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Situating Meaningfulness in Profound Living

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Abstract: Meaningfulness is regarded in literature as a significant aspect of life. Our work is concerned with situating the role of meaningfulness in living a profound life.

Keywords: Profound living, meaningfulness, functions of meaning

The purpose of this paper is to develop a theoretical foundation for understanding meaningfulness as an elemental component in living a profound life. Meaningfulness refers to the core significance and purpose of living. One definition of meaningfulness in life entails a basic sense of value, grounded in an assessment of life as coherent, significant, directed, and belonging (Schnell, 2009).

Thanks to technological advances, a world of information is available at our fingertips just a “google” away. Carr (2011) explored intellectual and cultural consequences of the Internet on modern day life. He juxtaposed printed material, that once held a coveted role in focusing attention towards creative intellect, to the Internet, which involves scrolling and hunting for quick bits and pieces of information, resulting in distracted thinking and cursory learning. Research shows the human brain changes in response to lived experiences. As our functions of reading and learning shift to Internet through scanning and browsing, we are losing capacity for concentration, contemplation, and reflection (Carr, 2011). The Internet contributes to cultural superficiality, attention span reduction and shallow thinking, despite the tremendous knowledge and information sharing opportunities it offers (e.g., Carr-Chellman & Kroth, 2018). To circumvent living only on the surface skimming life, it becomes critical to methodically study what makes life profound, and how to embody living profoundly.

Using an exploratory Delphi Study, Carr-Chellman and Kroth (2018) investigated the concept of profundity by inviting twenty-seven subject matter experts (SMEs) to participate in their study. The SMEs were selected from well-known professionals in the field of adult learning such as those serving on editorial boards of *Adult Education Quarterly*, *Adult Learning*, and *The Journal of Transformative Education*. The SMEs were asked four questions about the qualities of profundity, profound learning, and profound living. After four Delphi rounds, SMEs ranked six themes related to living profoundly in the following order: living meaningfully, practicing ongoing reflection, working toward deeper understanding, being intentional, being authentic, and being integrative. We selected the top ranked theme of living profoundly, living meaningfully, to explore here.

Martela and Steger (2016) explained that it is essential to differentiate between two concepts: meaning *in* life and meaning *of* life. Meaning of life refers to holistically looking at life and the world, “what is the meaning of life?” It addresses the point of life, its purpose and the reason it exists. Whereas meaning *in* life signifies an intention to contemplate individual experiences by asking what makes them subjectively meaningful. Our work here is concerned with meaning *in* life, and how it relates to living profoundly. Recent discussions emphasize that sense of meaning in life becomes more valued as people advance in age, while others maintain meaning in life is a lifelong process that is crucial to all life phases (Krause, 2012). Yet,

scholarly research does not widely address meaningfulness in life; the term is more commonly used by theologians, therapists, and individuals dissatisfied with their lives (Wolf, 2016).

Role of Meaningfulness

The importance of meaning in life has been addressed in early literature. Victor Frankl is most famous for beginning this conversation in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* (1962), where he argued that the desire to find meaning is fundamental to the human experience. Other scholars concurred that finding meaning in life is an important human need (e.g., Baumeister, 1991). According to MacKenzie and Baumeister (2014), a sense of meaningfulness in life is associated with four fundamental needs that humans desire to satisfy: purpose, values, efficacy, and self-worth. Their belief is that if meaningfulness is not perceived in life, individuals would innately try to recover the missing need. We believe their argument speaks to an elemental role meaningfulness plays in profound living—we instinctively pursue it.

MacKenzie and Baumeister (2014) identified three primary functions of meaningfulness in life. The first function concerns an ability to identify signals in the environment in order to detect patterns from meaningful information. For example, learning to recognize certain atmospheric conditions helps individuals prepare for incoming weather. Language is another example of how individuals discern and understand a variety of patterns as they become aware of specific ways language is used (MacKenzie & Baumeister, 2014). The second function is communication, sharing relevant information extracted from experience in order to increase knowledge. This knowledge helps integrate human interactions. The third function concerns individuals' self-regulation of behavior and affect, along with controlling actions based on cultural standards or perceived possibilities after an event. Self-regulation permits behavior to be guided by considering factors beyond the immediate situation. Mackenzie and Baumeister (2014) concluded that these three functions of meaning help people “guide their actions, make decisions, and regulate their emotion” (p. 32). Such regulation of actions, decisions and emotions empowers people aspiring to espouse a more profound living approach.

Meaningfulness and Adult Learning

Learning is a primary human brain function and an ongoing process that takes place not just in educational settings, but in everyday activities. Kroth (2016) defined a profound learner as “someone who pursues deeper knowledge regularly over time” (p. 29), an enduring quest for intensity and lifelong learning. Carr-Chellman and Kroth (2018) argued that “our society can benefit from an emphasis on profound living and learning, rather than superficiality, self-promotion, and polemical interactions” (p. 7). They maintained investigating the underexplored concept of profundity could inform current adult learning theories in the preparation of deeper learners.

Several works uncovered a correlation between meaningfulness and adult education/learning. For instance, Roessger (2017) pointed out that considerable dialog in adult education now focusses on meaning making. People discriminate about what they want to learn as learning must hold meaning for them. We look for learning that is personally meaningful along with experiences that “serve to further elaborate and deepen our understanding of who we are and our relationship with others and the world” (Dirkx et al., 2006, p. 132).

From a constructivist perspective, Kauchak and Eggen (1998) noted that meaningful learning encourages learners to build their own subjective conceptions from lived experiences rather than merely acquire abstract information from systematic settings. In effect, learning that ensues through life events is more influential and carries more meaning than instructional learning. Several authors suggested that adult learners are motivated to make sense of

experiences in order to understand a concept or develop a skill, an implication that constructing meaning carries both social and individual aspects (e.g., Caine & Caine, 2001; Caine, et al., 2005). Meaning construction is believed to emerge from a shift in perceptions of seeing the world, due to ample relevant experience (Caine & Caine, 2006) as adults strive for optimal functioning.

Elements Linking Meaningfulness to Profound Living

In a comprehensive theoretical overview, Martela and Steger (2016) outlined three aspects that contribute to understanding meaning in life: coherence, purpose, and significance. Coherence refers to clarity about what makes sense in life; purpose represents a discernment of core goals, aims, and direction in life; and significance relates to the recognition of life's innate value and experiencing a life worth living. Martela and Steger (2016) claimed that meaningfulness is an important dimension of human condition, and that examining each aspect separately could provide an accurate model for it.

On the other hand, Wolf (2016) suggested that finding meaning in life comprises two components: following a passion and being a part of something bigger than ourselves that we believe in. The first component represents a subjective view of what gives meaning in life, while the second component concerns objective values of the individual and group. Wolf expressed that without one or the other, there would be significant lack for meaningfulness. Therefore, she proposed an analysis and conceptualization of meaningfulness that integrates the two components/views together.

MacKenzie and Baumeister (2014) purported that meaning in life occurs on different levels. Complex long-lasting relationships are rooted in significant levels of meaning, while lesser levels of meaning are material and definite. For example, lower levels of meaning refer to simple behaviors without significant intent. Higher levels of meaning take into account that a behavior signifies feelings like appreciation and gratitude. Transitioning from lower levels to higher levels of meaning expands individuals' perspectives and offers enriching experiences while enhancing meaning in life (MacKenzie & Baumeister, 2014). We view that such shifts empower people to attain greater scales of profound living.

To address components of a meaningful balanced life, Littman-Ovadia (2018) called attention to works recognizing two key well-being features: "doing" signified by attaining goals or achievements, and "community" signified by collaboration or engagement in positive relationships. To achieve balance in life, these two socially desired features, doing and community, must be complemented by two often overlooked aspects that are not given much credibility in our society: being and solitude. Littman-Ovadia (2018) argued that growth is not only achieved through the states of "doing" and "community," but people need to experience both "being" and "solitude" situations in order to truly flourish in life. Accordingly, she proposed a model for building a meaningful balanced adult life that contained two-dimensional continuums. One continuum incorporates being and doing. The second continuum poses solitude on one end and community on the other. Four modes were generated from the two dimensions: solitary doing, solitary being, communal doing and communal being. Littman-Ovadia explained that stability amongst all four modes is necessary for growth and balance. Solitary doing is depicted when an individual performs solo activities. Working alone instead of with a team generates higher production levels as tasks grow more complex. Solitary being endorses self-reflection and meditation. Communal doing involves completion of group tasks or participation in social interactions. Communal being is likened to group meditation and group self-

identification. Balancing these four components increases meaningfulness while staying rooted in life.

Contributors to Meaningfulness

Positive affect has been considered a main predictor of meaning in life (e.g., King et al., 2006; Hicks et al. 2010; Hicks & King, 2008). Moreover, four basic meaningfulness dimensions: autonomy, competence, relatedness and beneficence, were shown to be important for subjective well-being and vitality (Martela & Ryan, 2016). Martela, Ryan and Steger (2018) investigated the predictors of meaningfulness and determined the four aforementioned dimensions of meaningfulness are not only better predictors of meaning in life than positive affect, but could also explain the noticed connection between positive affect and meaning in life. They added that finding ways of living that fulfill these four satisfactions can deliver more meaningful experiences, and potentially lead to eudemonic living (Ryan & Martela, 2016). Eudemonic well-being contributes to understanding the role meaningfulness plays in life. Eudemonic well-being encapsulates a sense of purpose, meaning, and self-fulfillment in life, whereas, a hedonic outlook indicates pain avoidance and maximizing pleasure, irrespective of the satisfaction of human psychological needs (Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008).

A considerable amount of meaning in life and individual well-being is realized through close relationships with others (MacKenzie & Baumeister, 2014). Forgas and Baumeister (2018) explained the way close relationships contribute to a sense of meaning has been understudied. They also clarified that social relationships are part of meaning and purpose and a main channel for experiencing positive emotions and fulfilling a need to belong. Additionally, most authors acknowledge close relationships more than other domains when describing what gives meaning to life (e.g. Klinger, 1977).

Many theories regarding meaning in life address the question of what makes life meaningful. Schnell (2009) discussed fluctuating sources of meaning that included self-transcendence, self-actualization, order, and well-being and relatedness. Self-actualization entails the employment and development of capacities. Order denotes holding on to values and courtesy. Well-being and relatedness connote enjoying life's gratifications both individually and collectively. To address fluctuation in levels of significance of sources of meaning, Schnell (2011) referred to the degree of individual commitment to any source of meaning as "density" and to the number of relevant sources of meaning to an individual as "diversity." Accordingly, Schnell (2011) claimed that the probability of living a meaningful life increases with density and diversity of sources of meaning (especially self-transcendent sources). We suggest that density, commitment to sources of meaning, is what constitutes profundity.

Discussion

We propose that Littman-Ovadia's (2018) model aligns with MacKenzie and Baumeister's (2014) model manifesting a relationship between functions of meaning and meaningful life balance. MacKenzie and Baumeister's (2014) first function: recognizing signals and patterns and appropriately responding, signifies an ability to act in an environment as an individual, solitary doing. Communication explains how people share meaning amongst their group while regulating intra- and interpersonal knowledge, which involves communal doing and communal being. The third function, self-regulation, enables behavior control within cultural standards, or solitary being. Based on these connections, we suggest the three main functions of meaning constitute the dimensions of a meaningful balanced adult life, as presented in figure 1.

This manifestation of the primary functions of meaning in everyday basic human life supports and explains the view that meaningfulness is ranked as one of the most significant aspects of profound living (Carr-Chellman & Kroth, 2018) and a key dimension of the good life (Wolf, 2016). The concept of meaning construction and shifting from lower to higher levels of meaning, discussed by MacKenzie and Baumeister (2014), is central to understand how to achieve and enhance meaningfulness in our lives, for a more profound way of living. Likewise, the commitment to relevant sources of meaning, density, promote a profound perspective for living.

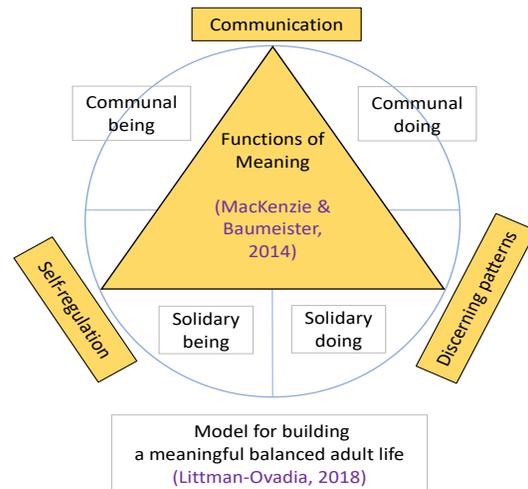


Figure 1

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