

Chapter 9

Emotions and Meaning in Life: A Motivational Perspective

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Research on meaning in life (MIL) has flourished in the past decade. Much of this research is influenced by the ideas of Viktor Frankl. In his seminal essay, Frankl (1963/1984) cogently argued that MIL is a central human motivation. He conceptualized MIL as a motivational action tendency aimed at behaving in a way consonant with one's deepest held values. Indeed, most conceptions of meaning often place motivation at the heart of this elusive construct (Crumbaugh and Maholick 1964; Emmons 2003; Klinger 1977; Ryff and Singer 1998). The goal of this chapter is to explore how discrete emotional experiences, and their inherent links to motivational tendencies, contribute to the experience of meaning. We will focus specifically on how emotions associated with varying degrees of motivational intensity (e.g., anger, sadness) amplify or detract from one's sense that life is meaningful. Before describing these ideas, we will first briefly review the limited research examining the relationship between emotional experiences and MIL.

Affect and the Experience of Meaning

While research has largely neglected the relationship between specific emotional experiences and meaning, studies have examined the contribution of global affect on reports of MIL (e.g., Hicks and King 2007, 2008; King et al. 2006). Overall, this research has shown that global positive affect (PA) is strongly associated with self-reports of MIL even after controlling for such variables as self-esteem, religious

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commitment, autonomy, competence, and relatedness (King et al. 2006; Lambert et al. 2010). Furthermore, state positive affect, either measured or manipulated, predicts enhanced MIL even above the level of average PA (Hicks and King 2008, 2009; Hicks and Schlegel 2010; King et al. 2006). Personality traits associated with PA such as extraversion (King et al. 2006) are also linked to MIL, suggesting that even chronic sources of PA may bear on judgments of meaning. Although it is unclear whether these individuals are consciously using their current feelings as a source of information or they are just using their mood as a heuristic, it is clear that PA contributes to judgments of MIL.

Unlike research on PA, the relationship between global negative affect (NA) and MIL is less clear. For example, Schlegel et al. (2009; see also Steger et al. 2009) found that global NA correlates negatively with MIL (studies 2, 4, and 5), but other studies have shown that NA is not a unique predictor of MIL when other variables were accounted for in the model (e.g., PA, self-esteem; Schlegel et al. 2011).

Though research has broadly examined the role of emotions in MIL, research has yet to examine how discrete emotional experiences contribute to the experience of meaning. In hopes of stimulating future research, the rest of this chapter will explore how the underlying motivational direction and intensity of emotions influences MIL. By thinking of discrete emotions not just in terms of their valence but also by their ability to facilitate behavior of an approach-related or avoidance-related nature, novel hypotheses can be generated for how emotions may influence MIL.

Motivational Intensity

Many theoretical models of emotion exist. One of the earliest models, the James-Lange theory (1884/1922), described emotion in terms of physiological arousal. Russell's (1980) circumplex model built upon the James-Lange theory suggests that emotion is the product of arousal and valence. In this model, emotions are thought of as either positive or negative in valence, broadly indicating their pleasantness and unpleasantness, respectively, and then further differentiated in terms of arousal level or the intensity. In this two-factor model, emotions are classified as positive-high arousal, positive-low arousal, negative-high arousal, or negative-low arousal. While this model allows researchers to classify most discrete emotions, it groups together some emotions which differ vastly in their experience and separates others which have surprisingly similar properties. For instance, despite its negative valence, anger influences attention, cognition, and physiological responses in the same way as high-arousal positive emotions (see Gable and Harmon-Jones 2010 for a review) and in ways often opposite to fear (see Carver and Harmon-Jones 2009, for a review). Two-factor models of emotion like the circumplex model are unable to account for these results, and thus a third factor is required to more accurately classify dimensions that may underlie discrete emotions: motivational intensity.

Broadly, emotions tend to facilitate behavior. For our purposes, the broad range of human behavior can be grouped into two types: approach-related and

avoidance-related behavior. Approach-related behavior involves moving toward a desired stimulus or goal. Running toward the bright yellow tape of a finish line, reaching for a slice of cake, and throwing a punch are all approach-related behaviors. Avoidance-related behaviors, on the other hand, involve moving away from a stimulus. These behaviors can range from wincing and pulling away from something painful to an adrenaline-fueled sprint from a predator. Hence, emotions that strongly facilitate these types of behaviors are thought to be high in motivational intensity. Importantly, not all emotions fuel instant goal-directed behavior; indeed, many emotions exist that are low in motivational intensity (e.g., contentment, sadness).

One distinguishing quality that separates motivationally weak from motivationally intense emotions is their relationship to goal striving. Emotions high in motivational intensity (e.g., desire, determination) generally occur during the pursuit of a goal, regardless of whether the goal is to acquire something desired (approach motivation) or to escape something aversive (avoidance motivation). This motivation gets stronger as an individual gets closer to the goal or as the object of desire/aversion becomes more salient. Emotions low in motivational intensity often occur after an attempt has been made to attain a goal, whether it resulted in success or failure. These emotions may occur after the acquisition of a preferred stimulus (e.g., happiness), disengagement from an unavailable goal (e.g., sadness), or the successful avoidance of a noxious stimulus (e.g., relief).

Acting on a goal presupposes the presence of pre-goal motivationally intense emotion. This motivational intensity lessens after goal-relevant actions have taken place, often resulting in a completely different emotional experience. Though motivational intensity and sometimes direction may change following the actions, valence is not necessarily affected. For example, a man running from a wild animal would experience fear. Upon successful evasion of the predator, his emotional state will decrease in motivational intensity, and he will likely experience relief. This emotion can be conceptualized as a positive emotion low in motivational intensity but most likely related to the avoidance motivational system (Carver 2009). Similarly, an individual in a competition may feel determination, a motivationally intense positive emotion, which focuses the individual on the goal of winning (Harmon-Jones et al. 2011). Upon winning the competition, the motivational intensity of the experienced emotion will decrease, transforming the pre-goal positive affect (determination) into some sort of post-goal positive affect (e.g., joy).

Goals themselves can also be conceptualized in terms of motivational direction. For example, in a competition, one could desire to “win the race,” visualizing the competition as something to approach. On the other hand, one could sprint with full effort, yet be thinking along the lines of “don’t lose the race”; this avoidance goal would likely yield a totally different motivational mindset, despite the identical behavior.

Overall, how a person conceptualizes their goal may influence their emotional state before and after the goal attempt. That is, the more they formulate their goal in terms of approach or avoidance, the more likely they will place themselves into such a mindset, potentially affecting the motivational intensity and direction of their emotional state. Clearly, the motivational component of emotion is relevant

to goal pursuit, and goal attainment (or failure at such) temporally marks an emotional transition.

While MIL is an abstract concept, it may be useful to conceptualize it in terms of goals. With this perspective, it is no surprise that the MIL literature has consistently shown the presence of MIL to relate to low motivationally intense, post-goal types of affect (e.g., joy, sadness), as they relate to the attainment and loss of potential sources of meaning. This distinction may also help resolve some of the inconsistencies in the emotion-MIL literature. First, we will examine emotions low in approach motivational intensity.

Low-Approach Motivational Intensity and Meaning

Positive Affect and Meaning

As cited above, positive affect predicts judgments of MIL over and above many other related factors. This is true whether PA is measured or created in the laboratory. Overall, it seems that when people are asked to judge the amount of meaning they have in their life, they automatically use their PA as a gauge to make the judgment. From a goal-pursuit perspective, emotions low in motivational intensity occur following the successful or failed goal pursuit. Hence, they may be easily accessible indicators of acquired (happiness) and, as explained next, lost (sadness) sources of meaning.

Sadness and Meaning

Motivational models of emotion (e.g., Carver 2004; Carver and Scheier 1998) suggest that sadness is a low-approach emotion that facilitates detachment from a failed goal or goal pursuit. The relationship between depression, a condition characterized by chronic sadness, and MIL has been examined extensively. A review of this work is beyond the scope of this chapter, but generally speaking, this research has found that depression is negatively related to the presence of MIL (Steger et al. 2006).

Considering that the presence of meaning relates to PA, it stands to reason that sadness should be negatively correlated with the presence of meaning. It is possible that sadness reflects the amount of meaning the individual desires, yet lacks. For example, sadness may serve as information related to one's progress toward a desired source of meaning (Higgins 1987). To illustrate, an individual may expect to derive a high amount of meaning in life from his/her romantic relationship. If the individual then fails to attain this sense of meaning, sadness may result. From this perspective, sadness may function to resolve the discrepancy between what one has and what one desires by acting as a transitory emotional state between goal failure

and goal disengagement. This is consistent with Baumeister's (1994) notion of crystallization of discontents, wherein the alignment of negative features of a relationship, role, or other association facilitates disengagement.

Some research supports the idea that one function of sadness may be goal disengagement (Gut 1989; Klinger 1977). When a specific source of meaning is lost, sadness may lead individuals to devalue that meaning source or disengage it from their global sense of meaning, thus resolving the discrepancy between felt and desired meaning from a given source. This is in contrast with emotions higher in approach motivational intensity, which may relate to meaning that is not yet lost or not yet acquired (e.g., anger, desire, determination). In these contexts, threatened meaning would likely lead to stronger defense of the specific meaning source under threat. By facilitating disengagement from threatened sources of meaning, sadness may indirectly lead to the search for new sources of meaning, perhaps via the broadening of cognition that occurs with sadness (Gable and Harmon-Jones 2010). When a meaning source is removed, an individual may be motivated (indirectly as a result of the sadness) to acquire new sources of meaning or more favorably evaluate existing meaning sources.

High-Approach Motivational Intensity and Meaning

Conceptualizing meaning in terms of goal attainment also allows us to speculate on how emotions (both positive and negative) higher in approach motivational intensity may relate to MIL. Pre-goal PAs (e.g., determination, desire) and anger (a type of pre-goal negative affect) are both high in approach motivational intensity. Considering our discussion above, we would expect these emotions to facilitate actions that feel meaningful, and the emotions themselves would contribute to the feeling of meaning. More specifically, these emotions should relate to goal pursuit and the protection of threatened sources of meaning (i.e., goal defense).¹

Anger and Meaning

Although anger facilitates actions relating to pursuit of meaning in some sense, measurements of anger have been found to relate negatively with the presence of meaning (Steger et al. 2006). However, it is likely that due to the high-approach

¹The actions of an angry/determined individual likely feel "meaningful" to the person at the moment. However, it is difficult to assess this perception of meaning in a laboratory on existing questionnaires, which measure global perceptions of meaning. If a more "local" sense of meaning could be measured, then individuals in a state of heightened motivational intensity would likely score high on this measure.

motivational properties of anger, it relates to the search for meaning, as frustration and goal blocking are common sources of anger (Frijda 1993; Kuppens et al. 2007; Silvia 2009; Silvia and Brown 2007; Smith and Lazarus 1993). Consistent with this idea, Baumeister (1991) and Klinger (1998) have suggested that the search for meaning only occurs among individuals whose needs have been frustrated.²

Despite evidence suggesting that anger should facilitate the search for meaning, laboratory manipulations of anger that test this hypothesis do not currently exist. However, much of the research on the anger-aggression relationship can be reconceptualized as defense of threatened meaning. For example, in studies using insulting feedback on self-relevant issues, anger may lead to aggression because the insult threatened an important source of meaning. The aggressive action then can be seen as a means of reestablishing the threatened meaning.³ Anger may only affect the perception of meaning in life to the extent that the antecedent of the angry episode relates to the blocking of a goal related to personal perceptions of meaning. Logically following this idea, anger episodes that are not caused by the blocking of a goal important to the individual's sense of meaning should not impact their ratings of meaning. Though most anger-inducing events involve some sort of frustration, anger induced through pain or defensive aggression should affect MIL less. Though it may be difficult to produce anger without affecting meaning in the slightest (after all, most people place their own physical well-being high on the priority list of meaningful things), laboratory procedures exist which produce defensive reactions toward unpleasant or unexpected stimuli, such as pain or a puff of air on the back of the neck (e.g., Knapp and Pohrecky 1995). Anger induced in such a fashion should not relate to MIL in any capacity.

While the effects of situational anger on the components of meaning in life can be fleeting depending on the length and intensity of the anger-inducing experience, trait anger may play a pivotal role in augmenting the effects of state anger on the MIL. Since individuals high in trait anger experience anger-inducing events as more intense (e.g., Deffenbacher et al. 1996), it stands to reason that those high in trait anger should experience anger-inducing events as more threatening to MIL. Individuals high in trait anger have also been shown to rate neutral or ambiguous social information as more threatening (Barazzone and Davey 2008; Wingrove and Bond 2003). This pattern also holds for laboratory manipulations of anger (Barazzone and Davey 2008). Extrapolating from this idea, it is plausible that those high in trait anger may come to view neutral events or events with ambiguous intent

²This idea is also consistent with the concept of concrete and abstract goals. Though the causes of anger vary, once it is elicited, anger may facilitate behavior that is instrumental to a specific goal. This should result in goals being framed in a more concrete fashion. Indeed, anger like other emotions high in motivational intensity should narrow attention and cognition. Again, as it is an approach-related emotion and likely relates to narrowed, concrete thinking, it follows that anger may relate to less perceived meaning, but a higher sense of search for it.

³Anger does not always need to produce aggression for this statement to be true. Anger can lead to action that may benefit self/others and not be aggressive, such as signing a petition to prevent an unjust event from occurring (Harmon-Jones et al. 2003).

as more threatening to MIL. That is, they may be more likely to perceive events as threatening to their personal sense of meaning (e.g., they might find others' jokes personally insulting rather than humorous) and may quickly become defensive. In addition to the defense of existing sources of meaning, those high in trait anger may also be more intense and persistent in the search for meaning.

Determination/Desire and Meaning

Like anger, determination and desire have high-intensity approach-related motivational qualities. However, they are also positive emotions. Despite their difference in valence, determination and desire should have similar effects on MIL as anger. Both of these emotions focus an individual on a salient goal and facilitate behavior that is instrumental toward the acquisition of that goal. They also narrow attention (Gable and Harmon-Jones 2010) and should also cause the formation of more concrete, approach-related goals.

Of course, it should be possible to differentiate the effects of these emotions on MIL from those of anger. From a goal-pursuit perspective, anger occurs when the pathway to a goal, or a goal already acquired, has been blocked or taken away. This could be perceived as a loss of meaning. While anger, determination, and desire are all emotions that facilitate approach-related goal pursuit and should all relate to elevated feelings of the search for meaning, angry individuals may be starting from a theoretically lower point of total meaning, as they had some of their sources of meaning taken away or blocked. The determined people, on the other hand, merely want to pursue their goal; they started from a "neutral" position. Hence, determination may result in a higher overall feeling of meaning than anger, as determined individuals theoretically have both existing meaning sources to draw from and potential new ones to obtain.

Broadly, emotions high in approach-related motivational intensity facilitate instrumental, goal-directed behavior. When areas of the frontal cortex associated with approach motivation are directly manipulated, it is not simply the case that people are angrier. Rather, in this work anger was more likely to lead to aggression when the appropriate brain area related to approach motivation was activated (Hortensius et al. 2011). In an analogous fashion, increasing approach motivational intensity (i.e., eliciting anger, determination, or desire) may not simply lead to an increased or more fervent search for meaning per se. Alternatively, it may strengthen the relationship between the search for and presence of meaning. Stated another way, when emotions high in approach motivational intensity are elicited, the search for meaning should be more likely to lead to the presence of meaning. This is consistent with the *search-to-presence model* (Steger et al. 2008) which suggests that searching for meaning yields more meaning. Within this model, basic motivational tendencies are thought to influence how search relates to presence. It is hypothesized that search and presence are strongly positively related in approach-oriented people whereas they are more negatively related in avoidance-oriented people.

Whether this is because approach-related goals are more likely to result in a successful acquisition of meaning sources or the act of searching itself becomes a source of meaning is unclear. Despite the large difference in motivational direction, avoidance motivation also has a profound impact on MIL.

Avoidance Motivation and Meaning

Emotions that elicit a strong avoidance response include fear, disgust, and anxiety. From an evolutionary perspective, these emotions were designed by natural selection to coordinate cognitive, physiological, and attentional systems toward the goal of self-preservation (Cosmides and Tooby 2000). To put it simply, in order for life to be meaningful or for you to strive toward sources of meaning, you need to be alive. The drive for self-preservation is a super ordinate goal to which other psychological processes are oriented toward fulfilling (Pyszczynski et al. 1999). From this perspective, the drive for self-preservation can be considered a source of MIL. Stimuli that elicit a strong avoidance response (e.g., predators) can be thought of as threats to self-preservation. Successful avoidance of a fearful stimulus, a disgusting stimulus, or an anxiety-provoking stimulus elicits the low-approach positive affective state of relief. The by-product of a successful avoidance response, relief, may increase MIL for two reasons. First, it may make the value of life itself salient, which may result in a greater sense of meaning (King et al. 2009). Second, it may bring to mind broad and long-term goals that have not been fulfilled (one of which, assumedly, is living to a moderately old age) and lead to a heightened sense of meaning through the introduction of an abstract approach-related goal.

Fear and Meaning

Seligman and Maier's (1967) work on learned helplessness provides a means of thinking about the fear-MIL relationships. In their work, dogs were electrically shocked in a cage that had a lever that could be pressed to alleviate the shock (or not). Seven days later, when placed in this presumably fear-inducing environment, those dogs that learned to press the lever to stop the electrical shock demonstrated normal avoidance behaviors, whereas the dogs that did not learn the lever press did not. Instead, these dogs that did not learn the lever press seemed to give up. Self-preservation is a goal in any organism and can be interpreted as a source of MIL. As a result, the dog's lever pressing can be interpreted as behavior directed at retaining MIL by means of self-preservation. From this example, it seems to be the case that action possibility is a key component to the fear-MIL relationship. When confronted with a fearful situation and action is possible, fear may lead to strivings toward meaning. In contrast, when faced with a seemingly inescapable fearful situation (or chronic exposure to a fearful stimulus), significantly less strivings toward meaning should be observed. Indeed, this latter case of helplessness likely

evokes sadness and depression, which are associated with low strivings toward meaning. This idea, albeit speculative, is consistent with Frankl's existential vacuum which can be defined as an emotional state characterized by boredom and apathy where there is no particular activity the individual wishes to participate in (see also Yalom 1980). Like Seligman's dogs, humans in this existential vacuum are in an aversive state without the motivation or behavioral inclinations aimed at alleviating the aversive state.

Anxiety and Meaning

Anxiety and fear are difficult to distinguish physiologically and through self-report measures, though recent work strongly suggests they are distinct discrete emotions (e.g., Sylvers et al. 2010). In addition, successful avoidance of either a fearful or anxiety-inducing stimulus elicits relief. As a result, the predictions made above for fear should hold for anxiety as well. As an individual difference, anxiety is inversely related to the presence of MIL (e.g., Debats et al. 1993). If highly anxious individuals experience less meaning in life, they may be more sensitive to threats to meaning. In turn they may mount a more rapid or intense defense response to meaning threats.

Disgust and Meaning

Disgust is an avoidance-oriented emotion that can be conceptualized as a mechanism for coordinating cognitive, physiological, and attentional systems in a manner that repels threats to the self. Disgust sensitivity has been correlated with discomfort at the thought of various self-related boundary threats. Recent research has shown that disgust sensitivity moderates mortality salience, such that those highest in disgust sensitivity are the most sensitive to mortality salience effects (Kelley et al. 2012). Since MIL is a fundamental part of the self (Schlegel et al. 2009, 2011), it can then be argued that those individuals who are most sensitive to disgust would more quickly mobilize a defensive response toward threats to MIL. Moreover, as another means of defending against meaning threat, those higher in disgust sensitivity may also search for meaning quicker or more intensely than those lower in disgust sensitivity.

Conclusion

Emotions cannot be adequately described with only valence and arousal. Motivational intensity is a critical third dimension that allows for more precise descriptions of emotional responses. Similarly, MIL is more complex than presence versus absence. The search for MIL and defense against threatened meaning

are critical concepts that are understudied. In past research, the relationship between emotion and MIL has focused primarily on global PA. The goal of this chapter was to speculate on how discrete emotions varying on three dimensions of valence, arousal, and motivation related to three components of MIL – presence, search, and absence. By looking at the interaction between emotions and MIL from this novel theoretical perspective, it is our hope that this chapter will be provocative and instrumental to researchers in constructing testable and generative hypotheses.

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