

Meaning and Positive Psychology

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Abstract

Positive psychology is the scientific study of what makes life worth living. Meaning is always included by positive psychologists as an element of the good life, but actually figures importantly in all topics of substantive concern to positive psychology. Research is described that links meaning to life satisfaction, character strengths, and physical health. In conclusion, this paper addresses why positive psychology is more often identified as the study of happiness than the study of meaning and how this situation might be remedied.

Meaning and Positive Psychology

The meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment.

—Viktor E. Frankl (1959, p. 110)

Positive psychology is the scientific study of what goes right in life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It is a new perspective within psychology that rests on certain assumptions (Peterson & Park, 2003). First, what is good about life is as genuine and relevant as what is bad, thus deserving equal attention from psychologists. Second, life entails more than avoiding or undoing problems. Someone without symptoms or disorders may or may not be living well. Positive psychology urges attention to what is taking place on the other side of the zero point of being problem-free. Third, explanations of the good life must do more than take accounts of problems and stand them on their head.

We emphasize the scientific basis of positive psychology. This perspective will rise or fall based on what the data show, not on its inherent and intuitive appeal, which of course is immense. Positive psychology is not to be confused with “pop” psychology or untested self-help approaches. It is not a secular religion. It is not a modern version of *The Power of Positive Thinking* (Peale, 1952) or a contemporary companion to *The Secret* (Byrne, 2006). Positive psychologists study optimism and affirmation, to be sure, but do not urge these psychological stances on anyone. Research shows that optimism sometimes has desirable consequences and sometimes not, and the value of positive psychology is to articulate the relevant circumstances (Peterson, 2000). With this information available, people can make informed choices about how best to approach life given their values and goals (Seligman, 1991).

Positive Psychology Background

One of the triggers for the introduction of positive psychology was the realization that since World War II, psychology as a field had devoted much of its effort to the identification, the treatment, and—occasionally—the prevention of problems like anxiety and depression (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The yield of these problem-focused efforts has been impressive, but a myopic view of the human condition has resulted. It is as if psychology views all people as fragile and flawed, and if not in the throes of disorder, then in denial or in recovery.

The premise of positive psychology is that the rest of the human condition deserves scientific attention as well. This premise is sometimes misunderstood as a claim that human problems are of no concern to positive psychology. What results is criticism of this new perspective as naïve or elitist. In point of fact, positive psychologists are not indifferent to suffering. The goal of positive psychology is to complement and extend the problem-focused psychology that has proliferated in recent decades, and an important idea from positive psychology is that one way to solve problems is by identifying and leveraging someone’s strengths and assets (Park, Peterson, & Brunwasser, 2009).

It has been observed that positive psychology is nothing new, meaning that occasional psychologists throughout the 20th century studied topics of concern to contemporary positive psychology, such as subjective well-being, genius, and character (Peterson, 2006). Furthermore, the questions raised by positive psychology about the good life reprise those posed centuries ago by Athenian philosophers in the West and by Confucius and Lao-Tsu in the East (Dahlsgaard, Peterson,

& Seligman, 2005). Positive psychology has more recent predecessors as well. The 1946 charter of the World Health Organization defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity,” a definition thoroughly consistent with contemporary positive psychology, especially as it has been used to make sense of physical well-being (cf. Seligman, 2008). In 1958, Marie Jahoda wrote a prescient book—*Current Concepts of Positive Mental Health*—which made the case for understanding psychological well-being in its own right and not simply as the absence of disorder or distress.

If positive psychology is the scientific study of what makes life most worth living, it necessarily entails the study of meaning. Central figures in the psychological study of meaning, like Viktor Frankl (1959), Carl Rogers (1961), Abraham Maslow (1970), and Rollo May (1953), are among the individuals upon whose shoulders contemporary positive psychologists stand, whether or not these important thinkers are regularly acknowledged. Damon, Menon, and Bronk (2003) noted the similarity in particular between Frankl’s approach to meaning and the general premises of positive psychology. Both hold that higher human characteristics are neither produced by nor derived from more basic needs or drives.

Despite ample precedents, contemporary positive psychology still has considerable value as an umbrella term for the study of what makes life worth living. Contemporary positive psychology draws together what have been scattered lines of theory and research and encourages their simultaneous consideration. For example, we have followed this strategy in our research looking at strengths of character and well-being (Park & Peterson, 2006; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

Parsing Positive Psychology

Several attempts to categorize the topics of concern to positive psychology have been made. So, one familiar distinction is between *hedonism* and *eudaimonia* (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Hedonism emphasizes the pursuit of pleasure, whereas eudaimonia emphasizes the actualization of human potential and the pursuit of a meaningful life (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005).

In setting an agenda for positive psychology, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) called for the study of *positive experiences* like pleasure, happiness, and the psychological state of flow; *positive traits* like strengths of character, talents, and a sense of meaning and purpose; and *positive institutions* like families, schools, and businesses that enabled positive experiences and traits.

Seligman (2002) proposed that “authentic” happiness entailed *pleasure, engagement* (i.e., deep involvement in ongoing life), and *meaning*. Park and Peterson (2009) added *good social relationships* between and among family members, friends, colleagues, and neighbors to this list, and even more recently, Seligman (2011) added *accomplishment*. A consensual parsing of positive psychology does not exist and may ultimately be elusive (Peterson, 2013). Existing attempts to categorize the concerns of positive psychology have tried to propose the basic elements of the good life, à la chemistry’s periodic table, and this may be a category mistake if there are no basic elements. Everyone seems to agree that “meaning” is an important topic for positive psychology but including it as simply one of several basic elements may be conceptually problematic. Perhaps meaning cuts across and characterizes all topics of concern to positive psychology.

Nowadays we take another approach to conceptualizing positive psychology by looking at what people actually do that contributes to the psychological good life for themselves and others (cf. Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007). This approach emphasizes behaviors and activities rather than hypothesized processes and mechanisms (Rozin, 2006). We have identified work, love, play, and service as important domains of human activity, and these all are apt to be most fulfilling when they are meaningful (Peterson 2013).

Meaningful work is engaging (Wagner & Harter, 2006). Meaningful love is secure (Bowlby, 1969). Meaningful play is passionate (Vallerand, 2008). Meaningful service is generative (Erikson, 1963). Can one have a fulfilling life without meaning (cf. Steger, Oishi, & Kesibir, 2011)? Perhaps one can be a short-term hedonist, but we believe that deeper and lasting fulfillment requires or at least is facilitated by a sense of meaning about what one does.

The Psychological Study of Meaning

When psychologists, including us, study meaning, our work can often be faulted for being content-free. That is, research participants are typically asked if they do or do not have meaning and purpose in their lives. Their responses are then linked to outcomes of interest.

Researchers rarely take the further step and ask about the source of meaning and purpose (Schnell, 2009; Wong, 1998), although some sources seem more worthy and apt to be fulfilling than are others. We can imagine two research

participants who report a high level of meaning. Person One derives his sense of purpose from ruthless competition—winning at all costs. Person Two, in contrast, derives her sense of purpose from selfless service—making the world a better place for others. Treating these two people as equivalent vis-à-vis their sense of meaning is likely to be misleading.

However, some researchers have focused on the specific content and context of meaningful activities. Dixon (2007) asked older adult research participants to whom they most mattered and their answers usually pointed to specific people—friends, children, and grandchildren—rather than people per se. Debats, Drost, and Hansen (1995) posed open-ended questions to their research participants, asking them to describe when their lives had the most meaning as well as when their lives seemed meaningless. The interpersonal context of meaning was emphasized. Participants experienced “meaning” when in contact with others, and “meaninglessness” when separated or alienated from others.

So, we conclude that meaning is specific and in particular social. When someone reports that his or her life has meaning, we assume that the source of this meaning is often found in specific relationships with other people. This typical content should be kept in mind when interpreting results from other psychological studies of meaning, even when the source of meaning is not explicitly ascertained.

Our own investigations of meaning have often used the *Orientations to Happiness* survey we devised based on Seligman’s (2002) formulation that there are (at least) three ways to pursue an authentically happy life: Through meaning, through pleasure, and through engagement (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005). This is a self-report survey that asks respondents to rate the degree to which statements reflecting each of these orientations apply to themselves. This measure had good psychometric properties, and three orientations are empirically distinct. See Table 1 for sample questions.

Table 1

Sample Questions from *Orientations to Happiness*

On a 5-point scale, how well does each statement apply to you? 1 = very much unlike me, and 5 = very much like me.

Meaning

- My life serves a higher purpose.
- My life has a lasting meaning.
- What I do matters to society.

Pleasure

- Life is too short to postpone the pleasures it can provide.
- In choosing what to do, I always take into account whether it will be pleasurable.
- I love to do things that excite my senses.

Engagement

- I seek out situations that challenge my skills and abilities.
- I am always very absorbed in what I do.
- In choosing what to do, I always take into account whether I can lose myself in it.

All three orientations predict life satisfaction, but meaning and engagement prove to be more robust predictors than pleasure. Furthermore, there is evidence of synergy among these orientations, meaning that people who score relatively high on all three of them are especially satisfied with life. So, meaning, engagement, and pleasure as approaches to life need not compete. They may actually be allies, and those with the fullest life have the best life.

We have also examined the cross-sectional associations between meaning assessed by the *Orientations to Happiness* and our measures of various strengths of character (Peterson & Park, 2012; Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007). Meaning is most strongly associated with religiousness and spirituality, although a number of so-called strengths of humanity are also linked to meaning (see Table 2). Strengths of humanity are social in nature, and this finding supports our earlier argument that “meaning” often has interpersonal sources.

Table 2
Strengths of Character Robustly Associated with Meaning (N = 29,987)

Character strength	<i>r</i> with meaning
Religiousness	.66*
Gratitude	.54*
Hope	.50*
Zest	.48*
Perspective (wisdom)	.48*
Love	.46*
Curiosity	.45*
Leadership	.41*
Social intelligence	.39*
Kindness	.38*

**p* < .001

These findings have been replicated in samples of participants from different nations: The United States, Switzerland, and Australia (e.g., Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; Ruch, Harzer, Proyer, Park, & Peterson, 2010; Vella-Brodrick, Park, & Peterson, 2009). They also hold at the level of nations, when aggregate scores from 27 different nations are computed for the three orientations and correlated with an aggregate score of life satisfaction (Park, Peterson, & Ruch, 2009). Interestingly, the aggregate score of meaning for a given nation is positively associated with its emphasis on religion. Also of interest is our finding that a nation’s aggregate score for pleasure is *negatively* associated with national gross national product (GNP).

Using other measures, we have also studied the prospective association between meaning and physical health, finding for example that older adults higher in a sense of meaning are less likely to have a heart attack, even when the usual suspect risk factors for poor health are controlled (Kim, Sun, Park, Kubzansky, & Peterson, 2013). Similar findings linking meaning to good health have been reported by other research groups (e.g., Perissinotto, Cenzer, & Covinsky, 2012; Sone et al., 2008).

Conclusion: Positive Psychology, Happiness, and Meaning

We have argued that meaning should be a central concern to positive psychology as it attempts to characterize a fulfilling life. Having a sense of meaning and purpose is importantly linked to psychological well-being as well as physical well-being.

The question therefore arises about why positive psychologists have not placed meaning at the center of this new perspective. Instead, “happiness” is usually on focus, despite protests by positive psychologists from the very beginning of the field that positive psychology is not to be confused with “happiology” (e.g., Seligman & Pawelski, 2003).

One obvious explanation is that happiness as a topic is more appealing to the general public, an assertion readily verified by the relative popularity of positive psychology trade books as judged by amazon.com sales ranks. Books with “happiness” or close synonyms in their titles usually outsell other books that address topics like gratitude, forgiveness, character, or—indeed—meaning¹.

Furthermore, people especially in the United States desire quick and simple solutions for problems. Unhappiness seems more amenable to a quick fix than are alienation, anomie, and meaninglessness. Indeed, research shows that the *search* for meaning can be difficult, even painful (Park, Park, & Peterson, 2010).

A deeper explanation of the popularity of happiness and its place as “the” public and sometimes academic face of positive psychology points to the emergence of positive psychology within the United States and its long intellectual tradition of utilitarianism and hedonism, fancy words for happiness (Peterson, 2006). Think psychoanalysis and behaviorism, the two most important traditions in 20th century psychology. Although using different terms (drive reduction or positive reinforcement), each in effect emphasizes feeling good as the guiding principle of human conduct.

Yet another explanation for positive psychology sidestepping the study of meaning is that religion provides an important source of meaning and purpose in life (Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007). Psychologists are often ambivalent about religion, not only because psychologists themselves are a strikingly non-religious group (Gross & Simmons, 2009) but also because of their reticence to be seen as endorsing a given set of values (Peterson & Park, 2007). However, one can study a topic without endorsing it one way or another. Those interested in positive psychology must investigate what matters to people, and religion matters to many.

Psychologists who study meaning and purpose must also bear some responsibility for the neglect by positive psychology of their topic. “Meaning” sounds ponderous, the subject of dusty books and Philosophy 101 courses as opposed to the central feature of ongoing life for all. We all want to matter; we all want to make a difference; and we all want to be connected with a purpose larger than the self. Discussions of meaning by psychologists are—frankly—not always very interesting because they tend to be abstract and overly concerned with semantic distinctions. If the study of meaning could be reframed to stress its specific and social content, which speaks to people’s real lives, we believe it would become a more salient concern within positive psychology.

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Footnote

1. A notable and instructive exception is Viktor Frankl's (1959) *Man's Search for Meaning*, which remains a top-selling book many decades after its first publication. Its appeal, we suspect, is that it speaks directly to people and the actual lives they lead.
