Positive Psychology in Search for Meaning

Edited by
Dmitry A. Leontiev

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What are the ways in which we can understand the significance of the psychology of meaning in people's lives? In the last century mainstream psychology has largely neglected the topic of meaning. More recently, the concept has become an academically legitimate one within positive psychology and in some other speciality areas of psychology. This book contains a collection of theoretical, methodological and empirical papers written by the acknowledged experts systematically working on the problems of personal meaning within the positive psychology framework. The authors investigate the possibilities and limitations of a scientific study of personal meaning and new perspectives that this concept brings to the field.

This book was originally published as a special issue of *The Journal of Positive Psychology*.

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Table of Contents

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Citation Information

The chapters in this book were originally published in the *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, volume 8, issue 6 (November 2013). When citing this material, please use the original page numbering for each article, as follows:

Chapter 1
Positive psychology in search for meaning: An introduction
Dmitry A. Leontiev
The Journal of Positive Psychology, volume 8, issue 6 (November 2013) pp. 457–458

Chapter 2
Personal meaning: A challenge for psychology
Dmitry A. Leontiev
The Journal of Positive Psychology, volume 8, issue 6 (November 2013) pp. 459–470

Chapter 3
On knowing more than we can tell: Intuitive processes and the experience of meaning
Samantha J. Heintzelman and Laura A. King
The Journal of Positive Psychology, volume 8, issue 6 (November 2013) pp. 471–482

Chapter 4
Assessing meaning and meaning making in the context of stressful life events: Measurement tools and approaches
Crystal L. Park and Login S. George
The Journal of Positive Psychology, volume 8, issue 6 (November 2013) pp. 483–504

Chapter 5
Some key differences between a happy life and a meaningful life
Roy F. Baumeister, Kathleen D. Vohs, Jennifer L. Aaker and Emily N. Garbinsky
The Journal of Positive Psychology, volume 8, issue 6 (November 2013) pp. 505–516

Chapter 6
Sources and motives for personal meaning in adulthood
Antonella Delle Fave, Ingrid Brdar, Marié P. Wissing and Dianne A. Vella-Brodrick
The Journal of Positive Psychology, volume 8, issue 6 (November 2013) pp. 517–529

Chapter 7
The mind's eye: A photographic method for understanding meaning in people's lives
Michael F. Steger, Yerin Shim, Brenna R. Rush, Libby A. Brueske, Joo Yeon Shin and Leslie A. Merriman
The Journal of Positive Psychology, volume 8, issue 6 (November 2013) pp. 530–542

Chapter 8
Predicting meaning in work: Theory, data, implications
Tatjana Schnell, Thomas Höge and Edith Pollet
The Journal of Positive Psychology, volume 8, issue 6 (November 2013) pp. 543–554

Chapter 9

Pride and the experience of meaning in daily life
Jeanne Nakamura
The Journal of Positive Psychology, volume 8, issue 6 (November 2013) pp. 555–567

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Positive psychology in search for meaning: An introduction

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The concept of meaning is not new in psychology. It is at home both in everyday speech and in academic discourse; both in fundamental and applied research, in 'depth' (Freudian and post-Freudian) and 'height' (Vygotskian and post-Vygotskian, as well as existentialist) approaches, both in the rigorous academic and flexible humanistic paradigm. The postmodern situation in present-day psychology is also favorable for the concept of meaning, which helps to link different contexts together. Meaning corresponds both to objective, subjective, and intersubjective or 'conversational' reality; it relates to consciousness, the unconscious, behavior, and personality, as well as interpersonal processes. Whatever one studies one cannot miss the importance of meaning.

However, until now, a gap between the intuitively evident importance of the concept of meaning and the lack of its conceptual clarity has persisted, despite the growing number of publications on the topic. The comparison of the numbers of journal publications on some topics from PsycInfo database in 1900–1980, 1981–1990, 1991–2000, and 2001–2010 made by Schnell (2012) evidences what she called an 'existential turn' in the psychological science of our days. The total number of publications provides a very flat, slightly ascending curve, accelerating a bit in the last decade. Publications on spirituality and morality reveal a more pointed dynamic, but only in the last decade, with increase in several times over. Sharper still is the growth of the curve of publications on death and on meaning in life; publications on death grew steadily before the jump in the last decade, and the publications on meaning peaked twice, first in the 1980s and again in the 2000s. Bright and serious international conferences on meaning organized by Paul Wong have been held every two years since 2000, not to mention conferences of more focused communities such as logotherapy. Until recently, there was a single handbook on the subject (Wong & Fry, 1998); now, not only did its updated version appear last year (Wong, 2012), but at least two new books are in preparation (Batthyany & Russo-Netzer, in press; Kreitler & Urbanek, in press).

In positive psychology, meaning has been one of the central topics since the early stages of its existence (Seligman, 2002). However, the progress in this domain of positive psychology research has not been as visible as in other ones. Probably, this is because the concept of meaning, if not reduced, seems to be more complicated than many more traditional concepts. Mainstream psychology of the twentieth century has provided no reliable tools and approaches for working with meaning in all its complexity. There is still a notable gap between meaning as the object of cognition and the attitudes of modern psychology that slowly start changing, but require more substantial change. Meaning as a whole has a qualitative nature, and only some of its aspects, such as one's orientation toward meaning, can be relatively easily measured using our traditional research methodology. Appreciating the brilliant insights of many scholars of the last century, I dare to state that the concept of meaning seems to be more relevant for the psychology of the twenty-first century, where it has a chance, in my humble opinion, to become a central one.

The integration of meaning into mainstream academic psychology's lexicon is now a vital challenge. The recent shift in mainstream academic psychology to a more inclusive emphasis on positive human qualities needs to be accompanied by increased conceptual clarity regarding the definition of meaning and its role in human functioning. The idea of a special issue of this journal on meaning emerged a few years ago; some renowned specialists, most of them regular JOPP authors, were invited to present their theoretical, methodological, problem-focused, or empirical papers on this topic. In this issue, one can find a collection of views of nearly all the leading experts on the problem of meaning in the positive psychology framework.

The paper by D. Leontiev warns against the simplified understanding of meaning. It investigates different kinds of challenges a scholar must face while trying to study meaning. Meaning is presented, in terms of V.Frankl's 'dimensional ontology', as a multidimensional

entity, and what we study is usually its flat projections. The essence of all manifestations of meaning is reference to some superordinate contexts; they cannot, however, be accessed directly by traditional methods.

S. Heintzelman and L. King present a theoretical analysis of the unconscious, intuitive forms of meaning, manifesting themselves in cognitive and behavioral effects without clear verbalization (Maslow, 1966, pp. 91–92) called them 'suchness meaning', as opposed to 'abstractness meaning'). The authors discover a huge *terra incognita* of meaningful experiential processes largely neglected by the mainstream studies and draw far-reaching implications from this analysis, both for theory and research methodology.

C. Park and L. George present a huge work of systematization of measurement tools and approaches to meaning and meaning-making processes in the context of stressful life events. The breadth of their view and the clear explicit structure (the list of references and summarizing tables comprise more than half of the paper) make their paper a priceless reference source. The challenge they throw down is for better awareness of theoretical constructs and operational measures and of the correspondence between them.

R. Baumeister, K. Vohs, J. Aaker, and E. Garbinsky add new insights to the issue of relationships between meaning and happiness. This issue has been an object of hot philosophical debate since the end of the nineteenth century; and in our days, it has become the target of empirical studies. The authors propose a systematic analysis of distinctive predictors of meaning and happiness correspondingly, with controls for their counterparts. The results support many intuitive guesses by solid empirical data to provide a spectacular picture of difference between a happy meaningless life and an unhappy meaningful one.

A. Delle Fave, I. Brdar, M. Wissing, and D. Vella-Brodrick present the data from the large international survey based on the assessment of meaningfulness of life domains and of satisfaction with life in seven countries. The authors pay special attention to motives and sources of meaning, to the meaning-making life contexts. They find a lack of direct correspondence between measures of meaning and satisfaction, interpreting it in terms of hedonia–eudaimonia distinction.

M. Steger et al. deal also with the sources of meaning; however, they use an innovative, non-verbal approach through participants' making pictures of what is meaningful for them. The results presented in the paper seem to open quite a new way to assess personal meanings.

T. Schnell, T. Hoege, and E. Pollet focus their analysis on work domain. The importance of meaningfulness of work is widely acknowledged; the authors give a detailed analysis of meaning in work. In their theory, meaning in work presumes a sense of coherence, direction, significance, and belonging; in turn, work-role fit, the significance of work tasks, socio-moral climate, and organizational self-transcendent orientation contribute positively to the prediction of meaning in work.

Finally, J. Nakamura deals with a special topic: the meaning of pride. The feeling of pride is associated with relevance to some value context; it is a signal detecting some personal meaning in one's accomplishments, rather than the objective accomplishments per se. Besides successful replication of the previous data, the study showed once again that the context matters, and the feeling of pride points at our sources of meaning: what you feel proud of is what has personal meaning for you

I hope that this issue will find its place and meaning in the readers' professional context and, in turn, will provide some extension of this context for future meaning-making.

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Personal meaning: A challenge for psychology

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The paper addresses the complexities associated with meaning as the object of psychological studies. Meaning is treated as a multifaceted entity that cannot be reduced to a single measurable trait-like or state-like variable. The challenge of studying meaning is split into several more focused challenges, including linguistic challenge, ontological challenge, structural challenge, anthropological challenge, dynamic challenge, and methodological challenge. The paper gives a referential view on meaning and suggests some methodological guidelines for meaning research.

Meaning in positive psychology – an intellectual excess or a missing link? A personal introduction

My interest in the problem of meaning emerged in my student years, and, in the more than 30 years since then, this issue has remained a central target of my research work. However, this topic was generally not in fashion: in the mainstream psychology of the twentieth century there was no place, for a topic like meaning. Indeed, meaning is neither a state, nor a trait; neither a cognition, nor an emotion; neither subjective, nor objective or, one may say, both trait-like and state-like, cognitive and emotional, subjective and objective at the same time. In fact, meaning transcends all these dichotomies that dominated absolutely over the psychology of the last century and still largely prevail today.

It is not that no one was interested in the issue. The importance of this concept was intuitively evident for many. Freud (1917/1953) discovered that whatever we do, it always means something. Adler brought us to the realization that 'human beings live in the realm of meanings' (1932/1980, p. 1). Frankl (1967) persuaded us that meaning is what our life actually is directed at and guided by. The main problem was to discover what meaning is, and correspondingly, what one should seek in one's search for meaning. I was very pleased to know personally such an enlightened person as Victor Frankl, assisting him during two his short visits to Moscow (1986, 1992) and working on Russian editions of his writings. However, it was not Frankl who infected me with the interest in meaning, but rather my grandfather, Alexey N. Leontiev (1903–1979), Lev Vygotsky's disciple. It was he who introduced the concept of meaning as a key explanatory one in his activity theory approach in the 1940s, stating: 'The concept of meaning is as important for psychology as the concept of value for political economy … Hence the teaching of activity is the *alpha*, the teaching of meaning the *omega* in psychology' (Leontiev, 1994). He developed a highly elaborate theory of personal meaning as an element of activity and consciousness that stimulated multiple studies (see Leontiev (Leont'ev), 1991). It was a very important contribution, but still not sufficient to bring the topic into mainstream psychology.

While working on my PhD during the mid-1980s, I found over 25 distinct, originally theoretical views of personal meaning in psychological publications, not to mention purely linguistic and semantic conceptions of meaning as an impersonal reality. Very rarely did different authors cite each other; not surprisingly, then, that they could not come to terms with what was meant by meaning. Before starting to develop a theory of my own, I classified these views along with two dimensions: first, whether the author spoke of *meaning* as the top integrative instance of personality or of *meanings* as multiple elements of human conduct and mental processes; second, whether meaning was understood as belonging to objective reality, subjective reality, or to the inter-subjective reality, 'conversational space' (see Leontiev, 1996, 1999). My aim was to integrate these separate views.

My PhD thesis in 1988 and subsequent Dr Sc. (habilitation) work in 1999 were devoted to the construction of a comprehensive theory of personal meaning. It was published in Russian as a 500-page book (Leontiev, 1999); in English, a very condensed summary is available (Leontiev, 2007b), as well as some thematic chapters (Leontiev, 1990, 1991, 1996, 2005b). However, all my attempts to speak of personal meaning at international congresses were invariably in vain; no one seemed

to be eager to listen on the topic of meaning. Though some very important and comprehensive synthetic theories of personal meaning did emerge through the 1990s (R. Baumeister, G. Reker and P. Wong, & R. Emmons), this field stayed definitely marginal in academic studies.

The long-awaited turn happened in the early 2000s. It is hard to imagine how happy I was when Martin Seligman in 2002 included 'meaningful living' among the few core concepts of positive psychology (Seligman, 2002). Still earlier, in 2000, Paul Wong organized a very bright and insightful conference 'The search for meaning in the new Millennium' in Vancouver that turned into a series of bi-annual conferences on existential psychology and meaning-centered psychotherapy, and Hubert Hermans launched a series of conferences on 'Dialogical Self' in Europe that also gave birth to a populated community where the concept of meaning is very important.

However, it was not enough to announce it, and in 2006 when I passed to Prof. Seligman some of my new reprints on meaning, he remarked sadly 'So nice that someone still takes meaning seriously.' Indeed, in positive psychology, the studies of meaningful living are very rare compared with studies of positive emotional states and character strengths. Though few would currently deny the importance of meaning in positive psychology, it remains a very fuzzy concept, defined in different ways by different researchers. In theory, we have absolute diversity of definitions, in methodology a lack of insight of what it would mean to assess meaning, and a serious problem of discriminant validity while measuring meaning, in research – fragmentation and a lack of coherence. Until now, meaning remains an insightful metaphor rather than a sound scientific concept.

The aim of this paper is to split the insoluble problem of meaning into a few more specific and better manageable challenges and to analyze typical misconceptions and misunderstandings that impede progress in this truly important and truly complicated domain. Among them are the *linguistic challenge* (meaning is an English word that is not easy to translate into other languages), the *ontological challenge* (it is unclear where and in what form what we call meaning exists), the *anthropological challenge* (what is the added value of meaning for the explanation of human conduct), *the structural or dimensional challenge* (meaning is often confused with its aspects or components), *the dynamic challenge* (though it is much easier to catch meaning as a fixed structure, essentially it is a fluid ongoing process that can hardly be stopped), and the *methodological challenge* (how to assess meaning without merging it with happiness, hardiness, coherence, optimism, and other nice things). The author advocates the view on *meaning as reference* to superordinate contexts.

The linguistic challenge: meaning is a word with multiple meanings

When we speak of meaning, we rarely know what is meant. Different people, both laypeople and specialists – have in mind different things. Though the word 'meaning' is at home both in colloquial use and in academic discourse, there is nothing like a common, unambiguous definition or even a common, implicit understanding. If we ask someone whether her life is meaningful, the answer 'Yes,' as well as the answer 'No,' may mean different things – we do not know exactly what the respondents have in mind when they comment on their meaning. If psychologists have nothing like a commonly accepted definition, we have no reason to believe that respondents do. Unless we investigate the exact meaning people ascribe to the word 'meaning,' we cannot bridge the gap between different people's use of the word, nor the gap between the word and the denotation.

A special obstacle is the English language, where the single word MEANING denotes a striking multitude of phenomena while other languages use different words for different things. I begin every paper on meaning with an introductory linguistic comment, so to quote myself:

> For instance, in German there is a clear conceptual opposition of SINN [sense] vs. BEDEUTUNG [meaning], and this opposition plays a central role in all the humanities. The first pole of this opposition most often denotes subjective personalized meaning rooted in an individual's life, or a deep, value-laden, cultural meaning. The second pole represents a culturally invariant elementary meaning (such as the word meaning), which can be shared by a common community of language speakers. The same opposition exists in Russian with SMYSL [sense] vs. ZNACHENIE [meaning]. In English, however, the word MEANING covers both poles (private, individual, personal, existential, idiosyncratic and subjective on the one hand, and public, collective, cultural, verbal, shared, and objective on the other hand), and it is used for notions having almost nothing in common; for example, Freudian or Adlerian SINN (rooted in an unconscious dynamic), and Vygotskian ZNACHENIE (understood as a unit of condensed socio-cultural, pragmatic experience). Two key dichotomies – private vs. public and individual vs. collective (Harré, 1983), –which are fairly well conceptualized both in German and in Russian, dissolve in the English word MEANING. No wonder that the pioneers who first introduced the concept of meaning (beyond a purely linguistic context) in the humanities, were German-speaking (E. Husserl, W. Dilthey, E. Spranger, M.Weber, S. Freud, C. Jung, A. Adler), and Russian-speaking (G. Shpet, M. Bakhtin, L. Vygotsky) authors. It is not only the problem of translating foreign texts into English that makes these difficulties evident. Some authors, using the concept of meaning, have to describe meaning on different levels in different ways (Carlsen, 1988; Kreitler & Kreitler, 1972). In fact, at these different levels we discover somewhat different realities, but language still fails to catch some of the important distinctions' (Leontiev, 2007b, p. 34).