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DEPTH OF MEANING IN LIFE: EXPLICIT RATING CRITERIA[1]

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Summary.—The present study is a development of a method of measuring meaning in life depth using outside judges' rating of the participants' in-depth statements describing their meaning. Adequate interrater agreement was obtained when five explicit depth of meaning criteria were utilized. The potential problem of rater bias because of the judges' preference for their own life meanings was discussed. In addition, three other issues previously investigated to some degree were again approached: whether a significant proportion of participants reported a feeling of meaninglessness (they did not), how many different types of meaning in life would be reported (an average of 4.26 were, implying that people do not prefer just one meaning in life), and what percentage of life meanings fell into each of the eight categories previously developed by DeVogler and Ebersole.

The concept of meaning in life is of central importance in much existential theorizing (9, 12, 16). Development of an instrument to measure accurately the intensity or depth of one's meaning would be a giant stride toward the possibility of more adequate empirical evaluation of the notions evolved by such theorists. Crumbaugh and Maholick's (2) Purpose in Life Test, a self-report scale purporting to measure intensity of meaning, has been the most popular so far along these lines although other approaches to measuring depth are being developed (1, 12, 15). These approaches have relied upon the participants' frame of reference for accurate self-reports of depth of meaning. In contrast, even though self-report by the participants is intrinsic to our approach also (6), we have added an element of evaluation independent of the participant by having outside judges read and rate essays written by the participants about their own meaning in life. Given that the judges read a large number of essays, we believe this approach has the advantage that the judgements of depth are made within a broader frame of reference concerning depth of meaning than is available to the participants themselves. With this method Ebersole and Sacco (7) obtained significant agreement ($r_{124} = .51$, $p < .01$) in rating depth of meaning despite not consulting about any explicit guidelines beforehand. However, better standardization of ratings between judges by creating explicit guidelines was needed. The signal purpose of the present investigation was to develop explicit rating criteria to facilitate adequate interrater agreement.

In addition to the central focus of the creation and testing of explicit guidelines for depth, three issues related to meaning in life that we have pre-

[1]Our contribution to this article was equal, so the ordering of authors was arbitrary. We gratefully acknowledge the assistance provided by Keith Millis in his rating of the meaning essays in Study 2. Requests for reprints should be sent to Peter Ebersole, Psychology Department, California State University, Fullerton, California 92634.

viously studied were also again investigated. The first concerned the general position on meaning in life taken by Frankl, that ours is an age in which lack of meaning has become a central problem. For example, he (11, p. 25) goes so far as to say, "The feeling of meaninglessness . . . is increasing and spreading to the extent that, in truth, it may be called a mass neurosis." In contrast to this position, our investigations (3, 4, 5, 6) so far have not turned up more than a few subjects (typically about 5%) who contend they are empty of meaning. So, we were again interested in how many peole would report a strong lack of meaning in life. The second focus was to investigate the number of different meanings people possess. Morris (14) found his USA samples preferred a flexible balance between different ways of being rather than a position of dedication to one ultimate way of life, such as exemplified by only action, only enjoyment, or only contemplation. Although he worked with a concept more akin to value than meaning in life, this result fits with some of our work: We have found that all but a few people very easily can name three of their personal life meanings. But we wanted to know the number at which they would arrive if not restricted to a maximum of three. Our final focus was to collect yet another sample of the types of life meanings that college students report having. We have evolved a classification of eight different types of life meanings and tabulated the percentage of time that each of these meanings is reported (3, 4, 5, 6). The present sample would allow us to see if there is consistency of percentages over different samples.

A second study is also reported replicating the first study's findings on interrater agreement on depth of meaning, but this time utilizing as one of the raters someone who had not previously worked with our research project to eliminate the potentially uncontrolled variable of the judges' sharing of implicit guidelines from having worked together for years and having evolved the present criteria together.

STUDY 1

Method

Subjects.—The 86 participants (50 women) were almost entirely California middle-class undergraduates in their late teens, the same type of sample utilized in the majority of our past investigations with the exception of the present sample's being gathered from a community (two-year) college rather than a state university population.

Explicit criteria for rating depth of meaning.—The participants' answers to the following two questions were used by the coauthors to arrive at their ratings of depth. First, the participants were asked to "write in detail about the thing that you find gives you greatest meaning in your life. Use the back of the page if necessary. Tell why this is meaningful to you and try to provide an example of it." The second question utilized in the scoring was "support to the best of your ability why you feel your meaning in life is deep or not deep. Use examples, tell how much you are involved (or not); in general, try to convince me that you know what you are talking about." This first question was essentially the same as that asked by Ebersole and Sacco (7). The second question had not been asked in any previous investigations.

The authors then independently sorted the essays of the women only into five piles, the sizes of the piles determined prior to the ratings on the basis of our past experience (7) with this type of rating; there were 5, 10, 20, 10, and 5 essays in each pile, ranging from the designation of "little or no depth" to "highest depth." Subsequently, they sorted the men's essays into a 3, 7, 16, 7, 3 distribution. Ratings of depth were based on five guidelines that had been pretested on previously gathered essays. These criteria for depth of meaning in life are listed below.

1. Rate the meaning more deeply the more the central meaning is discussed with complexity and the writer conveys a sense of the individuality of the meaning.

2. Rate the meaning more deeply the more the meaning and example are specific, believable, concrete, and down-to-earth. Also, be sure the example is significant, not trivial.

3. Rate the meaning less deeply the more the meaning is new and therefore relatively untried and shallow. Also rate it as less deep if the meaning has been held for a while and it is evident that it has not undergone development.

4. Judge on your own whether the person has high or low meaning; do not automatically accept his judgment of his own depth of meaning.

5. If you are confused and uncertain, tend to put the essay into the middle category. Also, if no example is given or if the one produced is insignificant, the rater should tend not to rate the essay any higher than the middle category.

Measurement of lack of meaning in life.—The measurement used was simply a seven-point scale inquiring whether for that person life is 1, empty of meaning, to 7, full of meaning.

Enumeration of number of meanings.—The subjects were asked to write down all those things that give their meaning in life in the order of their importance. They were to stop when they had listed their "major sources of meaning." Space for a maximum of ten responses was provided.

Percentage distribution of categories of meaning.—The names of the eight types or categories of meanings we have found to be most serviceable so far are Relationships, Belief, Service, Pleasure, Growth, Obtaining, Life Work, and Health (3, 4). Analyzing each person's essay about his highest reported meaning in life, we arrived at a frequency distribution of our sample's most important reported categories of meaning; for rationale and description of these categories see 3 and 4.

Results and Discussion

Interrater agreement of ratings of depth.—A Pearson product-moment correlation revealed a strong relation between the two investigators' independent interrater sortings for the 50 women's essays on meaning ($r_{50} = .84$, $p < .01$). A Pearson correlation ($r_{36} = .82$, $p < .01$) was obtained in rating the 36 men's essays. These interrater agreements were especially encouraging given the newness of our measures. However, due to possible extra familiarity with the other's style of rating from closely working together in creating these five criteria, we wanted to ascertain whether this agreement would hold up when someone unacquainted with the rating system was involved; Study 2 addressed this question.

Lack of meaning in life.—No significant sex differences were found for the mean or standard deviation on this or any other of the questions. No one so lacked meaning that they chose alternative 1 (empty of meaning); other

than for one person's checking the 2 rating, the lowest ratings were 4s. Just as we have found in our other investigations, as a whole the participants seemed satisfied with their meaning: the over-all mean for this item was 5.9, a number well toward the high end of this seven-point scale. Such results, to say the least, do not confirm the widespread void of meaning suggested by Frankl. Out of a number of possible ways of reconciling these data with Frankl's position we have chosen at this time to emphasize the following two. Dissatisfaction with meaning in life may have decreased dramatically from when most of the studies he cites in support of his position were done (1960s to early 1970s) to when ours were carried out (late 1970s to the present). Another possibility is that Frankl is reaching conclusions based on whether a person had *ever* experienced a feeling of meaninglessness, and our approach has been to inquire only about whether one is *presently* feeling loss of meaning, which would obviously result in a smaller percentage figure than would be the case with Frankl's studies. In a study central enough to be cited by him at least several times (9, 10) Frankl noted the high percentage of his American and European students who reported that they "had experienced" (10, p. 236) meaninglessness, which would indicate he had included anyone who had ever felt meaninglessness.

Number of categories of meaning.—The second additional question asked was about how many different areas people found meaningful in their lives. The average number of areas reported was 6.29. When these areas were sorted into content categories (to be enumerated below) developed in several earlier studies (3, 4, 5), the average number of our categories of meaning reported was 4.26. This implies that our students have a relatively large number of meanings they feel are important to themselves rather than just one central meaning. This result dovetails with past studies (3, 4, 5) where only a very small percentage of participants were not able to come up with three important meanings in their life; the present study makes it clear that they typically could have enumerated even more than three different meanings. To catch fully the meaning picture of a given person, one must be careful not to stop after the person volunteers only one or two meanings. We suspect that the danger of having so many meanings is shallowness in pursuit and fulfillment of each of them. One test of this notion would be to compare (by means of our criteria for depth and by giving the Purpose in Life Test) those citing only one central meaning with those claiming a larger number. If the latter group received lower ratings of depth, some evidence would be provided for the reality of this danger.

At all events, the consistent naming of a number of meanings as being important argues against the methodology of only asking for the single most important meaning in one's life in future investigations.

Percentages of meaning by category.—The percentages were the follow-

ing: Relationships, 37%; Belief, 18%; Growth, 13%; Life Work, 10%; Pleasure, 10%; Service, 5%; Miscellaneous, 6%; and Health and Obtaining combined, 1%. This is the same general structure as emerged in two previous studies with college students (3, 6). Relationships is the highest meaning by far, accounting for approximately one-third of the total cases; Obtaining and Health are almost non-existent; and the rest are fairly evenly distributed around the 10% mark with the exception of Belief, which is the category with the greatest variability.

Klinger (13) and Young (17) found Relationships to be the category most often mentioned as important. Our sample of adults over thirty years old (4) placed Relationships first 51% of the time, and 67% of our young adolescents (5) cited it as being their most imporant meaning. Despite our earlier caveat (5) about being careful not to draw much in the way of conclusions from our percentage data as they come from "handy" rather than systematic samples, the continuing consistency of Relationships being the most popular category is impressive. In contrast, Belief can be distinguished by its inconsistency in popularity. In our college samples it is highest for 18% (present study), 29% (3), and 13% (6). For the adolescents (5) it is nonexistent, but our adults (4) chose it as their strongest meaning 26% of the time. That Belief becomes more important as the person gets older is a speculation that fits these data. However, if we take seriously the finding that Americans tend toward a balance of a number of life meanings rather than only emphasizing one, the above comments lose some of their importance.

STUDY 2

The interrater agreement in Study 1 was encouraging, but it is possible it might have been artificially inflated because of the two authors working together in developing the scale and on other research projects connected with meaning in life. Therefore, Study 2 checked whether the interrater agreement would still hold up when someone who had not worked with us was involved in the rating.

Method

The participants were 34 introductory psychology students who were similar to the participants of Study 1 (almost all middle-class undergraduates in their late teens) except for being from a state university rather than a community college sample.

Beside being given some material to fill out not pertinent to the present investigation, they answered the following question, "What is the strongest meaning in your life right now? If you feel you have no meaning right now, make a check in the following space ..... and tell how you either lost your meaning or why you think you do not have one." Half-way down the page the following directions were given: "Write about an event in your life that will help me better understand your meaning in life (or lack of it)." The participants were given the material to complete at home and return anonymously within two days.

An undergraduate interested in research who had never participated previously in

any rating of essays on depth of meaning and the first author then independently sorted these 34 essays into five normally distributed piles ranging from least depth to greatest depth.

Results

The Pearson correlation ($df = 34$) of the ratings of the two investigators was .78 ($p < .01$). This not only replicated Study 1 but also eliminated the possibility that the high agreement reached in Study 1 was simply the result of the two raters' sharing unconscious frameworks of agreement from having worked together for years and from having developed together the criteria for rating of depth. In addition, this result argues for the ease of use of the criteria as the new rater did not undergo any special instruction in their use. Although this is a beginning, of crucial importance for future study is how adequate the interjudge reliability will be when it is obtained with a greater variety of raters.

General Discussion of Rating Criteria

In our opinion, what mainly fostered such surprisingly high interrater agreement was that many of our participants differed obviously clearly from one another in how they chose to answer the question about their meaning. In illustration of that we cite below an essay from the group showing lowest depth followed by one taken from the highest group.

Example of lowest rating group (What is the strongest meaning in your life right now?):

Right now I am undecided in what I am going to do in life. At the present time I am an undeclared major and have not the slightest idea about what to do in life." (Write about an event in your life that will help me better understand your meaning in life.) "When I was young I loved to play sports. No matter what sport it was, I would play it. My dream as a kid was to make it to the pros. As I got older, I realized it was not going to happen.

Example of highest rating group (What is the strongest meaning in your life right now?):

The strongest meaning in my life is to equip my children with the proper tools (values, attitudes and beliefs) to enable them to make good choices in their lives and become sensitive and productive adults. One of the ways for me to do this, is to recognize my potential and strive for that potential; to know myself well enough to let them know themselves, and strive for their own potential as human beings. (Write about an event in your life that will help me better understand your meaning in life.) The hardest decision I have ever had to make was that of divorcing my husband. Yet, I could see the life come into my children's eyes when he went on a business trip and was out of the house. Through the separation, I can see my children are more relaxed, more at ease with themselves, more sure of themselves as individuals, much more productive. They are afraid, but they are secure individuals and coping well—I can't say *very* well. They love their father, as do I. We are going through crazy and hard times at the moment, but also, good and close times. I want to get a good education, to be able to provide adequately for them so they can be free to grow in their own individual ways.

Nonetheless, these obvious differences between the depth of meaning expressed were far from the entire story as the essays rated in the Ebersole and Sacco study probably differed just as much but without the aid of the explicit criteria utilized in the present study the correlation between the two independent ratings in their study was only .51. It is our hope that newer and more precise criteria will grow from continuing investigation and increase the interrater agreement even more.

A main criticism of our direction taken in rating depth of meaning is that we generally run the danger of mixing science and the biases of our own value systems together by deciding which meanings are more deep than others rather than simply letting the participants indicate how deep their meaning is. We agree that much caution is needed here. In connection with the present study the most troublesome specific problem with our approach to rating depth could be the rating bias created by the potential tendency of the rater to prefer automatically life meanings that are similar to those they personally value for themselves, i.e., if the rater's own strongest personal meaning in life is Relationships, then that rater could be biased toward ranking that general type of meaning higher than others. The raters' agreeing so highly in the present study is not sufficient refutation of this criticism because their personal meaning preferences might have been similar and therefore automatically have produced similar ratings. Fortunately, we had a means of checking this problem by reanalyzing the data of a past study (7) in which we had obtained a ranking of the preferences for meaning in life of each of the two raters in terms of the eight categories of types of life meanings developed by DeVogler and Ebersole (3). After placing each of these 124 essays into one of these eight categories, the 62 essays on which the raters disagreed were selected. We eliminated 21 of these because the meaning in life displayed in these was one the raters had ranked equally in terms of their own life meanings. On the remaining 41 essays about which the raters had disagreed we found that they had ranked 20 of them in the direction that would be expected from the potential bias they should have from their ratings of personal meaning. But the other 21 rankings were in the direction opposite what would have been predicted from the raters' personal ratings! Therefore, this analysis in conjunction with the high level of agreement obtained by the judges in the present study is a partial refutation of this possibility of rater bias for this study.

Crumbaugh and Maholick's use of the Purpose in Life Test as a measure of depth of meaning in life and the other approaches cited do not have to face the above problem of rater bias. But they do have the drawback of being self-report measures, resulting in one's having to trust totally the estimation of the participants as to how deep they judge their own meaning in life to be. Such an approach runs up against the traditional problems of whether one is aware of the truth or willing to share it with the investigator. Happily, at this

incipient point in the development of meaning depth measures there seems to be no strong push to decide among the various instruments. We know so little about them that any knowledge their further development brings is to be welcomed.

Since meaning in life is such a central concept for existential personality theorists such as Frankl and Maddi, being able to measure it more and more precisely becomes crucial if advances in research are to be made within this orientation. If meaning in depth of life proves to be a valid measure of good functioning, we anticipate it also could find ready application in such areas as gerontology and evaluation of psychotherapy. These and others are questions awaiting the development of more accurate measures of meaning in depth of life.

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