

**IT'S NEVER JUST A CUP OF COFFEE: THE CYCLE OF MEANING-
SEEKING**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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Submitted to Honors and Undergraduate Research
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as an

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

Approved by
Research Advisor:

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May 2015

Major: Psychology

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ABSTRACT

It's Never Just a Cup of Coffee: the Cycle of Meaning-Seeking. (May 2015)

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Existential philosophy has long asserted human life serves a purpose beyond simple existence and, further, that humans have a fundamental need to seek and understand this purpose. Humans are undeniably meaning seekers, consistently attempting to make sense of their lives and the world around them, but what happens when meaning is found? Investigations have focused on how, why, and where people seek meaning in life. Luckily, people are adept at finding meaning in various domains. Because these searches are not fruitless, it becomes relevant to question how finding meaning may affect behavior and preferences. The purpose of this study is to explore the effect of experiencing meaning on future choices. In this investigation, participants viewed a series of images before responding to a writing prompt of their choice. Participants who viewed high meaning images for a longer duration reported more desire to engage with a high versus low-meaning prompt. Additionally, participants who viewed high meaning images for longer duration expressed feelings of inspiration which were connected with desire to engage with a meaningful writing prompt. Together these findings suggest that experiencing a sense of meaning influences people to continue engaging with meaningful targets by decreasing interest in low meaning stimuli and increasing feelings of inspiration. Thus the experience of meaning was not satiating, instead motivating people to further seek meaningful experiences.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am gratefully indebted to Dr. Heather Lench and the EM Lab for their guidance, comments, and support.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“If I asked for a cup of coffee, someone would search for the double meaning” –
-Mae West

Although Mae West was referring to the public’s mistrustful attitude towards her risqué and often unladylike demeanor in this quote, she managed to additionally comment on a fundamental driver of human behavior: the need to find meaning. As audiences we wait at the edge of our seats for the punchline; as students, the lightbulb moment; and as spiritual beings, enlightenment. Mae West adeptly points out the immense amount of effort people spend to make sense of themselves and the world around them in hopes of finding meaning.

What is Meaning?

Existential philosophy argues humans have an unrelenting drive to understand the purpose of being alive, which, with any luck will result in experiencing meaning (Barbalet, 1999; Steger, 2012; van Tilburg & Igou, 2011). Although the type of meaning found may differ between individuals, there is a shared human need to search. Existential meaning transcends present tasks and tangible goals, tapping into the reason for life itself.

In the psychological literature, meaning has been defined in a multitude of ways. Most definitions converge upon novel insights or knowledge that either explains a life truth or increases the value of living (Barbalet, 1999; Fahlman et al., 2001; van Tilburg & Igou, 2011, 2012). Definitions of meaning also tend to emphasize the ability of a person to place life

experiences within a larger, understandable context, perhaps finding patterns in events or choices (King & Hicks, 2009; Steger, 2012).

Why is Meaning Important?

Put simply, meaning is important because people behave as if it is important: people devote their lives to finding it, spend time teaching others about it, and perhaps even engage in violence to defend it. Steger (2012a) stresses the unwilling nature of seeking meaning, noting that “people automatically coax meaning from their experiences, including the experience of life itself” (p. 165). Whether intentional or involuntary, the urge to seek meaning is part of the human experience.

Meaning is of research interest not only because people spend so much energy seeking it, but because negative consequences occur in the absence of it. From Plato on, philosophy has considered meaning in life an important topic of discussion. Indeed, the existential tradition views the absence of meaning as a major contributor to human suffering (Fahlman et al., 2009). Following this tradition, early meaning in life research focused almost exclusively on the hazardous consequences of a life devoid of meaning (Steger, 2012b). More recently, it has been proposed that a lack of meaning motivates individuals to restore their purpose for living (e.g., Heine, Proulx & Vohs, 2006; van Tilburg & Igou, 2012). Previous research suggests people who fail to find meaning in life exhibit a range of dysfunctional behaviors such as gambling problems (Blaszczynski, McConaghy, & Frankova, 1990), eating disorders (Jervis, Spicer, & Manson, 2003), and aggressiveness (Rupp & Vodanovich, 1997). Conversely, living a meaningful life has

been associated with many different aspects of general well-being such as positive personality traits, positive affect and emotions, and life and self-satisfaction (see Steger 2012a for a review).

Where is Meaning Found?

Research suggests that meaning is found in relationships rather than objects (Barbalett, 1999). Both relationships with others and relationship with oneself contribute to experiencing meaning in life (Castano, 2004; Hogg, 2009; Lambert, Stillman, Hicks, Baumeister, Gamble, & Fincham, 2013; Schlegel, Hicks, King, & Arndt, 2011). For example, in one series of studies, accessibility of one's true self-concept predicted level of meaning found in life (Schlegel, Hicks, King, & Arndt, 2011) suggesting that understanding oneself is an important source of experiencing meaning. Groups serve as an important source of information that allows people to understand themselves (Tajfel, 1978, 1981). Social identity theory (SIT) posits that the groups to which people belong make up an important component of self-concept and identity (Tajfel 1978, 1981). This suggests that knowing what groups one belongs to is an important way to understand oneself and ultimately provides individuals with a source of meaning in life. Feelings of belongingness within a group has been found to predict the level of meaning participants report in their lives: in one study simply thinking of close relationships induced feelings of belonging that caused participants to endorse the belief that their lives are meaningful (Lambert et al., 2013). Additionally, group engagement provides protection against meaning threats (Castano 2004; Heine, Proulx & Vohs, 2006) and a sustaining framework for certainty in chaotic situations (Hogg 2005, 2009).

The Present Study

The experience of meaning itself remains unexplored in the psychological literature. Researchers have yet to question the effects of a real-time meaningful experience. The present study aims to fill this gap by addressing the effect of experiencing meaning on future choices. Understanding these effects sheds light on behavior following meaningful experiences. Based on the idea that humans relentlessly seek meaning, we expect the experience of meaning to be reinforcing. We believe satiation for meaningful experiences will not occur, providing evidence for philosophical traditions which views the need for meaning as a fundamental drive throughout people's lifetimes. In other words, we expect high duration, high meaning experiences to result in a stronger preference for meaning in the future. The present study manipulates duration of exposure to meaningful stimuli in order to clearly assess the motivational impact of meaning, illustrating that as experienced meaning increases, preference for meaning also increases. We expect inspiration may also occur as participants experience meaning in life and believe inspiration may assist in driving people to reorient their lives in response to experiencing meaning. Because people intentionally seek out meaningful experiences, knowing what to expect post-experience is an important way to predict and make sense of behavior.

CHAPTER II

METHODS

Participants

Participants were 108 Texas A&M undergraduate students who completed the study for partial course credit. The majority of participants were female (58%), freshman (73%), non-transfer students (92%) who had attended the university orientation session for freshmen (fish camp; 72%).

Procedure

Participants completed all study tasks on computers separated by cubicle walls.

Images were selected from a pilot study of International Affective Picture System (IAPS; Lang, Bradley, & Cuthbert, 2008) images and 35 additional images gathered from web searches. The pilot study yielded 13 images rated greater than 7 of 10 on a likert-type scale for meaning, these images were then used for the meaningful conditions of the full study. Participants were randomly assigned within a 2 (repetition: low, high) x 2 (meaning: low, high) design according to the types of images they viewed. Based on the pilot data, meaningful images were selected that were given a rating of 7 or greater in response to the statement “This image is meaningful to me” on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 10 (extremely); meaningless images were selected from neutral images in the IAPS.

In the high repetition conditions, participants viewed 13 images (either meaningful or meaningless) five times for five seconds each; in the low repetition conditions, participants viewed the same 13 images three times for five seconds each. Participants then completed a mood survey (an amended version of PANAS). We used the Positive and Negative Affective Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1998) to assess whether meaningful/meaningless images affected other mood states (e.g. positive affect). Participants indicated to what extent they presently felt various emotions on a scale from 1 (very slightly, not at all) to 5 (extremely).

Participants then rated how much they would like to write about a Texas A&M tradition and how much they would like to write about recent celebrity news on a scale from 1 (not at all interested) to 9 (extremely interested). We chose Texas A&M Aggie traditions as a meaningful topic because "Aggies" is a salient group to which all participants belong. Studies suggest that engaging with a group serves as protection from meaning threats (Castano, 2004). Further, the feeling of belonging to a group predicts how much participants feel their lives have meaning (Lambert et al., 2013). Celebrity news was chosen as the meaningless topic because participants presumably would not feel the same sense of belonging or identity when thinking of celebrities and thus would view the topic as relatively meaningless. Participants then made a dichotomous choice regarding whether they wanted to write about a Texas A&M Tradition or news regarding a famous celebrity and were given five minutes to write a response to the topic. Participants then completed the PANAS a second time and were debriefed.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Overall, a majority of participants chose to write about an Aggie tradition (83.3%). On average, participants felt more competent writing about Aggie traditions ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.64$) than celebrities ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.53$), $t(109) = -12.46$, $p < .001$. Participants experienced a slight increase in positive affect (composite variable from PANAS) after completing the experiment ($M = 2.86$, $SD = .88$; $M = 3.00$, $SD = 2.9$; before and after, respectively), $t(109) = -2.21$, $p = .029$.

To find out if exposure to meaningful versus meaningless images at low versus high durations affected participants' preferences, I conducted an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with meaning (high, low) and duration (high, low) as the between subject factors and the difference in preference for writing (i.e., preference for university tradition minus preference for a celebrity) as the outcome measure. The results revealed no main effect of meaning, $F(1, 106) = .80$, $p = .37$, and no main effect of duration, $F(1, 106) = 3.22$, $p = .08$, but did reveal a significant interaction between meaning and duration, $F(1, 106) = 7.87$, $p = .027$. Post-hoc analyses revealed that participants in the high meaning, high duration condition reported greater preference for writing about a meaningful versus meaningless target ($M = 1.96$, $SD = .98$) compared to participants in the low meaning, high duration condition ($M = 1.21$, $SD = 1.40$), $t(53) = 2.29$, $p = .026$, participants in the high meaning, low duration condition ($M = 1.16$, $SD = 1.29$), $t(52) = 2.87$, $p = .006$, or participants in the low meaning, low duration condition ($M = 1.32$, $SD = 1.12$), $t(53) = 2.25$, $p = .028$.

A similar ANOVA revealed differences among conditions in the degree to which inspiration changed after viewing the images (i.e., inspiration at time two minus inspiration at time one), $F(3, 106) = 3.61, p = .016$. Post-hoc analyses revealed that participants in the high duration high meaning condition reported a greater increase in inspiration ($M = 1.00, SD = .92$) compared to participants in the high duration low meaning condition ($M = .14, SD = 1.11$), $t(53) = 3.11, p = .003$, and participants in the low duration low meaning condition ($M = .14, SD = 1.01$), $t(53) = 3.23, p = .002$, and participants in the low duration high meaning condition ($M = .28, SD = 1.43$), $t(52) = 2.26, p = .028$.

To assess whether increased feelings of inspiration accounted for the relationship between condition and preference for meaningful tasks, we conducted a mediation analysis (Hayes, 2013; 5,000 samples), with condition (high duration meaningful v. other conditions) as the IV, desire to write about Aggie traditions as the DV, and inspiration as the mediator, $R^2 = .09, F(3, 108) = 10.84, p = .0013$. We found a significant indirect effect of .20 ($SE = .09$), which was significant because the confidence interval did not include zero (95% CI: .10–.50). Thus, inspiration partially mediated the relationship between condition and preference for writing about Aggie traditions. In other words, participants in the high duration, high meaning condition felt more inspired, and this greater inspiration was associated with a stronger preference for writing about a meaningful target.¹

¹ Initially, this study was designed to investigate the motivational impact of boredom when the stimuli used to evoke boredom is meaningful compared to meaningless. There was no difference in boredom across high and low duration conditions, suggesting this design was not effective at eliciting boredom. Further, we found no significant interaction between choice (i.e. decision to respond to a meaningful or meaningless writing prompt) and condition, $F(3, 104) = 0.41, p > .05$. Additional analyses, reported in the main text, suggested that the “high boredom, high meaning” manipulation actually increased inspiration.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

Consistent with our hypothesis, participants exposed to meaningful stimuli for a longer duration demonstrated an increased preference for meaningful stimuli (a university tradition) versus meaningless stimuli (celebrity news), widening a preexisting gap in favor of meaningful stimuli. These results bolster the idea that humans intuitively and relentlessly seek to decipher meaning in life. The novelty of this study lies in the assertion that not only a lack of meaning, but the experience of meaning itself may result in meaning-seeking behavior.

Inspiration and Awe

One explanation for this effect, supported by the findings, is that participants began to experience inspiration as they watched meaningful images. Thrash and Elliot (2003) conceptualized a tripart model to explain the experience of inspiration. This model is composed of transcendence, evocation, and motivation; transcendence being an orienting toward something greater than one's typical concerns, evocation describes the lack of responsibility in becoming inspired (i.e., one cannot will themselves into a state of inspiration), and motivation describes the desire to express new ideas. The shift in preferences exhibited in this study could be interpreted as evidence of transcendence, suggesting inspiration may be a cornerstone of meaningful experiences or inspiration cannot occur without experiencing meaning.

Our results are consistent with a recently growing literature on the psychology of awe. At face value feelings of inspiration and awe are similar, if not impossible to disentangle. Awe has been proposed to contain two distinct cognitive appraisals: perceived vastness, and need to accommodate (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Need to accommodate refers to revisiting and revising current understandings in order to effectively process awe inducing stimuli. Similar to definitions of meaning, this may involve an understanding of new truths. Keltner and Haidt (2003) point out that awe has the ability to “transform people and reorient their lives, goals, values,” perhaps due to a shift in preferences, as demonstrated in the present study. This point underscores the motivational power of awe, making obvious the need to research these experiences.

Inspiration and awe appear to critically rely on experiencing meaning. Without understanding one’s experience in a meaningful way, it seems unlikely that feelings of awe or inspiration could occur. This study illuminates the effect of experiencing meaning in a way that explains the intuitive association between experiencing meaning, inspiration, and awe: each experience involves a reorienting of the self.

Satiation

Previous research has highlighted meaning in life as a source to draw upon in order to protect against meaning threats (e.g., Heine, Proulx & Vohs, 2006; Landau, Kosloff, & Schmeichel, 2011; Moser & Schroder, 2012). The Meaning Maintenance Model (MMM) argues inconsistencies motivate people to reestablish meaning by reinforcing preexisting beliefs, thus placating uncomfortable feelings of chaos or disorder (Heine, Proulx & Vohs, 2006). An important component of this argument is the assertion that meaning is reducible to a need which

may be sated, similar to eating in order to alleviate hunger. Though meaning certainly provides comfort in disorienting situations, the present study challenges the claim there is a satiation point at which people stop searching for meaning. Unfortunately, MMM fails to explore meaning seeking that occurs outside of a negative affect paradigm (Moser & Schroder, 2012). The present study induced a meaningful experience through positive stimuli which evoked feelings of inspiration leading to increased desire for meaningful engagement. This suggests that meaning seeking is unlike other motivations and is not simply “attenuated when sated” (Heine, Proulx & Vohs, 2006 p. 93; Baumeister & Leary, 1995)

Limitations

The first limitation of this study is that it remains unclear if an increased preference for meaningful stimuli directly translates into increased meaning-seeking outside of the laboratory. Perhaps participants are not more motivated to seek meaning than the average person, but rather achieve more positive affect from their next meaningful experience as a result of increased preference for meaningful stimuli. Additionally, it is unclear whether distress would occur if participant preference for meaningful stimuli was left unmet. Considering the abundance of literature establishing a positive relationship between meaning seeking and psychological distress (e.g., Blaszczynski, McConaghy, & Frankova, 1990; Jervis, Spicer, & Manson, 2003; Rupp & Vodanovich, 1997; Steger, 2012b) it is pertinent to tease apart whether an increase in preference for meaningful stimuli directly causes meaning. Finally, this study does not address how long this shift in preference will persist. In light of the proposition that a cycle is initiated upon experiencing meaning, duration of the effect is an important factor to consider in future studies.

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