful life events and drug use in younger adults but not in older adults.

These findings are yet more examples why meaning and purpose in life is not best conceptualized as some mysterious, yet important, human need, but as representing one's perception of opportunities for rewarding experience. The adolescent who is continually depressed or frequently berates herself will not perceive as many opportunities for rewarding experience. The adolescent who does perceive opportunities for rewarding experience even in the midst of stressful life events will be less likely to turn to future-destroying drugs for rewarding emotional experience.

Unfortunately, much less research has been done to determine the role of meaning in life in an elderly person's experience.

Old age

Gerontologists have emphasized the importance of helping the elderly find or create meaning in life and have made suggestions about how it could be done (e.g., Courtenay & Truluck, 1997; Wong, 1989). However, there has been little research to examine the importance of meaning in life to psychological well-being in old age. One indication that meaning in life may be important during old age is that the suicide rate is higher for the

elderly (and for adolescents) than for the rest of the population (Reker et al., 1987). Klinger (1977, pp. 298-299) has reviewed research reporting that meaninglessness occurs as a reason for suicide in 57% of men's notes and 75% of women's notes left by people age 60 and over. However, it is not clear at this time how different from the rest of the population the elderly are with respect to the experience of meaning in life.

Finally, meaning in life has been demonstrated to be important throughout the life span whenever we are faced with or have faced a stressful life event. In the following section this area of research will be briefly reviewed and the implications of this research for our understanding of meaning in life will be discussed.

Stressful events

Perhaps the most clear-cut reason the experience of meaning in life has been of interest, besides its hypothesized relation to overall psychological well-being, is that it is believed to be positively related to psychological well-being in times of crisis. One example of this may be Frankl's survival of the concentration camps (Frankl, 1965). It has been fairly well established that individuals who are able to find meaning in traumatic and highly stressful life-events are psychologically healthier than those who do not find meaning in what has happened to them (see Debats, Drost, & Hansen, 1995, pp. 371-372 for references). For example, Debats and colleagues (1995) found that individuals who had overcome a crisis in the past and derived from that experience a clear sense of meaning experienced higher current levels of meaning in life. Newcomb and Harlow's (1986) work which demonstrated that meaning in life mediates between stressful life events and drug use also supports this idea. Antonovsky's (1987) "sense of coherence" construct is at least partly based on the idea that those who find meaning in life or in an event are both psychologically and physically healthier than those who do not.

In addition to logotherapy (Frankl, 1965), there have been other efforts to make meaning-finding or -making a more central aspect of therapy (e.g., Carlsen, 1988). Sherman's (1987) work, which explores mid-life crises and transitions by focusing on the meaning of the crisis or transition to the individual, is also related.

Commentary

The process of finding meaning in a past crisis may be more helpfully described as finding the reward of that past experience—finding the good in what may have been a terrible experience. The individual who experienced a terrible event and was not able to find any value in the experience—to find any meaning in it—will not have as high a level of post-crisis meaning in life as someone who was able to value the experience. A terrible experience is likely one that will impinge itself frequently upon one's present experience for many years. A person who is able to feel that there was a reward from that past experience will be more likely to perceive the rewarding opportunities in her present experience. As for the actual process of finding the good in what is generally perceived as bad, the POREE concept says nothing. This issue can be explored further in the works that discuss finding meaning in past undesired events.

This concludes the consideration of the role of the experience of meaning in life throughout the life span. As you have seen, the research addressing the role of meaning in life in adolescence, old age, and middle age is not extensive, although it is enough to emphasize the relationship of meaning in life to coping in adolescence and throughout the rest of life.

The next area of research I will review involves asking people what aspects of their present life they find meaningful, and what experiences in the past they consider to have been meaningful. This research gives us some idea of what people might mean when they are speaking of meaningful experiences.

Categories of meaningful experiences

Categories of meaningful experiences in the present

Ebersole and his colleagues (e.g., 1987) have investigated experiences of meaning in the present for individuals ranging in age from childhood to old age. Of children in first grade they asked the question, "What is most important in your life?" (Taylor & Ebersole, 1993). Other age groups were asked to write about, and rank in order of importance, the three strongest meanings in their lives. However, the later-life couples were only asked to write about their strongest life meaning. De Vogler and Ebersole (1980) then constructed categories that allowed for the greatest amount of interrater reliability.

They have found that in all of the groups of people studied, the category the raters most frequently selected to describe participants' answers was the category of relationships. The relationships category includes interactions with family, friends, and romantic partners. Approximately 40-50% of the answers Ebersole and his colleagues rated were placed in the relationships category, while the other categories were selected rarely more than 20% of the time. The exception to this finding were "eminent" persons who generally ranked meanings related to the category of life work as more important than relationships (Ebersole & DeVogler-Ebersole, 1985).

For later-life couples (mean age 76), health (wanting to maintain physical health) became a more frequently rated meaning category (Ebersole & DePaola, 1987), while for first graders (Taylor & Ebersole, 1993) and young adolescents (De Vogler & Ebersole, 1983), activities (some form of recreation, sport, or hobby) were a more frequently rated category, as compared to undergraduates (De Vogler & Ebersole, 1980; Ebersole & De Vogler, 1981) and an adult sample (mean age 46 years; De Vogler & Ebersole, 1981). Service (a helping, giving orientation), belief (living according to one's social, political, or religious beliefs), and growth (a striving towards developing potentials), were also fairly frequently chosen by the raters, after relationships. Two other categories used by Ebersole and his colleagues were "obtaining" (emphasizing a pure materialistic preference), and "pleasure" (expressions that happiness, contentment, or experiencing daily life are most meaningful). Additionally, the categories of school (centering upon school grades or advancement) and appearance (focus upon how one looks to others or the clothes one wears) were added to account for some of the adolescents' essays.

Ebersole and his colleagues have also addressed the issue of the hypothesized widespread lack of meaning in life (e.g., Frankl, 1965). Usually less than 5% of the participants in their studies mentioned a lack of meaning in life. However Ebersole and his colleagues note that differential response rate, and answers reporting superficial levels of meaning, which their experimental design does not take into account, may bias their results against reporting a lack of meaning in life. (Ebersole & De Paola, 1987)

Prager (1996, 1997) has also explored categories of individuals' experiences of meaning in present existence by administering Reker and Wong's (1988) Sources of Meaning Profile (SOMP) to different age groups. Like Ebersole and his colleagues, Prager has found that relationships are perceived as contributing the most to participants' experience of meaning. Also important to the participants' present experience of meaning

were meeting personal needs, leisure activities, preserving human values and ideals, and personal growth. Least important to participants' present experience of meaning were religious activities, leaving a legacy for the next generation, and being acknowledged for personal achievement.

Additionally, Prager has found little support for hypothesized changes in value and meaning orientations with age, consistent with other findings that older clients rarely describe themselves as changing significantly since early adulthood (see Prager, 1996 or 1997 for reference). He suggests that later-life reductions in involvement in specific activities and areas of interest may be accompanied by a maintenance of meaning importance in those very areas (Prager, 1996, p. 134).

The next section focuses on experiences in the past that people consider to have been meaningful. As we will see there are sometimes significant differences between those experiences and the experiences people consider meaningful in their day-to-day life.

Categories of meaningful experiences in the past

Baum and Stewart (1990) have asked participants of different ages (range 17-96) to report the "most meaningful events" in their lives and the age of occurrence of the event, as well as reasons why the event was meaningful. Baum and Stewart divided responses into the following categories: Work, love and marriage, births of children, independent pursuits (military service, travel, personal accomplishments), accidents, illnesses or death, separations and/or divorces, and major purchases. They found that the men most commonly mentioned events in the work, love and marriage, and independent pursuits categories, while the women most commonly mentioned births of children, love and marriage, and work. Baum and Stewart also suggest, based on their findings, that in many cases the same events are held to be meaningful irrespective of age, i.e. both the 25 year old and 85 year old consider marriage to be meaningful. It is also interesting to note that, consistent with previous findings, Baum and Stewart found that the age of occurrence for the onset of all meaningful events mentioned ranged from 17 to 43 years, with a mean of 30 years. That is, "most meaningful events" were not reported occurring after age 43.

Baum and Stewart's (1990) work suggests that past experiences involving either happiness or sadness can be considered meaningful. Both births and deaths were considered to be most meaningful events. This is different from the experiences participants described as giving meaning to their present existence, none of which appear to involve primarily sadness or other less desirable emotions (e.g., Ebersole & DePaola, 1987; Prager, 1996).

Commentary

Ebersole's research and other research like it show us what people determine to be important to the quality of their emotional experience. It is notable that the strongest finding is that many people find intimate relationships to be most important. It is equally notable that not everyone feels this way.

Regarding Baum and Stewart's (1990) finding that most "most meaningful events" are reported early in an individual's life, this seems reasonable because later events for a person who has lived a long time will probably be understood in terms of earlier events, thus making later events seem less special than the earlier event, or make the earlier event more meaningful. To state this in a different way, earlier events are more likely to lead to accommodation, and later events are more likely to be assimilated. However, considering events in the past to be meaningful is more an issue of the emotion involved in the event (more emotionally intense events are more likely to be remembered, and a past event must

be remembered to be considered meaningful [I do not have the source for this]) than the difficulty in understanding an event. It may be, then that most meaningful events are only reported occurring early in a person's life because we have more emotionally intense experiences early in life. Certainly this is an area that requires further investigation.

The finding that both positive and negative past events are considered meaningful is not surprising because there is considerable motivation to find the good in significantly bad events (all humans desire to improve or maintain the quality of their emotional experience). As mentioned before in discussing stressful events, those who are able to find the good in a stressful event find life more meaningful than those who do not see any worth in the bad experience they have had.

To conclude, the exploration of the findings regarding categories of meaningful experience has led to some important distinctions, and some unanswered questions. In my opinion, research addressing categories of meaningful experience is limited because the categories are always arbitrary, and only really relevant to the extent that they designate fundamentally different interactions, e.g., dyadic interaction, as compared to an individual interacting with nature. Even such categories do not help us understand what it is about these different interactions that people find meaningful, or why it is that different people find different interactions meaningful.

In the following section, I move beyond research addressing categories of meaningful experience to consider efforts to understand the nature of the experience of meaning, i.e., what defines the experience of meaning and differentiates it from other concepts. It is true that the nature of the experience of meaning in life is addressed in some way in each section of this paper. The difference with the following works is that they each have as their central concern the nature of the experience of meaning in life (or a closely related concept); concerns with the relationship of the experience of meaning in life to other phenomena are secondary.

Nature of the experience of meaning

As yet, there is no consensus about the explicit definition of the experience of meaning, nor has any conceptualization of the experience of meaning been strongly supported by research. Moreover, there appears to be little direction or agreement for how one goes about rationally understanding abstract human concepts like love or meaning. Below, I review four attempts to improve our understanding of the nature of the experience of meaning. O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996) test the validity of Reker & Wong's (1988) theory about the development of and the effects of our "personal meaning systems." Debats, Drost, and Hansen (1995) explore the nature of the experience of meaning using a phenomenological approach. Harlow and Newcomb (1990) perform a latent variable analysis of meaning and satisfaction in life. Finally, I review Antonovsky's effort to define his "sense of coherence" [SOC] concept, which is his attempt to explain and assess a personality attribute/attitude which he believes is strongly related to how well people cope with stressful life situations. Antonovsky's sense of coherence concept may be closely related to the experience of meaning in life.

Theorizing about the nature of the experience of meaning that is not reviewed below include Battista & Almond (1973), Maddi (1967/1970), Frankl (1965), and Yalom (1980). Of these, only Battista and Almond have made significant efforts to empirically evaluate their ideas. I do not review the work of these theorists because many of their ideas are represented in the work I do review, and I have generally limited myself to reviewing only

work which reports on research studies. However, anyone who is interested in meaning in life theory will probably find the above-mentioned works helpful.

I should also note that in this paper I have steered clear of the experience of meaninglessness. If understanding meaning is difficult, understanding the variegated states that could be called an experience of meaninglessness is even more difficult. I have dealt with the experience of meaninglessness by packaging it with all other undesirable emotional experiences as something humans are motivated avoid in favor of the experiences of meaning and well-being. The following reviews may offer more insight into the experience of meaning.

O'Connor & Chamberlain (1996)

O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996) conducted structured interviews in order to test the validity of Reker and Wong's (1988) conceptualization of the personal meaning system. Reker and Wong's theory addresses both the momentary experience of meaning and the stable personality trait of experiencing meaning in life. Reker and Wong believe that momentary meaningful experiences (which they call "sources" of meaning) exhibit affective, cognitive, and motivational components. Reker and Wong also believe that the degree of personal meaning in life is defined as the total amount of meaning derived from all available sources, and that an individual's degree of personal meaning will increase in direct proportion to his or her diversification of sources of meaning (p. 225).

O'Connor and Chamberlain tested both Reker and Wong's assertion about the structure of sources of meaning, and whether an individual's personal meaning system could be said to exhibit depth (a measure of intensity) or breadth (a measure of diversity) dimensions. However, O'Connor and Chamberlain do not agree with Reker and Wong's method of assessing breadth of personal meaning, and so used their own method, which involved counting how many different categories a person's sources of meaning fell into. To assess depth of the personal meaning system, O'Connor and Chamberlain combined Reker and Wong's (1988) method with that of Ebersole and Quiring (1991).

Reker and Wong (1988) had defined depth as the degree of self-transcendence involved in a particular meaningful interaction. They proposed that to determine the depth of an individual's experience of meaning, the individual's "sources" of meaning should be sorted into four different levels of depth of meaning: hedonistic pleasure/comfort; realization of personal potential; commitment to social/political causes; and a level which encompasses "cosmic meaning and ultimate purpose" (O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996, p. 465). Ebersole and Quiring attempted to assess the depth of participants' experience of meaning by rating essays participants wrote about what they found meaningful according to the following principle: those "meanings" which were discussed with more complexity and greater detail indicate greater depth, while those meanings which appeared to be new, untried, or undeveloped were rated as less deep.

In O'Connor and Chamberlain's (1996) study, each participant was asked, "What do you think of as an important source of meaning in your life?", and questions were asked to clarify the response. This process was repeated until the participant no longer had any sources of meaning to add. These sources of meaning were divided into categories, again with the finding that the highest frequency of meaningful interactions involved relationships with people. The other categories of meaningful experiences were those related to creativity, personal development, politics and social change, and religion and spirituality. Also, O'Connor and Chamberlain found it necessary to add a new category, "Nature," for the nature-related interactions which participants reported as meaningful to them.

Politics and social change was the least frequently selected category by the raters of the interview. O'Connor and Chamberlain suggest that perhaps this occurred because "sources" of meaning in this category often have a lack of immediate rewards, and it may be that if an interaction or activity is not associated with strong positive affect, it is less likely to be mentioned as a source of meaning in life.

In O'Connor and Chamberlain's examination of the reports of sources of meaning for affective, cognitive, and motivational components, they were able to find these components for each source of meaning mentioned by all but one of their 38 participants. Here is an example of description of a source of meaning which shows (C)ognitive, (M)otivational, and (A)ffective material:

I've chosen an occupation (C), nursing, where I can exercise interacting with people (M) in a way that gives me satisfaction (A), and as well I can apply skills that learn along the way (C) to those interactions and at the same time get paid for it (M). (p. 471)

O'Connor and Chamberlain concluded that their findings confirm Reker and Wong's (1988) model of the structural components of the momentary experience of meaning. However, while O'Connor and Chamberlain were able to measure the breadth of a person's experience of personal meaning, they found many problems with Reker and Wong's approach to measuring depth: "The content of the source affects the depth level reached, the levels do not necessarily follow in order [of increasing depth] from each other, and [the levels] are of widely diverging sizes" (p. 474), and they considered Ebersole and Quiring's approach to measuring depth be too subjective.

Commentary

While I do see value in some of Reker and Wong's ideas, I am less enthusiastic about them than O'Connor and Chamberlain.

First, it is a misnomer to speak of "sources" of meaning—if there is a source of the experience of meaning it is evolutionary past, human history, and the individual's own past. It would be more accurate to speak of "interactions" in which a person experiences meaning. The individual quoted in the excerpt is describing an *interaction* from which she derives a fair amount of desirable emotional experience. Second, it is meaningless to me to say a source of meaning has "affective" "cognitive" and "motivational" components—at least as they explain it—any human interaction could be said to have those components without contributing significantly to our understanding of the interaction.

Third, Reker and Wong also believe that "having a sense of personal meaning means having a purpose and striving toward a goal or goals" (Reker, et. al., 1987, p. 44). This idea is a recurring theme in meaning in life theory. For example, Battista and Almond (1973) define meaning in life as "an individual's belief that he is fulfilling his positively valued life-framework or life-goal" (p. 409). However, I do not find the rational framework/goal orientation conceptualization of meaning entirely relevant to my conscious experience of meaning. The defining attribute of the experience of meaning is not the rational goal or framework that any acting person could be said to have but the fact that the acting person values something as opposed to valuing nothing. My hypothesis is that everyone who experiences meaning in life would agree without hesitation to the statement, "I value something," but not "I have goals." Certainly it could be pointed out to any person who experiences meaning that she exhibits goal-oriented behavior, but that is not the salient aspect of the experience of meaning. If thought and reason are our tools for achieving or

maintaining what we value, the goal/framework conceptualization of meaning focuses on the tools, not the valuing. As for what valuing actually is and what the role is that valuing plays in human behavior and human experience, it is hard for me to say. That is where this paper leaves off, and, I hope, others continue.

Fourth, Reker and Wong believe that a conformist has a less diverse list of sources of meaning than an individualist (Reker & Wong, 1988), and therefore less personal meaning. This idea is also recurring theme in meaning in life theory. For example, Maddi (1967) believes that people who (among other behaviors) consider it “not only inevitable, but proper, that they conform to the pressures of the social system” (p. 315), are predisposed to “existential neurosis”—the experience of meaninglessness. However, conformity, or at least being like others, appears to me to be more of a protective factor than a risk factor with respect to the experience of meaninglessness. It may be that the recurrence of an emphasis on independence and goal-orientation in meaning in life theory is more due to industrial/post-industrial culture’s positive view of goals and individualism than to these concepts being an integral part of the experience of meaning.

Finally, Reker and Wong (1988) believe that an individual’s degree of personal meaning will increase in direct proportion to his or her diversification of sources of meaning (p. 225), and that depth of meaning, also a desirable characteristic, is the degree of self-transcendence involved in a particular meaningful interaction. These questionable hypotheses combined with O’Connor and Chamberlain’s difficulties assessing depth, raise the question of whether depth, and breadth/diversity of meaningful experiences are relevant aspects of most people’s experiences of meaning, and if so, how can these characteristics be assessed?

Speaking from my own experience, I find “emotionally intense” to be more helpful than “deep” for understanding differences between my experiences. I can think of past and future experiences that were or I imagine to be more intensely emotionally rewarding than others. I also note that the emotional intensity of an experience has to do with my really needing or wanting the experience, (e.g., I have not seen my girlfriend for a while, and I really want to see her) and when the desired experience becomes more routine, it is less intense. On the other hand, I can also think of experiences that are fairly intensely good day after day—being with a good friend, living in a beautiful town, or getting good exercise. As for breadth or diversity of meaningful experiences, I do note a definite improvement in my emotional situation when I can think of many opportunities for rewarding emotional experience instead of only one, and it does appear that people who experience significant meaning in life can think of many relatively varied meaningful experiences (Leath, 1999b).

Another important attribute of meaningful experience may be how long and how frequent rewarding emotional interactions occur for a person. For example, Frankl may have been better able to think of things to look forward to while in the concentration camp because of a strongly and frequently rewarding past. Vice versa, people are probably more likely to be profoundly sad at the loss of good long-term relationship than at the loss of a relationship which they have only had for a few days.

To put these (supposed) various characteristics of the experience of meaning in context, it may be helpful to think of humans as being motivated to seek out the best emotional experience possible. In deciding what to do we probably evaluate (more or less unconsciously) not just the degree or intensity of reward of a particular experience, but also the stability, reliability, and likelihood of continued availability of the experience. Additionally, the most extraordinary human behavior should occur when a great loss or gain in perceived opportunity for rewarding emotional experience is involved.

Thus, in assessing an individual's experience of meaning we should probably consider: (1) how many opportunities for rewarding emotional experience she perceives (quantity/diversity); (2) how excited she is about/how much she looks forward to these opportunities (intensity); (3) how long similar opportunities have been/are expected to be rewarding for her (duration/stability/permanence); (4) How frequently these opportunities have been/are expected to be rewarding. (frequency).

My approach to assessing these criteria was presented in the measurement section of this paper, and you will notice that I do not attempt to independently assess the quantity, intensity, duration, or frequency of an individual's experiences of meaning, as did O'Connor and Chamberlain, Reker and Wong, and Ebersole and Quiring. This is because what matters most in an individual's experience of meaning is her subjective experience of meaning. To the extent the above characteristics of the experience of meaning are accurate, the questions should feel relevant to everyone and be readily answered.

Just to be clear with respect to O'Connor and Chamberlain's (1996) study, I do agree that depth (intensity) and diversity are important characteristics of an individual's experiences of meaning. However, I find no reason that the intensity of emotional reward (depth) of an experience should relate to the self-transcendence involved in the experience as Reker and Wong (1988) supposed. Additionally, while discussing an opportunity for rewarding experience in more detail and complexity may indicate a more meaningful experience than a less thoroughly described rewarding emotional experience, as Ebersole and Quiring (1991) suggest, this appears to be a rather round-about and incomplete assessment of the quality of a meaningful experience.

To conclude, O'Connor and Chamberlain's (1996) and Reker and Wong's (1988) work has been reviewed and improvements to their conceptualization of the experience of meaning and methods of assessment have been suggested. I will now review the work of Debats, Drost, & Hansen (1995) who take a primarily phenomenological approach to exploring the nature of the experience of meaning.

Debats, Drost, & Hansen, 1995

Debats, Drost, and Hansen (1995) asked participants to describe situations or times they felt strongly their life had meaning or was meaningless, as well as how the feeling came about. They conducted their research based on these assumptions:

(1) A sense of meaningfulness in life is associated with relatedness, active engagement, well-being and general life satisfaction and happiness, high self-esteem, a generous attitude toward others, as well as a positive attitude towards life in general; And (2) a sense of meaninglessness is related to a loss of social identity, alienation and social isolation, disengagement, and psychopathology (pp. 360-361).

Following a phenomenological analysis of the responses, Debats and colleagues concluded that their results are consistent with the idea that meaning and meaninglessness are essentially the states of being in contact and alienation respectively. That is, the experience of meaningfulness is the state of being in contact "with the self, with others, and with life or the world," and the experience of meaninglessness is feeling alienated from "self, others, and life or world" (p. 371). Debats et al. also found a strong relationship between having a partner and positive life regard.

Their results are not terribly informative on the surface, but they do support the conceptualization of meaning and meaninglessness as being primarily the presence and

absence of rewarding emotional experience. Their results also give us some direction to what rewarding emotional experience might be. Specifically these results led me to think of the experience of meaning as being the experience of emotional connection. I have found the imaginary image of an emotional connection to be helpful in understanding what a person who finds meaning in life has that a person who experiences life as meaningless does not.

Different from the two studies just reviewed, Harlow and Newcomb (1990) explore the experience of meaning in life with an entirely quantitative approach.

Harlow & Newcomb, 1990

Harlow and Newcomb interpret meaning in life as a global feeling due to many particular environmental characteristics. In Harlow and Newcomb's (1990) latent variable analysis of meaning and satisfaction in life, they found that 25 questions could be organized into a hierarchical model, purportedly of meaning and satisfaction in life. These 25 items composed nine factors which in turn composed 3 factors, relationship satisfaction, purposeful living, and work and health satisfaction, which composed the first order factor of meaning and satisfaction in life. Consistent with previous research, Harlow and Newcomb found that relationship satisfaction loaded more strongly (.98) onto the primary factor than purposeful living (.89) and work and health satisfaction (.84). Harlow and Newcomb's model was based on the empirical work demonstrating the importance of relationships to meaning in life; existential literature emphasizing the importance of purpose in life, freedom, choice, and opportunity to meaning in life; empirical work demonstrating the negative effects of powerlessness and lack of control; and research emphasizing the importance of physical well-being and work to a sense of satisfaction in life.

What Harlow and Newcomb's work is most useful for is showing the environmental conditions most conducive to a feeling of meaning and satisfaction in life. But it does not give us an understanding of how these environmental influences contribute to the experience of meaning. Tolstoy (1981) is an example of someone who had everything going for him, yet still began to find life meaningless. I will return to Tolstoy's situation later.

Next, I explore the relationship between Antonovsky's (1987) sense of coherence [SOC] concept and the experience of meaning in life. The sense of coherence concept is of interest because at least one component of the SOC concept relates directly to an individual's experience of meaning. In addition, previous researchers have explored its use as a meaning in life measure (e.g. Chamberlain & Zika, 1988).

Sense of coherence

Antonovsky (1987) created the sense of coherence construct in order to assist him in understanding why certain individuals respond better than others under stressful life situations. He defines the sense of coherence as:

A global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable, and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement. (1987, p. 19)

Antonovsky refers to each of these three dimensions respectively as comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. The English version of the scale Antonovsky designed to measure SOC can be found in the Appendix on page 50.

For Antonovsky, a person's feeling of manageability refers to the extent to which the person believes she has the resources necessary to meet the demands of her internal and external environments. It is not implied that the individual needs to have absolute control over her environment—simply that she either has control over enough of her environment, or that she does not believe she needs control over her environment, e.g. “God has control, and my faith is in Him” or “Things are wonderful now, and I think they will always be wonderful—I've never had work at all to have a great time!”

Antonovsky's comprehensibility dimension is simply the degree of the individual's perception that the aspects of the world that she is concerned with make sense, as opposed to being completely random and unpredictable.

The meaningfulness dimension is the degree of the person's motivation in life. If a person is low on the meaningfulness dimension, she will not be motivated to seek out resources or to continue to try to make sense out of her situation.

The SOC has been widely researched and more recently has been used to design interventions (European Alzheimer Clearing House, 1997). While it generally makes sense, and, understandably, is getting at something important, there are some problems with the concept.

Commentary

First of all, the meaningfulness dimension is left as a mysterious black box. And in spite of his vagueness on what meaning is, Antonovsky suggests that it is the motivating force of the whole sense of coherence construct. This raises the question of how the experience of meaning might be different from sense of coherence. One difference is apparent: the SOC is concerned primarily with “coherence,”—do things make sense?—while meaning seems to be not so much concerned with coherence, but something else.

However, I would suggest that “coherence” is meaningless without emotion. In order for there to be any sort of coherence for a human, there must be a way for valuing one outcome over another and this is where emotion comes in. Even logic is useless without any emotional value to the end logic is being used to achieve. So, if we alter Antonovsky's sense of coherence to read primarily: “Do I feel capable of getting rewarding emotional experience in life?” (manageability), and, “Do I feel that I have an understanding of what is important to me for achieving rewarding emotional experience?” (comprehensibility). Then the third part of the whole “sense of coherence” would be simply how rewarding an individual finds living to be (meaningfulness).

But even this modified sense of coherence does not seem to be a parsimonious description of Frankl's concentration camp experience (Frankl, 1965). As Antonovsky supposed, Frankl could not be said to have had high scores on the manageability and comprehensibility dimensions, nor did he find his day-to-day existence wonderfully rewarding. What was more likely the case with Frankl was that he perceived significant opportunities for rewarding emotional experience in the future, *if he lived* through the misery of the concentration camps. Frankl was particularly eager to live for the rewarding experience he might have in the future. Other people imprisoned in the camps did not have as strong a will to live.

Moreover, many analyses of the SOC concept (c.f. Antonovsky, 1993) have demonstrated that the SOC scale (Antonovsky, 1987) has one general factor, not three

individual factors. And, if you consider the relationships between the components, you will see how having one component without the others (say, having a significant feeling of meaningfulness without believing you are capable of doing what is necessary to have meaningful experience) is unlikely. For this reason, I find it more acceptable to speak of only one dimension—perception of opportunity for rewarding emotional experience [POREE]. This one dimension incorporates all three of the modified SOC dimensions. Someone who scores high on the POREE dimension will (1) perceive that there are things in life that are rewarding to do (meaningfulness/comprehensibility) and (2) believe that there is an opportunity for her to be able to have that rewarding experience (capability/comprehensibility). Even this division of the POREE concept is not appropriate—a person is unlikely to believe that there are things in life that are rewarding to do unless she believes she has the opportunity to do those things.

Conclusion

The review of each of the preceding four works has allowed me to develop a clearer understanding of the nature of meaning in life. The review of Reker and Wong's theory and O'Conner and Chamberlain's (1996) research illustrated what characteristics of the experience of meaning might be important to assess. Debats, Drost, and Hansen's (1995) work assisted me in visualizing how the experience of meaning might be different from the experience of meaninglessness. Harlow and Newcomb's (1990) work suggests what some positive and negative environmental influences on an individual's experience of meaning in life might be. Finally, while it is not apparent from its position in this paper, in attempting to understand Antonovsky's (1987) sense of coherence concept, I developed the POREE concept.

No one approach to improving our understanding of the experience of meaning in life really stands out from the works just reviewed. However, it is notable that I found the most detailed, explicit theories to provoke what I consider to be the most helpful of my thinking about the experience of meaning in life.

In the following sections of this paper the research question shifts from what the defining characteristics of the experience of meaning in life might be to how individuals' experiences of meaning can change over time. The assumption of meaning in life researchers/theorists has generally been that an adult's experience of meaning in life can change dramatically. Below I review Denne and Thompson's (1991) work which addresses how a transition from experiencing life as meaningless, pointless, or hopeless, to experiencing meaning in life might occur.

The transition to meaning and purpose

Denne and Thompson (1991) have taken a phenomenological approach to studying the experience of transition from a feeling that life is meaningless to a feeling that life is meaningful. In exploring Denne and Thompson's research findings, we can compare them to what might be expected from the perspective of the POREE concept: Similarly to what was described in the well-being section of this paper, the individual who experiences life as meaningless is not perceiving any opportunities for rewarding emotional experience. The first prerequisite for change in this situation (outside of an environmental change for the better that the individual did not cause) would be hope that life can be rewarding. Secondly, if there is to be any change in the individual's experience, she must begin to form hypotheses about how to improve her experience and then test those hypotheses. Finally, for change to

occur, the individual needs to feel that her approach to improving her experience is being successful. We should see these basic events in Denne and Thompson's description of the transition from meaning to meaninglessness.

Denne and Thompson recruited 19 persons who believed they had experienced "a transition from a prolonged state of despair at the meaninglessness and purposelessness of life to a prolonged state of strong, clear, and satisfying meaning and purpose in life" (p. 115). These 19 participants were then interviewed and the interviews were taped. Of the 19, 10 were selected for further analysis based on the criteria in the list below. Five of the ten met each criterion, the other five met all criteria but that of completeness of the transition (c):

- a) the participants described their experiences in terms of meaning and purpose independently of interviewer prompting.
- b) Participants had experienced meaninglessness and purposelessness for at least two years.
- c) Participants described their current meaning and purpose in at least two of these terms: clear, strong, satisfying, without limiting qualifications.
- d) Participants did not speak of seeking new meaning content in the future but of the huge difference between their current experience and that of their despair period.
- e) Participants did not describe their current meaning and purpose as fluctuating but as having survived challenges and difficulties that would have previously been linked to a sense of meaninglessness. (p. 116)

Seven of the ten participants were women. The age range of the participants was 20 - 50, and most of the participants had experienced the transition during their 20s.

In developing the inclusion criteria, Denne and Thompson noticed that participants experienced despair at the experience of meaninglessness without searching for meaning in existence. They also found that the transition to an experience of meaning does not have a definite beginning and end, instead the transition appears to continue "even after a person has come to prolonged, clear, strong, and satisfying meaning and purpose in life" (p. 116).

Denne and Thompson then analyzed transcripts of the interviews to determine the "invariant constituents" of the transition, which were present in all transitions, and the "manifest constituents" of the transitions, which were not present in all transitions. They also compared the transition descriptions in order to determine the general process structure of the transition.

Denne and Thompson found five invariant constituents of the transition (paraphrase & quotation (where noted) of pages 119-124):

(1) They found that, during the transition, individuals accepted responsibility for themselves and their lives, i.e. they took responsibility for creating meaningful lives rather than depending on others or the environment to do it for them. In taking responsibility for the self, individuals also became more emotionally self-reliant. Each individual went from primarily reacting to the demands of the environment (others, or society), to living proactively according to their self-understanding.

The manifest constituents of the transition related to this invariant constituent include: Participants adapted an orientation to live either toward future goals or for present experience; Some participants needed the development of greater self-awareness by either simply recognizing their self as existing and special, or by developing personal values and beliefs rather than conforming with those of others; Some participants needed increases in self-esteem and self-efficacy before they were able to take responsibility for their selves and their lives.

Participants' acceptance of greater responsibility for their existence always occurred in a social environment. The development of self-awareness and values occurred while reading and talking with others.

Self-esteem developed through interactions between accepting and enacting responsibility for the self and affirmations of significant others.

(2) The acceptance of resisted aspects of experience. Participants came to accept positive and negative aspects of themselves or of existence, and if they had not done so already, they admitted an awareness of non-material aspects of reality (e.g., emotions).

(3) Congruence between personally meaningful concepts and experience. There had to be both an emotional experience of meaning, and a cognitive conceptualization of why the experience was meaningful. Either a meaningful experience or a conceptualization of meaning could come first, but the conceptual structure had to be congruent with meaningful experience.

(4) Decisional turning points. Transitions involved making a decision, risking/accepting possible negative outcomes, and then later feeling that the right decision was made. Sometimes the decisions would be dramatically life-changing events, other times they occurred more gradually. Decisional turning points had different effects depending on which other constituent of the transition process they occurred in relation with. They might result in publicly observable effects, such as changing one's life to live in congruence with one's ideals, or more private effects, such as accepting emotions as an important part of existence.

(5) Progression toward a balanced relation between self and world. Participants underwent a transition from an anxious or alienated relation with the world to a relation which was experienced as "an easy and satisfying balance of give and take, of self- and other-awareness, and of self- and other-responsiveness" (p. 123). What was interesting was that those who had been more externally focused and reactive had originally felt more alienated and were more self-absorbed. As they became more self-aware, and began to take more responsibility for their situation, they became more creatively involved in the world. Denne and Thompson also found that "as each person became self-reliant and self-responsive, previous difficulties in relating to the external world seemed to disappear automatically" (p. 123). One man, by focusing on himself first and on being happy with himself, seemed to take care of improving his relationships with others.

In addition, in their descriptions of meaningful experiences, participants described feeling the integration of one's self with the world. For example, one participant mentioned feeling like the ego was gone, and another that he felt that he and what he was doing was "just part of the whole thing that happens" (p. 123).

The progression toward a balanced relation between self and world did not appear to result from environmental changes, but primarily from "new attitudes, decisions, and activities, which developed in a spiral of increasing openness to both the self and the life-world" (pp. 123- 124).

General process structure of the transition

Denne and Thompson found that the relationships between the aforementioned invariant constituents varied from person to person. Moreover, the constituents were often linked as a gestalt, "with one episode illustrating all constituents" (p. 124). Supporting the gestalt conceptualization, Denne and Thompson found that "a change in one constituent seemed to generate the need for complementary changes in other parts of the individual's system of being-in-the-world" (p. 124).

It is important to note that while idiosyncratic content was not essential to the general structure of the transition, it was experienced as essential by individuals. Also, internal locus of control appears to be a necessary for the transition to occur.

Denne and Thompson contend that their results do not support theories which emphasize environmental determinants of behavior, but they realize that, “It could be argued that the subjects in this sample possessed the means of restructuring their life-styles because of the society in which they live” (p.126). They suggest that future research compare persons of different of cultures and socioeconomic groups.

Their work supports the idea that individuals must explore, find, and create their own values and meanings, rather than accepting the prescriptions of society, mass media, or the environment. Their work does not support Frankl’s belief that commitments to self-actualization or self-expression (as opposed to commitments to something outside of the self) are not conducive to the experience of meaning. Nor do their results support Heidegger’s belief that orienting one’s existence toward the future is required to experience meaning. Denne and Thompson’s results suggest that having a religion is not required for the experience of meaning, rather an “underlying commitment to a construct and life-style which seems experientially and intellectually valid to the individual” (p.127) is what is necessary.

In their article, Denne and Thompson also review many theories about meaning in life, and address some of the hypotheses suggested by these theories.

Commentary

Denne and Thompson’s research gives us many ideas to work with, but, because of the nature of their study, it is difficult to tell if what they found was actually an important characteristic of the transition, or something unique to their interpretation of the situation. We also have no way of knowing if what they found occurring in their sample is unique to those undergoing the transition to meaning, or also exhibited by people who continue to experience meaninglessness—it is possible that some of the changes described in their study could occur in a person, yet the person would continue to experience meaninglessness.

These limitations aside, I will now discuss whether the predictions (p. 30) I made from the POREE concept appeared in Denne and Thompson’s study.

Invariant constituent #1 “accepting responsibility for one’s self and one’s life” does not fit particularly well into any of the predictions I made based on the POREE concept. This suggests that accepting responsibility may not be of universal importance in the transition. One example, which may or may not be valid, that refutes the importance of accepting responsibility is the individual who decides to put all her faith in God. Such an individual would (1) have hope that her experience can be rewarding, and (2) have the hypothesis that by trusting in God that her experience will improve. What is involved is not so much a conscious acceptance of responsibility for one’s life, but an awareness that one is dissatisfied with one’s situation and the hope that one can make some change in one’s life that will improve one’s situation. If there is a change, it would be from a more passive, hopeless outlook on existence to a slightly more proactive stance. While “accepting responsibility for one’s life” may fit with some peoples’ perspectives of their transitions, it is probably not appropriate for everyone.

Invariant constituent #2, “accepting resisted aspects of experience” and #4 “decisional turning points” both could be said to have to do with forming and testing hypotheses. Since everyone in Denne and Thompson’s study had been experiencing meaninglessness for at least two years one might imagine that a significant amount of personal/environmental change would have to occur before the participants would consider

themselves to have progressed through a transition. The personal change involved in such a transition would likely be fundamental to the person's outlook on life. For example, Denne and Thompson mentioned that some participants who had not admitted awareness of the world of feelings did so in the progress of their transitions. That can be a fundamental change in a person. In the language of Piaget (1952), what is occurring is not assimilation but accommodation. Invariant constituent #4, "decisional turning points," understandably would occur when the individual begins to test her newly formed hypotheses. Finally, as Denne and Thompson noted, in order for an individual to feel that she is progressing through a transition, she must believe that testing her hypotheses was worthwhile—that she is making some progress.

Invariant constituent #3, "congruence between meaningful concepts and experience" speaks to a particular kind of hypothesis. Denne and Thompson are suggesting that an individual undergoing a transition from meaninglessness to meaning will be actively trying to understand what meaningful experience is. When the participants in your study are speaking in terms of meaninglessness and purposelessness such a situation is likely to exist. However, it is also possible that there are many people who experience something like meaninglessness but do not speak of it in those terms. They may not even ask questions about the nature of rewarding emotional experience, yet they will begin to form hypotheses about how they can improve their situation. Tolstoy's transition, which I review below, is an example of this. What is probably accurate about invariant constituent #4 is that people will be able to feel when things are going well for them, but until they come to an understanding of why their situation improved, no real progress will have been made. For example, in Tolstoy's transition, he felt good when he believed in God, and suicidal when he did not believe in God, but until he formed the understanding that he needed to believe in God to live, he felt no progress was being made. Thus, similarly to what Denne and Thompson stated, either the hypothesis (not necessarily about meaning) or the improved experience can come first, but until there is a congruence between the hypotheses and experience, the individual will not feel that progress has been made.

Invariant constituent #5 "progression toward a balanced relation between self and world" appears to be simply Denne and Thompson's way of saying that the quality of the participant's emotional experience improves. While it may be that a fair amount of Denne and Thompson's description is different ways of describing the same process, reading different descriptions of the experience of meaning can be helpful in getting a better feeling for what the experience of meaning might be. Also, the descriptions of meaningful experience Denne and Thompson share are consistent with the idea, which I will address later, that an important part, the more "spiritual" part, of experiencing meaning in life, is believing that your life and work is a part of a good thing that is larger and more timeless than one's self. This idea seems related to something mentioned in Adamson & Lyxell's (1996) article about existential concerns in adolescence—that identity development (generally assumed to be a good thing) may involve first the task of self-differentiation (awareness of one's self as capable of thinking and acting independently) and then the task of integrating one's concept of self with one's concept of the larger social world.

At any rate, we have seen how the POREE concept fits into Denne and Thompson's findings about the transition from meaninglessness to meaning, and how the POREE concept may offer a more simplified, universal understanding of how the transition occurs. Much more can be said about the general transition from meaninglessness to meaning, including the decision to or not to commit suicide, and if one decides not to commit suicide, how one either deals with a continually bleak existence or works to improve one's experience. I will

leave that discussion for later, although some of these issues are touched on in the section that follows.

The next section details what may be a special case of the general transition from experiencing meaninglessness to experiencing meaning. Specifically, it has to do with crises like that of Tolstoy (1882) when he found himself unable yet compelled to try to understand why and wherefore he was living. *The meaning and the purpose of life* are not a concern for every human, but it appears that for some the time comes that life becomes unlivable (no opportunities for rewarding emotional experience are perceivable) when they are unable to contradict the thought that their life, and all life, is without purpose and without meaning. This phenomenon and possible reasons for its occurrence are explored below.

Tolstoy's transition

Tolstoy has left us a description of both his transition from meaning to meaninglessness and from meaninglessness to meaning. His experience is notable because it illustrates ways in which one can be paralyzingly blinded to the possibility of rewarding experience due not so much to oppressive conditions of one's external environment as to a particular way of thinking and perceiving the world. What follows is a rather crude paraphrase of Tolstoy's (1882) "A Confession," which I encourage you to read in its entirety if it interests you—it is available on the web on several different sites. (Quotations do not have page numbers because they come from an on-line copy of the essay)

Perplexingly, not long before the onset of Tolstoy's experience of meaninglessness, he did not have any obviously unfavorable environmental conditions—he was not lonely or isolated or being worked to death in a concentration camp. His situation would not be unlike that of a rich, successful person today who has rich, successful friends. However, questions like "What is it for?" and "What does it lead to?" began to impinge themselves on Tolstoy's consciousness with increasing frequency until he was paralyzed... He wrote, "As long as I did not know why, I could do nothing and could not live." Tolstoy frantically and thoroughly searched human knowledge for some sort of rational answer as to what the purpose of life, and the purpose to his life might be. The only answer he found was that "life is nothing." He then wanted to kill himself, but some feeling kept him from doing so. He eventually looked to the peasants to see what they did such that they were able to live meaningful lives. He decided what they had that he did not was faith, and he resolved to try to have faith himself. He was then ready to accept any faith as long as it did not demand of him a "direct denial of reason." And he went back and forth hundreds of times, wanting desperately to believe in God, but he could not find a way of believing that made sense to him. Finally, he realized that he was happy when he believed in God, but suicidal when he did not. He came to this conclusion: "This is He. He is that without which one cannot live. To know God and to live is one and the same thing. God is life." Upon accepting this need of his to believe in God, Tolstoy found he had the same outlook on life that he did when he was a child, when he unconsciously accepted God—only this time he "knew that without it I could not live."

Commentary

Tolstoy's experience illustrates exceptional ways the experience of meaninglessness can be encountered. First, it seems unusual that someone who had life conditions most people in industrial/post-industrial society would deem favorable would lapse into meaninglessness so inexplicably. However, later in his essay Tolstoy offers some clues as to

why this might have happened. He decided that he was right when he agreed with Schopenhauer that life is evil and an absurdity—at least he was right about his own life and those of his friends. They lived lives of self-indulgence supported by the peasants. Tolstoy gives an example of an executioner who makes his living torturing and killing, who asks “What is life?” and of course he will answer “Life is the greatest evil.” Whereas the person who is surrounded by loving people, people who find life full of meaning, cannot help but answer that life is beautiful. Let us assume these remarks of Tolstoy’s demonstrate that all was not right with his life before his experience of meaninglessness. It would be hard to explain a spontaneous, if even possibly thought-induced, experience of meaninglessness.

The two other serious risk factors for the experience of meaninglessness in Tolstoy’s experience were: (1) his belief in the primacy of rational thought—here is a quote from his essay: “If there is nothing higher than reason (and there is not: nothing can prove that there is)...”—and (2) his preoccupation with there needing to be a purpose for everything. In Tolstoy’s transition from meaninglessness to meaning, he had to change his view of reason and purpose and pay attention to a feeling within himself which he first calls a “consciousness of life,” and later, “a search for God.” He realized that reason was not the highest good because reason could find life meaningless, and that reason only exists because of life.

The final requirement to the resolution of Tolstoy’s experience of meaninglessness is that he find some way of thinking of his life such that he sees his life not as ending with his death, but as part of larger, timeless whole, that he believes is good (or simply neither good nor evil). This can be seen in his essay in the change in his characterization of life from “life is nothing” to “life is God.”

So, as we have seen in Tolstoy’s case, a human is capable of being driven by her culture’s emphasis on purpose and rational thought to use rational thought to destroy the quality of any experience she might have... Imagine what living would be like if you compulsively ask about every experience “what is the purpose of this?” and do not stop asking until you find a reason—yet you find none. If you are lucky, this compulsion continues until you turn reason on itself and relegate it to a lesser place in your consciousness. Yet there is also an underlying need in some people to come to an understanding about what life is for. Some people simply “feel” that living is good. Others need to come to a more rational understanding. However, no rational understanding works unless it allows the individual to feel she is a part of a larger, good, whole.

One exception to this may be the perspective of some existentialists that rationally, life is meaningless, but we may as well live as if life was not meaningless just to spite the ridiculous joke that has been played on us. However, I find assertions that, “rationally, life is meaningless” to be no more logically sound than claims that there is an anthropomorphic God—but that matters little, as the holder of either belief is apparently able to go on living. In spite of the serious effects that we have seen that questioning the point of living can have, I believe that thought- and question-induced experiences of meaninglessness (the undesirable kind of meaninglessness) are not likely unless preceded by a lack of or reduction in the quality of an individual’s emotional experience.

Pirsig’s (1974) *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is another example of something like a thought-induced experience of meaninglessness. Other related examples, including experiences described by William James and Nietzsche, are presented in Novak’s (1970) *The Experience of Nothingness*.

Will to Meaning

One question raised by Tolstoy's transition is why an individual would want so much to find a purpose for living or a meaning for his life, regardless of what his other problems might be. Frankl (1965) postulated that humans have a "will to meaning," a fundamental motivation to find "meaning" in their existence. While Frankl made little recorded effort to justify his claims of a will to meaning, Crumbaugh (1963) did.

Crumbaugh suggests that the cause of a human's motivation to find meaning is related to or the same as the cause of the Gestalt psychologists' laws of perceptual organization, i.e., that humans have an inherent motivation to "organize stimulus elements into meaningful wholes" (p. 45). Crumbaugh mentions that a motivation to organize one's perceptions has survival value, "for the greater the range of stimuli which can be comprehended and interrelated, the greater the chance of adaptive manipulation" (p. 45).

Thus, while we regularly differentiate and organize our visual input into a comprehensible whole (consider your behavior when you saw something that visually did not make sense to you... or imagine what your life would be like if you did not differentiate and integrate your visual input; c.f. Yalom, 1980— "groundlessness"), we may also do the same thing when considering all that we are capable of considering, all of our past and what we imagine of our future, all that we know of human history and the history of the universe, and all that we imagine the future of humanity and the universe to be.

As attractive as this idea may seem, let us further consider support for the idea and possible problems with it. First, that finding meaning in existence might, as Crumbaugh suggests, involve integrating our understanding of our existence with what we know of the world around us, appears to be congruent with both feelings and cognitions of meaning, i.e., "feeling at one with all things" or the feelings of being in contact with self, other, and life or world as described in Debats' 1995 study, or cognitively, in seeing the point, or how it all makes sense.

Additionally, viewing one's life and viewing being alive as an important part of something larger than one's self may be one reason many people, like Frankl, have maintained the will to live through the most miserable conditions. And a strong desire to feel a part of and to believe one is a part of something larger than one's self, or the frustration of that desire, may help account for the myriad of things people die for, kill themselves because of, or endure intense torture to preserve. It appears that the desire to have lived a meaningful existence is a much stronger motivator than the fear of death.

However, the fact that people would choose to put themselves in dangerous situations, or even choose not to reproduce, to stay true to the beliefs that they find meaningful poses a difficulty for a hypothesized "will to meaning" in passing the hurdle of natural selection. One possibility is that the advantages, in terms of reproductive success, of a "will to meaning" outweigh the disadvantages, and that the fact that so many people will die to remain true to their meaningful beliefs attests to the magnitude of this advantage. It could also be that a "will to meaning" in humans is a byproduct of the reproductive advantage of Gestalt perception and organization. Finally, since we are a product of both biological and social evolution, we may not be able to use natural selection to create a complete understanding of the origin of a hypothesized "will to meaning."

Unfortunately, there has been little discussion in the research literature beyond Crumbaugh's (1963) about a possible "will to meaning," so none or few of the ideas I have presented about it have weathered serious debate. Further exploration of the "will to

meaning” could prove valuable, especially if “will to meaning” is as strong a motivator it appears to be.

In conclusion, the nature of the will to meaning has been discussed, and support for and problems with the concept have been presented. “Will to meaning” may be less mysteriously thought of as the desire to perceive one’s self and one’s behavior as part of a whole that is larger and more timeless than one’s self. An important point was made that for some people, consciously perceiving that their life is somehow a part of something good and larger and longer lasting than themselves must be considered an important pre- or corequisite to being able to perceive opportunities for rewarding emotional experience in their day-to-day and life-long existence.

One influence on an individual’s experience of meaning in life which has not been addressed in this paper is the influence of culture. However, you will remember that Tolstoy, in his desperation to find meaning in life, turned to the culture of the peasants for help. He also implicated his own culture in the onset of his experience of meaninglessness. Moreover, throughout the meaning and purpose in life literature, and ever since the inception of the research area (c.f. Frankl, 1965), a rising and even overwhelming incidence of the experience of meaninglessness (in western industrial/post-industrial culture) has been posited, and attributed to changes in the culture. In the following section of the paper, the influence of culture on the experience of meaninglessness is briefly addressed.

Culture

Several researchers (Yalom, 1980; Blocker, 1974) have suggested that the tragic sense of meaninglessness may be primarily a phenomenon of European culture. There, due to the emphasis of religion, science, or the interaction of both, people grew up believing that an objective, knowable reality exists. These people became distressed when—in an age when long-held traditions were being discredited, and when, as Tolstoy found, science did not offer agreeable answers to life’s questions—they were unable to find an objective purpose or meaning for their life that felt good too.

On the other hand, Blocker (1974), suggests that for traditional Buddhists, who do not assume there is an objective meaning to life, the experience of meaninglessness is a liberating and joyful experience—the experience of the meaninglessness of life gives them a feeling of creative power. Another non-western perspective related to the issue of the purpose of life can be found in a quote in Yalom (1980): “Existence has no goal. It is pure journey. The journey in life is so beautiful, who bothers with the destination?” (~p. 467).

Unfortunately, I have not been able to find much cross-cultural research into the experience of meaninglessness, so the ideas above remain untested. Other possibilities for a higher incidence of meaninglessness in industrial/post-industrial societies include: (1) the heightened pace of technological change leads to physical and social environments changing faster than individuals and cultures can adapt; (2) An increasingly “mass” and centralized culture reduces (a) the responsiveness of the social and political environment to most individuals, and (b) most individuals’ feeling that they matter; and (3) An increasing degree of personal freedom, and a decrease in the level of emotionally involving and rewarding interaction required in order to survive may lead to: (a) increased incidence of the experience of meaninglessness and (b) fewer feelings of oppression, less suppression, and greater feelings of creative power. At any rate, culture, among other variables, can be a significant influence on the emotional quality of humans’ lives, and vice-versa—the psychological and biological characteristics of humans lead them to shape their cultures in certain ways.

Individuals interested in positively influencing their experiences of meaning in life could benefit from considering the effect on the experience of meaning in life of the outlooks and ways of life of various cultures and subgroups of the population.

This concludes this review of work addressing various aspects of the experience of meaning in life. The following section is a summary of notable concepts and findings about meaning in life that have been presented. I conclude with some suggestions where research and interventions related to rewarding emotional experience might go from here.

Perceiving opportunities for rewarding emotional experience [POREE] concept summarized

I find it helpful to think of the experience of meaning in life as “being able to perceive opportunities for rewarding emotional experience.” This and other concepts mentioned below are referred to as the POREE concept throughout the paper. I think of “perceiving” as being aware—in this case, being aware that certain things or interactions are important to you. One arrives at these awarenesses through an emotional evaluation of information. In evaluating our life-experience, imagined future experience, and particular experiences, we probably consider (more or less unconsciously) the quantity/diversity, intensity, frequency, and likelihood of continued availability of emotional reward from the experience. Your evaluation of this information is influenced by or uses as inputs years of biological and social evolution, memories—conscious and less conscious—of your own personal experiences, and, occasionally, language-based thought processes, like reasoning.

Transition from the experience of meaninglessness to the experience of meaning

One transitions from being *unable* to perceive opportunities for rewarding emotional experience to being able to do so by first at least having the hope that living can be rewarding, and then developing and testing hypotheses about the changes one could make to improve the emotional quality of one’s life. Some environments are harder to perceive opportunities for rewarding emotional experience in than others.

The need for a meaning of life

An interesting characteristic of humans is that some may *need* to be aware of some meaning or purpose for their entire lives in order to be motivated to continue to perform even the most basic life-supporting behaviors. What these humans need is not a rational answer to the meaning or purpose of their lives but an answer that *feels* good to them. An answer that feels good allows one to perceive that one’s life is part of a good whole that is larger and more timeless than one’s self. Being unable to perceive a larger meaning or purpose for one’s life is not a significant concern in many cultures in which the answer is provided and rarely questioned—lacking an answer to the meaning of one’s life may only be a noticeable problem in industrial and post-industrial cultures.

“Will to meaning”

The phenomenon of humans seeming to need to have a good-feeling answer for the larger meaning and purpose of their lives may, as Crumbaugh (1963) suggests, be related to Gestalt perception—the ability of humans and many animals to process visual stimuli as wholes instead of many different component parts. An adaptation like Gestalt perception in other areas of sensing and processing may be beneficial because “the greater the range of stimuli which can be comprehended and interrelated, the greater the chance of adaptive manipulation” (p. 45). When humans are motivated to consider the role of their own life in

what they know of the rest of existence, concerns with the meaning and purpose of life are the result.

Hierarchical organization of behavior

As astonishing as a human's behavior when she perceives that her life has no purpose or meaning is her behavior when she is passionately committed to a well-defined life goal or a vision of the ideal life. People are able to subsume basic life functions to the service of achieving their goal or ideal. Additionally, people can be devastated when they perceive that they have lost an intensely rewarding or long-lasting opportunity for rewarding emotional experience.

Some of the other conceptual issues addressed in this paper include:

Well-being—The individual who both perceives opportunities for rewarding emotional experience and frequently experiences emotionally rewarding experience has achieved well-being. One can be physically miserable and still experience meaning in life.

Hope—Maintaining emotional attachment to/continuing to look forward to the possibility that one's emotional experience will improve or remain as good as it is is hope.

Purpose in life involves having clear perceptions of what kind of far-off yet potentially achievable future experience will bring about rewarding experience.

Meaning in life involves having the perception that there is rewarding experience to be had in daily life or in the future, not necessarily involving sustained effort to achieve particular goals.

Experiences of fear and hate can be as meaningful as experiences as love, especially in contrast to the emotionless, apathetic experience of meaninglessness.

The intensity or degree of an individual's experience of meaning can be determined by assessing the effort she is willing to exert to attain or maintain what is important to her, or by assessing the sadness an individual feels at the loss of a perceived opportunity for rewarding emotional experience.

Measurement of some of the above concepts is discussed on pages 8-14.

Notable research findings related to the experience of meaning in life:

In adolescence, the experience of meaning in life is associated with reduced risk of adopting socially undesirable coping strategies (such as drug use or suicide) in the face of stressful events.

The ability to find the good in otherwise undesirable experiences is an important aspect of psychological well-being.

Personal, intimate relationships are the aspect of life most frequently mentioned as providing the greatest amount of meaningful interaction. There are notable exceptions to this finding, however—those who value their life's work over personal relationships.

Future Research

Where from here?

My first concern is to test the ideas in this paper. I may let the researchers whose work I have reviewed know about this paper, with the hope that these ideas could be of use to them or that they could point out the shortcomings of this paper. I may also publish it on the Web so that people who search for "meaning in life," "purpose in life" or other concepts addressed here might find this paper and provide criticism.

Beyond testing the soundness of this paper in those ways, my research will continue in several areas. I am most drawn to the consideration of rewarding emotional experience in my own life. I would like to express a certain kind of beauty, perceivable at least by me, in the way that I live and in the experiences I have. Other research possibilities include: (1) The further development of empirically testable hypotheses based on the concepts in this paper; (2) Altering the structure of physical, social, and political/economic environments to make them more conducive to rewarding emotional experience; (3) Exploring the nature of social and cultural change; and (4) Researching the process by which individuals develop ways of living and comprehending life that are conducive to well-being and continued survival.

Finally, if I have accomplished anything in this paper, I hope it is the refining of an obscure concept. While it is easy to think that by saying meaning in life is “perceived opportunity for rewarding emotional experience” I am guilty of equivocation, the thought processes detailed in this paper have led to what I believe is a more accurate statement of the question. The mystery is no longer “what is meaningful experience?” it is now, “How does one come to perceive an experience as emotionally rewarding?”

Emotion, then, or more explicitly, the process of valuing, is the next area to explore. Why does a child pick up a leaf when she is walking along, carry it with her, and then cry when it breaks? How does it happen that a person could be absolutely apathetic about existence? How can that person come to experience emotional involvement in living again?

Perhaps emotional development in childhood is like language development. We are excited about all sorts of things and then we learn to only be excited about a few. A lot of emotional experience seems easy enough to understand—the most emotionally drawing experiences are those that we would expect from an evolutionary perspective to be most reinforcing. Few things can be more emotionally rewarding than involvement with a responsive partner in an intimate relationship. On the other hand, for a person in an environment she perceives as absolutely unresponsive to her, apathy is understandable.

Now that the question, “What is the experience of meaning in life?” is a question of understanding the emotional basis for valuing an experience, the area we need to work on is a more clear. We should be able to make significant progress.

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Appendix—Measurement instruments

I. The Purpose in Life Test [PIL]

Developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964). This is a copy of the one printed in Garfield (1973).

For each of the following statements, circle the number that would be most nearly true for you. Note that the numbers always extend from one extreme feeling to its opposite kind of feeling. “Neutral” implies no judgment either way. Try to use this rating as *little* as possible.

1. I am usually:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
completely bored			(neutral)		exuberant, enthusiastic	

2. Life to me seems:

7	6	5	4	3	2	1
always exciting			(neutral)		completely routine	

3. In life I have:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
no goals or aims at all			(neutral)		very clear goals and aims	

4. My person existence is:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
utterly meaningless, without purpose			(neutral)		very purposeful and meaningful	

5. Every day is:

7	6	5	4	3	2	1
constantly new and different			(neutral)		exactly the same	

6. If I could choose, I would:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
prefer never to have been born			(neutral)		like nine more lives just like this one	

7. After retiring, I would:

7	6	5	4	3	2	1
do some of the exciting things I have always wanted to do			(neutral)		loaf completely the rest of my life	

8. In achieving life goals I have:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
made no progress whatever			(neutral)		progressed to complete fulfillment	

9. My life is:
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
empty, filled only with (neutral) running over with
despair exciting good things
10. If I should die today, I would feel that my life has been:
7 6 5 4 3 2 1
very worthwhile (neutral) completely worthless
11. In thinking of my life, I:
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
often wonder why I (neutral) always see a reason for
exist my being here
12. As I view the world in relation to my life, the world:
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
completely confuses me (neutral) fits meaningfully with
my life
13. I am a:
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
very irresponsible (neutral) very responsible person
14. Concerning man's freedom to make his own choices, I believe man is:
7 6 5 4 3 2 1
absolutely free to make (neutral) completely bound by
all life choices limitations of heredity
and environment
15. With regard to death, I am:
7 6 5 4 3 2 1
prepared and unafraid (neutral) unprepared and
unafraid
16. With regard to suicide, I have:
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
thought of it seriously (neutral) never given it a second
as a way out thought
17. I regard my ability to find a meaning, purpose, or mission in life as:
7 6 5 4 3 2 1
very great (neutral) practically none
18. My life is:
7 6 5 4 3 2 1
in my hands and I am in (neutral) out of my hands and
control of it controlled by external
factors

19. Facing my daily tasks is:
 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
 a source of pleasure and (neutral) a painful and boring
 satisfaction experience
20. I have discovered:
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 no mission or purpose in (neutral) clear-cut goals and a
 life satisfying life purpose

II. The Life Regard Index [LRI]

Developed by Battista and Almond (1973).

Below are 28 statements that you may agree or disagree with. Using the 1 - 7 scale below indicate your agreement with each item by placing the appropriate number on the line preceding that item. Please be open and honest in your responding.

(Note: Those are sample directions. Scales with as few as three choices have been used before. The questions would be presented in random order.)

- * 7 - Strongly agree
- * 6 -
- * 5 -
- * 4 - neutral
- * 3 -
- * 2 -
- * 1 - Strongly disagree

Framework Items (Positive)

- ___ I feel like I have found a really significant meaning for leading my life.
- ___ I have really come to terms with what's important for me in my life.
- ___ I have a system or framework that allows me to truly understand my being alive.
- ___ I have a very clear idea of what I'd like to do with my life.
- ___ There are things that I devote all my life's energy to.
- ___ I have a philosophy of life that really gives my living significance.
- ___ I have some aims and goals that would personally give me a great deal of satisfaction if I could accomplish them.

Framework Items (Negative)

- ___ I just don't know what I really want to do with my life.
- ___ I really don't have much of a purpose for living, even for myself.
- ___ I need to find something that I can really be committed to.
- ___ I get completely confused when I try to understand my life.
- ___ There honestly isn't anything that I totally want to do.
- ___ I really don't believe in anything about my life very deeply.
- ___ Other people seem to have a much better idea of what they want to do with their lives than I do.

Fulfillment Items (Positive)

- ___ I have real passion in my life.
- ___ I really feel good about my life.
- ___ Living is deeply fulfilling.

- I feel that I am living fully.
- I feel that I'm really going to attain what I want in life.
- I get so excited by what I'm doing that I find new stores of energy I didn't know that I had.
- When I look at my life I feel the satisfaction of really having worked to accomplish something.

Fulfillment Items (Negative)

- I don't seem to be able to accomplish those things that are really important to me.
- Other people seem to feel better about their lives than I do.
- I have a lot of potential that I don't normally use.
- I spend most of my time doing things that really aren't very important to me.
- Something seems to stop me from doing what I really want to do.
- Nothing very outstanding ever seems to happen to me.
- I don't really value what I'm doing.

III. Sense of Coherence [SOC]

Developed by Antonovsky (1987). Antonovsky employed a technique to make sure certain elements in his questions were evenly distributed. Refer to p. 77 of his book for details. This is copied from pp. 189-194.

C= comprehensibility, MA = manageability, ME= meaningfulness.

A high score represents a strong SOC. Before calculating the total score, the thirteen items marked R should be reversed.

For those interested in using a short form of the SOC, the thirteen items marked * are recommended.

The notations, obviously, are to be omitted when the questionnaire is used.

ORIENTATION TO LIFE QUESTIONNAIRE

Here is a series of questions relating to various aspects of our lives. Each question has seven possible answers. please mark the number which expresses your answer, with number 1 and 7 being the extreme answers. If the words under 1 are right for you, circle 1; if the words under 7 are right for you, circle 7. If you feel differently, circle the number which best expresses your feeling. Please give only one answer to each question.

1. When you talk to people, do you have the feeling that they don't understand you?

	C	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
		never have this feeling						always have this feeling

2. In the past, when you had to do something which depended upon cooperation with others, did you have the feeling that it:

	MA	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
		surely wouldn't get done						surely would get done

3. Think of the people with whom you come into contact daily, aside from the ones to whom you feel closest. How well do you know most of them?

	C	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
		you feel that they're strangers						you know them very well

- *4. Do you have the feeling that you don't really care about what goes on around you?
 ME 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 R very seldom or never very often
- *5. Has it happened in the past that you were surprised by the behavior of people whom you thought you knew well?
 C 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 R never happened always happened
- *6. Has it happened that people whom you counted on disappointed you?
 MA 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 R never happened always happened
7. Life is:
 ME 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 R full of interest completely routine
- *8. Until now your life has had:
 ME 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 no clear goals or purpose at all very clear goals and purpose
- *9. Do you have the feeling that you're being treated unfairly?
 MA 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 very often very seldom or never
10. In the past ten years your life has been:
 C 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 full of changes without your knowing what will happen next completely consistent and clear
11. Most of the things you do in the future will probably be:
 ME 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 R completely fascinating deadly boring
- *12. Do you have the feeling that you are in an unfamiliar situation and don't know what to do?
 C 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 very often very seldom or never
13. What best describes how you see life:
 MA 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 R one can always find a solution to painful things in life there is no solution to painful things in life
14. When you think about your life, you very often:
 ME 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 R feel how good it is to be alive ask yourself why you exist at all

15. When you face a difficult problem, the choice of a solution is:
 C 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 always confusing and hard to find always completely clear
- *16. Doing the things you do every day is:
 ME 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 R a source of deep pleasure and satisfaction a source of pain and boredom
17. Your life in the future will probably be:
 C 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 full of changes without your knowing what will happen next completely consistent and clear
18. When something unpleasant happened in the past your tendency was:
 MA 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 "to eat yourself up" about it to say "ok, that's that, I have to live with it," and go on
- *19. Do you have very mixed-up feelings and ideas?
 C 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 very often very seldom or never
20. When you do something that gives you a good feeling:
 MA 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 R it's certain that you'll go on feeling good it's certain that something will happen to spoil the feeling
- *21. Does it happen that you have feelings inside you would rather not feel?
 C 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 very often very seldom or never
22. You anticipate that your personal life in the future will be:
 ME 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 totally without meaning or purpose full of meaning and purpose
23. Do you think that there will *always* be people whom you'll be able to count on in the future?
 MA 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 R you're certain there will be you doubt there will be

24. Does it happen that you have the feeling that you don't know exactly what's about to happen?
- | | | | | | | | |
|---|------------|---|---|---|---|---|----------------------|
| C | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | very often | | | | | | very seldom or never |
- *25. Many people—even those with a strong character—sometimes feel like losers in certain situations. How often have you felt this way in the past?
- | | | | | | | | |
|----|-------|---|---|---|---|---|------------|
| MA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| R | never | | | | | | very often |
- *26. When something happened, have you generally found that:
- | | | | | | | | |
|---|--|---|---|---|---|---|--|
| C | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | you over-estimated or under-estimated its importance | | | | | | you saw things in the right proportion |
27. When you think of difficulties you are likely to face in important aspects of your life, do you have the feeling that:
- | | | | | | | | |
|----|--|---|---|---|---|---|--|
| MA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| R | you will always succeed in overcoming the difficulties | | | | | | you won't succeed in overcoming the difficulties |
- *28. How often do you have the feeling that there's little meaning in the things you do in your daily life?
- | | | | | | | | |
|----|------------|---|---|---|---|---|----------------------|
| ME | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | very often | | | | | | very seldom or never |
- *29. How often do you have feelings that you're not sure you can keep under control?
- | | | | | | | | |
|----|------------|---|---|---|---|---|----------------------|
| MA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | very often | | | | | | very seldom or never |

IV. Happiness Measures

Developed by Fordyce (1988).

$$\text{Happiness measures score} = (H \times 10 + HP) / 2$$

Part I

DIRECTIONS: Use the list below to answer the following question: IN GENERAL, HOW HAPPY OR UNHAPPY DO YOU USUALLY FEEL? Choose the number of the *one* statement below that best describes your *average happiness*, and write it on this line: {H} ___

- 10. Extremely happy (feeling ecstatic, joyous, fantastic!)
- 9. Very happy (feeling really good, elated!)
- 8. Pretty happy (spirits high, feeling good.)
- 7. Mildly happy (feeling fairly good and somewhat cheerful.)
- 6. Slightly happy (just a bit above neutral.)
- 5. Neutral (not particularly happy or unhappy.)
- 4. Slightly unhappy (just a bit below neutral.)
- 3. Mildly unhappy (just a little low.)
- 2. Pretty unhappy (somewhat “blue,” spirits down.)
- 1. Very unhappy (depressed, spirits very low.)
- 0. Extremely unhappy (utterly depressed, completely down.)

Part II

DIRECTIONS: Consider your emotions a moment further. *On the average*, what percent of the time do you feel happy? What percent of the time do you feel unhappy? What percent of the time do you feel neutral (neither happy nor unhappy)? Write down your best estimates, as well as you can, in the spaces below. Make sure the three figures add up to equal 100%.

ON THE AVERAGE:

The percent of the time I feel happy {HP} %
 The percent of the time I feel unhappy _____ %
 The percent of the time I feel neutral _____ %
 TOTAL: 100 %