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# Unresolved Tensions in the Study of Meaning in Life

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In an effort to provide some integration to the commentaries in this special issue on existential meaning, this article explores some of the tensions expressed within and across the commentaries regarding how conceptualization and research on meaning should proceed. These tensions include (a) mystery versus science, (b) situational versus global focus, (c) boundaries versus boundlessness, (d) subjective versus objective phenomena, (e) cognitive versus affective aspects, and (f) universal versus culture-specific meanings. Each of these tensions warrants considerable exploration and discussion; future advances in our understanding of existential meaning depend on our successful resolution of these tensions. The commentaries in this special issue on the prospects for advancing our understanding of meaning in life contain many great insights and ideas. Collectively, these commentaries provide much wisdom and many directions for future theory development and empirical research. To provide some integration, I highlight some of the tensions expressed within and across the commentaries. I hope these ideas prove useful in guiding these future endeavors.

## MYSTERY VERSUS SCIENCE

Meaning in life is, arguably, the most important, pressing, and profound concern of human beings, at the core of our existence. Because of this centrality to our humanity, however, the press to advance the scientific study of meaning does not come without reservation. For example, Potter argues that the concept of meaning “resists reductionistic, literalistic, individualistic, scientific, and moralistic views” (cited in Medlock, this issue) and, in her commentary, Huta grapples with the twin desires to be an objective scientist and to remain immersed in the wondrous metaphysical mysteries of meaning in the universe. Many of the commentaries also touch on issues of spirituality and consider how transcendent perspectives may enrich our understanding of meaning in life.

Philosophers, theologians, novelists, and poets clearly inform our understanding of life meaning in ways that laboratory research cannot. Yet to have an empirical perspective, we need to have some relatively consensual operational definitions and methods that will allow us to build on one another’s work. Perhaps one way to live with this tension is to always humbly acknowledge that our scientific endeavors are necessarily an approximation of the rich and profound concept of meaning in life.

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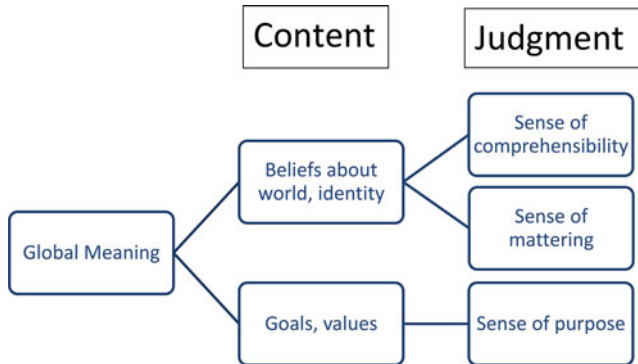


FIGURE 1 Global meaning system as comprising both content and judgments.

### SITUATIONAL VERSUS GLOBAL FOCUS

I am pleased to see that a number of commentaries—as well as, in their discussions, Neimeyer and Wong (cited in Medlock’s summit overview, this issue)—distinguish between situational and global meaning and emphasize the importance of situational meaning. As I have argued, making this distinction allows us not only to examine both types of meaning but, perhaps even more importantly, to examine their interrelationships (Park, 2010). As I noted in my commentary, we have much to learn about the content of global meaning; similarly, situational meaning is an area ripe for empirical inquiry.

In moving forward with this focus on situational meaning, however, it will be important not to lose sight of the importance of global meaning, as well—that is, global meaning in large part determines the situational meanings that people assign to traumatic or highly impactful life experiences. Furthermore, those situational meanings can feed forward to influences one’s posttraumatic global meaning system (Park, Currier, Harris, & Park, in press). For example, Neimeyer and his colleagues have shown how religious and spiritual beliefs can change following bereavement (e.g., Burke, Neimeyer, Young, Bonin, & Davis, 2014).

### BOUNDARIES VERSUS BOUNDLESSNESS

Reading through these commentaries, I am struck again and again by the fact that what we argue, and what we find in our empirical studies, is in large part driven by how we define our concepts. In particular, we are still actively trying to define what meaning is and figuring out what specific constructs belong within this entity and which do not. In his overview, Medlock notes a consensus emerging that meaning comprises at least the dimensions of a sense of coherence or comprehensiveness, a sense of purpose, and a sense of significance or mattering. I am encouraged to see the increased recognition of these three distinct aspects of meaning. It is important to keep in mind that these three dimensions reflect the evaluative “sense of meaning” component of meaning but that meaning systems are more than these judgments, also including a global meaning system of beliefs, identity, goals, and values (see Figure 1). Individuals derive these

judgments of meaning in life (a sense of coherence/comprehensiveness, a sense of purpose, and a sense of significance/mattering) from their determinations of congruence between their current situations and their global meaning. For example, a sense of purpose is derived from individuals' evaluation of the progress they are making on reaching their global goals.

However, Medlock goes on to note that “there is a growing consensus that additional dimensions related to subjective factors such as positive affect, engagement, conscience, mindfulness, and spiritual resonance need to be included—although which factors to include remains somewhat elusive.” Meaning in life has been construed over the years by various writers as including so many concepts that its boundaries can seem infinitely elastic. However, the more imprecise and inclusive we get in defining meaning, the less useful the construct becomes. Many of the candidate concepts being considered for inclusion might better be thought of as important correlates or outcomes of meaning rather than as comprising meaning per se. In this way, we can investigate important questions regarding relations between these other constructs (e.g., positive affect, mindfulness) and meaning in life.

### SUBJECTIVE VERSUS OBJECTIVE PHENOMENA

Many of the commentaries grapple with the question of whether there are objective criteria for characterizing meaning, or if it is solely a matter of each individual's subjective experience. As empirical researchers, we would very much like to identify some ways of measuring meaning objectively (i.e., other than self-report; see commentaries by Leontiv and Schlegel & Hicks). Researchers are devising alternative approaches for measuring meaning (e.g., informant reports, behavioral measures, brain scans) in the hope that our scientific understanding of meaning in life will advance once these measures are in place. I wholeheartedly support the development of these methods and expect that they will lead to new generations of research that will greatly enhance our understanding of life meaning.

At the same time, I would add the caveat that such measures do not in themselves comprise some objective construct of meaning per se but, rather, reflect subjective inner experience. Such a distinction is subtle but important: Personal meaning is ultimately a subjective experience, and these objective assessment tools measure factors that are presumed to correlate with one's subjective experience of meaning. They do not in themselves provide an objective definition of the construct of personal meaning. For example, in their commentary, Schlegel and Hicks describe the potential of using measures such as “life outcome data” to gauge life meaning. Clearly, individuals' life meaning may be reflected in their health status or occupation, but these variables do not constitute life meaning per se as we typically conceptualize it and thus should never be construed as such. An additional difficulty such objective approaches can create for the researcher is that when these types of variables are considered to be both capturing some aspect of life meaning and also its correlate, the distinction between predictor and outcome disappears and life meaning becomes simply another name for salutary states or outcomes.

### COGNITIVE VERSUS AFFECTIVE ASPECTS

In his commentary, Leontiv expresses reservations about separating the cognitive from the emotional aspects of meaning. As I discussed in my commentary, many of the models of meaning

are quite cognitive and do not integrate aspects of emotion. I would suggest that in considering meaning systems, emotions may not be part of the system per se, but they are certainly strongly related to both the content of people's beliefs and goals and their evaluations of how well the meaning system is working vis-à-vis their experience of the world. As shown in Figure 1, conceptualizing a subjective sense of meaning in life (collectively, a sense of comprehensibility, purpose, and mattering) as derived from one's global meaning system provides more conceptual space for determining how affect might be aroused by different aspects of global meaning.

### UNIVERSAL VERSUS CULTURE-SPECIFIC MEANINGS

I am greatly appreciative of the international composition of the participants included in the Meaning Summit, because meaning in life is sometimes characterized as a peculiar focus of the West. Presenters from around the world provided important perspectives drawn from an array of philosophical and cultural backgrounds and highlighted how meaning in life, in various forms, is indeed a universal human concern. For example, in his commentary, Salagame presents Vedic, Buddhist, and Jain historical and philosophical perspectives on life meaning.

Another concern sometimes expressed about the focus on meaning in life is that it is a curious byproduct of living in cultures that provide extensive choice and leisure time, a situation enjoyed by a relatively small and privileged number of people. In their thought-provoking commentary, Schlegel and Hicks raise the question of whether there are individual differences in the need for meaning or cultural differences in whether existential considerations are common. Others have raised questions about whether individuals living in more collectivist cultures or those who have little latitude in their life choices are less concerned with their meaning in life.

In part, answers to these questions are empirical. Research across many cultures may reveal cultural differences. Of course, using research instruments that directly ask people about their sense of meaning in their lives may be problematic, given the variations with which people understand this type of language (see Leontiv's commentary). In formulating one's research design, however, it is easy to bias the results one will obtain by how one frames the questions. For example, a researcher could ask a group of indigenous people about their "search for meaning," "need to feel they matter," or "pursuit of a sense of purpose" and get only puzzled looks. This researcher may then conclude that, indeed, this group does not have a need for meaning, or even that meaning in life is not a concept with which they are familiar. Alternately, a researcher could document the underlying beliefs of the people in this group, and then ask them how well their beliefs explain their experiences, or one could ask them about the goals and values that are important to them and how well they feel they are meeting their goals, demonstrating the presence of a strong meaning system and perhaps individual variation in the extent to which individuals found their meaning systems satisfactory.

In their commentary, Schlegel and Hicks also introduce the question of individual differences not only in a sense of life meaning but also in the *need* for a sense of meaning. Again, this is an interesting question that calls for empirical attention, and again, the way the question is framed will determine the outcome. Does everyone need a meaning system that is functional and provides a coherent way of navigating the world? Understanding more about individual differences in meaning requires a great deal of additional research, but researchers must always

acknowledge that their findings are based in large part on the ways in which they frame their questions.

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