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# Distinctions to Promote an Integrated Perspective on Meaning: Global Meaning and Meaning-Making Processes

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This article continues the dialogue begun during the First Congress on the Construction of Personal Meaning by addressing specific questions generated at the Congress. I argue that it is desirable to move toward consensus in understanding existential meaning, that it is useful to reframe the human “need for meaning” as the “need for a functional meaning system,” and that it is important to consider the functionality of individuals’ meaning systems as determining when and how they may change. I describe a model of global meaning as comprising beliefs (cognitions), goals (motivation), and a subjective sense of meaning (emotion); and meaning making as aligning one’s appraisals of situations with one’s global meaning. I highlight the unique role that spirituality plays in the meaning systems of many people. I conclude by strongly encouraging future researchers to develop and use strong measures of meaning-related constructs. My aim in this article is to help foster consensus and advance the science of human meaning.

The First Congress on the Construction of Personal Meaning provided a wonderful forum for exchanging ideas and information regarding the nature of meaning and meaning-oriented approaches to research and clinical practice. Participants were united in our desire to advance this area of scientific inquiry by finding areas of commonality and bridging theoretical differences, bringing us closer to the goal of integrating our reservoirs of expertise and knowledge. I was delighted and honored to be part of this illustrious group. As a way of continuing our dialogue, I provide my thoughts here on some of the questions posed to conference participants that may bring us closer to this integration.

## IS IT POSSIBLE OR DESIRABLE TO PROPOSE AN INTEGRATIVE THEORY OF HUMAN MEANING?

Let me start with the second part of this question: I think it is *very* desirable not only to propose an integrative theory but to move toward developing some consensus in this regard. Because we are all interested in the general phenomenon of life meaning, we should be able to talk with and learn from one another and build on one another’s work. By doing so, progress would be much easier to make and our knowledge would advance more quickly. However, our conceptualizations and

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terminology can be barriers: Often, reading the theoretical and empirical literature is frustrating, because there is so much great work already published and much more coming out all the time. Yet because people use different terms to refer to similar constructs (and similar terms to refer to different constructs), it can be hard to put together the pieces or see where the various lines of work intersect. Our language can be unifying if we can develop a common framework and vocabulary to survey what we already know, where we are now, and what we need to study next to advance our understanding.

Now to answer the first part of the question: Is it possible? Certainly, we can propose integrated theories, but can we reach some kind of consensus? Meaning is the central issue of human existence, so the topic has attracted many scholars over the centuries—theologians; philosophers; and, in more recent years, psychologists, biologists, and neuroscientists. The vast richness and complexity of these perspectives is amazing and wonderful, but it also creates a challenge in developing a useful and elegant integration. In some ways, recent years have brought us closer to this integration. The very existence of the summit and the resulting discussions are examples of this movement toward integration (see Medlock, *in press*, this issue). In his keynote, Wong (2014) provided a basic model of global meaning that provides a solid basis for future work. He detailed meaning in life as comprising four components: purpose, understanding, responsibility, and emotion/enjoyment. My work builds on his conceptualization of global meaning and extends it to include situational meaning (i.e., meaning based on the interaction of global meaning with events in one's environment).

#### WHAT ARE THE FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN NEEDS ASSOCIATED WITH THE NEED FOR MEANING? HOW IS THE NEED FOR MEANING RELATED TO THESE OTHER HUMAN NEEDS?

One way to think about the human “need for meaning” is to reframe it as the “need for a functional meaning system” (Park, Edmondson, & Hale-Smith, 2013). That is, this core human motive to find or create meaning derives from a set of meaning-related needs for significance, comprehension, and transcendence. Among these specific meaning-related needs are those for agency, control, certainty, identity, social validation, values, and mortality defense. Framing the need for meaning in this way allows us to start unpacking exactly what individuals mean when they express a need for meaning and what we, as theorists and researchers, mean as well, moving us if not toward consensus then at least toward mutual understanding.

A meaning system includes both one's global beliefs (the sum total of one's beliefs about the universe and how it functions, one's self and identity, human nature and relationships, and so on) and one's global goals (including aspirations, values, and strivings). Together, the extent to which individuals feel that the world and their place in it are comprehensible and that they are making adequate progress toward those goals in ways consistent with their values, may determine their experience of sense of life meaning. These three aspects—comprehensibility, purpose, and a subjective sense of meaning—map roughly onto the cognitive, motivational, and emotional aspects of an individual's experience. When a meaning system is functioning poorly (e.g., the world is not making sense, one is confused about one's identity, one feels a lack of purpose and clarity regarding life goals), people can experience profound distress. When a meaning system is functioning well, people experience peace and life satisfaction.

### WHAT IS THE DIALOGICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GLOBAL MEANING AND SITUATIONAL MEANINGS, AND THE PROCESSES BY WHICH EACH MIGHT CHANGE OR EVOLVE?

Thinking about the functionality of meaning systems is the key to this issue—meaning systems function well when people’s experiences (situational meaning) match their global meaning system, life unfolds as expected and desired, and people feel high levels of subjective meaning. But when people encounter adversity—tragedy, loss, or illness—their experiences are inconsistent with their global meaning. That is, things are happening that should not be happening or that are contrary to what they want. This discrepancy between the meanings they ascribe to their experiences and their global meaning system creates intense distress and drives efforts to “make meaning” from the experience, either to change their views of a situation to make it congruent with their global meaning system or to accommodate the new experience by changing their global meaning system (see Park, 2010, for a more detailed description).

Drawing this distinction between global and situational meaning is critical in moving our field forward, because it allows us to conceptualize and measure both components as well as the degree to which they fit together following any particular stressful experience. Furthermore, this distinction allows us to look at the critically important issues of when and how people change their global and situational meanings and how these changes impact their health and well-being.

Further, when researchers clarify whether the phenomenon they are reporting on is an aspect of global meaning or one of situational meaning, and exactly which type of global or situational meaning, we can interpret those results more clearly. Thus, these distinctions will help to us to better incorporate new research into our current body of knowledge.

### IF MEANING IS REGARDED AS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL CONSTRUCT, WHAT KEY DIMENSIONS WOULD NEED TO BE INCLUDED?

One way to think about global meaning systems is as comprising beliefs (cognitions), goals (motivation), and a subjective sense of meaning (emotion). Each of these three components can be further divided. As I noted above and have described in more detail elsewhere (e.g., Park, 2010), there are many different global beliefs (e.g., about the world, about human nature, about one’s self, about God). Likewise, goals can be viewed as hierarchies of priorities, personal projects, strivings, and values. And recently, my graduate student, Login George, and I proposed a tripartite model of the subjective sense of meaning, comprising senses of comprehensibility, purpose, and mattering (George & Park, 2014).

Situational meaning consists of many different components as well. As I conceptualize the model, situational meaning refers to the appraisals that people assign to specific situations (e.g., Why did this occur? What are its implications for my life?); the extent of discrepancy of these appraisals with their global meaning; the distress resulting from discrepancy; meaning-making efforts (attempts to restore congruence that can take the form of automatic or effortful cognitive processing); and meanings made, or the changes that one makes as a result of the meaning-making process. Such meanings made can include changes in how one appraises the situation as well as in one’s global meaning system (e.g., reconfigured global beliefs or goals).

Another important dimension, which I have not mentioned yet, is the actual *content* of one's meaning system. That is, not only are we interested in how functional individuals' meaning systems are in terms of helping them interpret their surroundings, make their way through life, and experience a sense of meaning, but the *actual* beliefs and goals are also of interest to us—that is, what are people's beliefs regarding the world, human nature, and themselves? What are people's ultimate pursuits and the values they embrace to achieve them? How do differences in the content of these global beliefs and goals influence meaning-making processes and experiences of subjective well-being? How do these different contents influence people's sense of responsibility for others, for the larger community? These topics have received little research attention to date, so the content of meaning systems is an area ripe for inquiry, particularly if researchers can frame the questions so that they inform our larger understanding of life meaning and how it plays out in our own personal lives and more broadly in our society.

#### HOW DOES THE CONCEPT OF MEANING RELATE TO THE AFFECTIVE OR SUBJECTIVE REALM? THE COGNITIVE REALM?

Meaning theorists and researchers are increasingly grappling with this issue (see Medlock, this issue), and it is crucial for developing a comprehensive model of meaning that can be informed by the research coming out of the neuro-, affective, and cognitive sciences. There are many points of intersection among affect, cognition, and meaning, of course. As I described, one place where we see strong emotion is in the experience of discrepancy between situational and global meaning: When things are not making sense or going the way we want them to, we experience intense distress. Another is the general feeling of contentment experienced when our meaning systems are functioning well. Most theories of meaning are quite cognitive in highlighting the central role of beliefs and the hierarchy of goals and values that together form the global meaning system (Park, 2010). Similarly, processes of meaning making (creating or recreating harmony among global and situational meaning) are considered to be primarily cognitive.

Fascinating research is being conducted in many related fields that those of us interested in advancing our understanding of meaning can usefully draw upon. For example, research has been exploring how certain beliefs influence how we respond behaviorally (e.g., to implicit priming) as well as how our brains respond to challenges to our meaning systems (e.g., Greenberg, Koole, & Pyszczynski, 2004; Tullett et al., 2013). Joining with such researchers—and incorporating their methods and perspectives in our work—will allow us to develop more sophisticated models of meaning and also to disseminate our work into the broader field of psychology.

#### HOW DOES MEANING RELATE TO THE VARIOUS VIRTUES OR STRENGTHS ENVISIONED BY POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY OR BY DIFFERENT WORLD RELIGIONS AND/OR ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS?

I have spent a substantial portion of my career looking into the issue of how religiousness is interwoven into global and situational meaning (see Park, 2005, 2013). I have focused less on the influence of specific world religions and more on the more general influence of various aspects of religiousness and spirituality. Religiousness and spirituality are highly influential in both global and situational meaning for many people. For example, individuals' beliefs about God's existence

influence their beliefs regarding human nature, the distribution of good and bad events, and their own identity as well as their ultimate goals, daily personal strivings, and values (see Park, 2013). Furthermore, religiousness and spirituality influence situational meaning in terms of how people appraise and cope with stressful events. Some of these influences vary by denomination, but there is a lot of heterogeneity within religious groups and a lot of homogeneity across them.

In terms of how our work relates to the virtues/strengths approach of positive psychology, meaning researchers could profitably integrate some of their ideas (Park, 2015). For example, positive psychologists aim to help individuals identify and increase their reliance on their own unique constellation of strengths, which they propose will lead to greater experiencing of subjective life meaning, along with the other aspects of flourishing (Seligman, 2011). Meaning researchers could test such propositions using the framework of strengths (the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths) developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004).

### WHAT ARE SOME OF THE KEY CHALLENGES FACED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF APPROPRIATE MEASURES-OF-MEANING CONSTRUCTS?

Measurement is central to our endeavors to better understand meaning. As I noted above, the lack of clarity created by different conceptualizations and operationalizations impedes our ability to move forward, to integrate and build on one another's work. Solid measurement development relies on solid theoretical development. To the extent that we have a ways to go in integrating our theoretical understanding, measurement will lag behind.

Furthermore, many (perhaps the most critical, even) aspects of meaning are subjective phenomena. Thus, although we may be able to develop reasonable "objective" measures (e.g., using fMRI or behavioral measures), these will at best correlate with an individual's actual inner experience. That is, no other assessment method can trump one's own reports of many meaning-related phenomena. Yet self-reporting is highly problematic, introducing all sorts of biases. Furthermore, most measures of meaning suffer from some fundamental validity constraints: We are often not sure what people actually mean when they respond to questions like, "Have you been searching for meaning?" and qualitative research suggests that people understand these questions in very different ways (Park, 2010).

Login George and I recently reviewed measurement approaches to the meaning-making model (Park & George, 2013). In that article, we reviewed psychometric information on measures that tap into each of the components of the meaning-making framework—global beliefs, goals, and subjective experience of meaningfulness—as well as situational meaning—appraisals, discrepancies, meaning making, and meanings made. We wrote this article to provide information that can help researchers select their measures with care and specificity. We also encourage researchers to map the measures they select carefully on to the constructs they intend to study and, to the extent possible, employ measures that comprehensively assess the processes of interest. We are hopeful that future research taking this approach will bring greater clarity to the field.

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