

Meaning and Well-Being

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Abstract:

The topic of meaning in life is coming to the fore in well-being research. From an arcane existential idea to a cornerstone of wellbeing, the path from obscurity to recognition was established through empirical research. This chapter summarizes the development of theory and of measurement in meaning scholarship over the past 70 years, and highlights replicated research results. Among the relationships that have been found repeatedly in the literature are positive correlations between meaning and happiness, life satisfaction, positive emotions, hope, self-esteem, autonomy, positive relationships with others, competence, extraversion, conscientiousness, health, and longevity. Negative correlations have been replicated between meaning and negative emotions, depression, anxiety, stress, hopelessness, neuroticism, substance use problems, and suicidality. The body of evidence regarding meaning is large and growing quickly, and appears to reliably demonstrate the importance of meaning to human wellbeing and flourishing

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Conceive yourself, if possible, suddenly stripped of all the emotion with which your world now inspires you, and try to imagine it as it exists, purely by itself, without your favorable or unfavorable, hopeful or apprehensive comment... No one portion of the universe would then have importance beyond another; and the whole collection of its things and series of its events would be without significance, character, expression, or perspective. Whatever of value, interest, or meaning in our respective worlds may appear endowed with are thus pure gifts of the spectator's mind.

William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

William James, like scores of psychologists since, sought to understand the psychological nature of humanity's most profound and deep experiences. By speculating on the role of emotions in giving life its savor and significance, he presaged modern interest in how the seemingly fleeting and earthly (emotions) contributes to the seemingly enduring and transcendental (meaning). Emotions, of course, seem fundamental to well-being (Diener, 1984). However, despite being proposed to be a defining feature of well-being nearly 30 years ago (Ryff, 1989), meaning only recently has been a serious and common part of conversations and research about well-being. Given that meaning is supposed to be a path to living well and enjoying rich, fulfilling lives, it is important to examine how consistently and reliably meaning relates to a variety of well-being variables. In this chapter, I will summarize research on meaning in relation to well-being. By the end of this chapter, I believe it will be apparent that many studies have found, and replicated, close ties between meaning and other variables that are used to indicate well-being. In fact, the weight of this research seems to make clear that asking whether meaning is related to well-being is no longer an interesting research question. Instead, a better question may be whether it is possible for people to experience well-being without meaning.

To help support this conclusion, this chapter will present the psychological approach to understanding meaning in life, including the most popular and recent theories and tools for measuring meaning in life. This chapter also will review empirical research on meaning in life, with a particular emphasis on results that have been found again and again, showing that many ties between meaning and wellbeing are reliably repeatable.

Meaning in Life in Psychology

Although there is evidence that people's concern for whether 'life, the universe, and everything' has any meaning is quite old, modern meaning in life scholarship does not draw its inspiration from ancient sources that touch on topics at the heart of meaning, such as the Judeo-Christian Bible or The Epic of Gilgamesh. Instead, in one form or another, most scholars trace the inspiration for studying our human attraction to meaning to Viktor Frankl. As we will see, Frankl really personalized the idea of meaning, rooting it in each individual's experience.

Earlier existentialist philosophers had argued that the failure of religion, governments, and other human institutional collectives to prove their authority over moral truth and righteousness led to the inescapable conclusion that there really was no valid external entity that had dominion over these topics. There was no person, text, or tradition one could point to in life to say "OK, so *that's* what this is all about." Moral sources relied on an accumulation of authority and the weight of absolute conviction. Governmental sources relied on their ability to steward the needs of those they governed. Over centuries of war and exploitation, particularly the World Wars of the mid-20th Century, the capacity for these moral and governmental agents to represent moral truth and righteousness was in doubt. "Trust us" no longer seemed adequate to the task. Rational sources of moral authority did not fare any better. Brilliant and persuasive people could argue both sides of every issue from violence and human rights to the existence of God. The loss of these official sources of meaning left a vacuum, devoid of sense and direction. This realization struck many as alarming. Without being able to rely on millennia of teachings, dogmas, and laws to point a way toward how we are supposed to live our lives, we are forced to improvise. One person might determine that life is about helping others but another person might determine that life is about exploiting and dominating others, and our simple species couldn't say who was right because no one was right. The universe did not care. Life did not have moral rules. There was no absolute truth. Life and the universe were random, and in a meaningless universe, meaning is impossible.

Frankl had a different perspective. Frankl (1963) argued that there was, in fact, some kind of meaning out there for each of us, and that our primary job was to discover it and give it life. Meaning became a personal pursuit of purpose in Frankl's view, and the desire for meaning was put forward as essential to being human. Where earlier meaning was in the hands of an inert and uncaring universe, in the middle of the 20th Century meaning was positioned as a core part of who we are, manifested through our relationships, actions, and attitudes. This shift created the possibility that we could actually study something as abstract as meaning. We cannot test whether the universe has meaning, but we can test whether people have meaning, one person at a time. Thus, meaning in life—as a psychological variable—does not bother with what people think about where life came from, why bad things happen to good people, or whether there is a soul. None of their answers can be proven or disproven according to scientific methods. Such questions are about a different level of meaning. They are about the meaning *OF* life. In contrast, psychology cares about whether a person feels that there is meaning *IN* life, from her or his perspective.

From this critical pivot—from the vast universe to the lone individual—meaning in life became a human quality that psychologists could research. Not that they necessarily started to research meaning right away. About less than 100 papers were published per year in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. However, beginning in 2006, interest in meaning took off. In 2015, 1,900 papers were published on the topic, and a large proportion of these papers presented empirical data, extending in small and large ways what we know about how people experience meaning in their lives and what that experience of meaning provides. Essentially, as many papers are published each and every year on this topic now as were published in the first 60 years of the field combined. This chapter draws on that large body of research to identify what we are confident we know about meaning in life as well as to identify key areas where we still do not know enough. We will begin by discussing definitions and theories concerning meaning.

Definition and Measurement of Meaning in Life

At a basic level, "meaning" itself is widely used to refer to how meaningful people perceive their lives to be. People who regard their lives to be very meaningful are said to "have meaning," or that their lives have the "presence of meaning." Meaning in this sense exists at a medium level of abstraction. At a more cosmic level is the meaning that the universe might or might not have (known as cosmic meaning). For example, people's belief or disbelief in religion are concerned with cosmic meaning. At a more specific level is the meaning any one of us might attribute or draw from a particular life event (known as situational meaning). Most interest in situational meaning concerns the way in which people interpret or try to make sense of trauma, tragedy, or adversity they encounter in life. For example, losing one's job can be

interpreted as a rebuke or diminishment of worth, in which case the situational meaning is one of hardship and defeat. The meaning you perceive your life to have is more formally known as *personal meaning*. To some degree personal meaning includes the ways in which cosmic meaning and situational meaning are relevant to your life, but only insofar as they impact whether you feel your own individual life overall is meaningful. Throughout this chapter, and in most of the research people conduct, “meaning” is used in this manner.

A couple of additional distinctions are made in the field. First, although two people might both perceive similar levels of meaning in their lives, their *sources of meaning* may differ. Person A might get the most meaning from hard work, trying to achieve goals, and pursuing success, and Person B might get the most meaning from family time, being a good friend, and volunteering. Sources of meaning are those parts of life from which people draw meaning and in which they invest their energy. Generally, research suggests that the most common sources of meaning are relationships and the types of activities we are engaged in (e.g., Steger et al., 2013). Not a lot of research has examined whether it makes a difference what sources of meaning people have, but studies often find that people who get their meaning from self-centered or materialistic sources are less happy and experience less meaning than people who get their meaning from self-transcendent and altruistic sources (Schnell, 2009).

Second, Person A and B might have very different orientations to meaning itself. Person A might go through life never thinking about meaning unless she or he is asked, whereas Person B might think about meaning much more, trying to get a deeper understanding of the nature of existence and being a good person, looking for more meaning all the time. Person B would be more likely to engage in the *search for meaning*. The search for meaning refers to how actively and intentionally people are oriented to meaning in terms of their interest to find more or deeper understandings of meaning in their lives. Research shows that people who are searching for meaning are a little more likely to be anxious and unhappy, but also are more likely to be open-minded and interested about the world around them (e.g., Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008). The rest of this chapter is about the presence of personal meaning in a person’s life, or, simply, *meaning*.

Theories of Meaning

Why should meaning be such an important part of well-being? Why should people experience meaning in the first place? There are few theories that tackle both of these questions. Frankl (1963) proposed that deep within humans is an innate need, or will, for meaning. In motivational need theories like this one, people experience well-being if they meet the need and distress if they do not. People successful at meeting needs are in their natural states, and look happy overall, particularly in contrast to people who are frustrated in their efforts to meet their needs. It still might be somewhat unclear as to why people would have a need for meaning. Frankl argues that humans are spiritual creatures, though not in any religious sense. As spiritual creatures, we need to address our built-in desire for living out our values in a meaningful way. In contrast to this spiritual explanation for why we might have an intrinsic orientation to meaning,

Klinger (1977) felt that as living creatures we have a natural inclination to set goals to attain those materials we need to stay alive. Klinger implies that this motivational drive transfers to meaning and purpose because we humans are able to conceive of big abstract notions about what our lives should be like. According to these two scholars, meaning is important as a motivational drive, perhaps rooted in our animalistic needs to seek out nutrition, warmth, water, and other life-giving resources, which then gets transferred to higher aspirations for having a life worth living. Battista and Almond (1973) suggested that people also need to have a mental framework they can use to understand what that life worth living might be like. In these theories, feeling the presence of meaning is the marker that we are doing a good job of pursuing good aspirations. Baumeister (1991) argued that meaning occurs when a specific set of needs are met: purpose (having big goals), self-worth (feeling good about one’s self), value (having some way to justify decisions and actions), and efficacy (feeling competent to act effectively in the world). There are two studies that provide some evidence that these four needs are correlated to people’s levels of meaning in the context of thinking about one’s family (Lambert, Baumeister, Stillman, & Fincham, 2012) or under experimental ostracism conditions (Stillman et al., 2009). However, purpose has been viewed as central and even definitional to meaning since at least Frankl’s work in the 1940s and 1950s, and self-worth, efficacy, and having a system of values or philosophies to guide one’s actions are each part of models of general well-being in their own right. These close associations among meaning, well-being, and the proposed needs makes it difficult to tease apart whether they are needs, or whether those elements are part of meaning versus well-being. However, bridging these early theories of meaning’s origin suggests that people have some level of primal motivational drive to act in the world that must be satisfied to create meaning in their lives.

A different account of where meaning comes from focuses more on the nature of our mental processes, rather than our motivational processes. Steger (2009, 2012, in press) argued that meaning is similar to other mental processes the people have, that making sense of important stimuli gave us an evolutionary competitive advantage. For example, making sense of the facial expressions of a new group of people you encounter helps you navigate possible conflict. Making sense of the landscape around where one lives helps identify dangers and resources. Making sense of the sounds and gestures produced by other members of your species helps preserve and spread knowledge. This information processing and integration capacity is very similar to the way in which meaning works. Meaning incorporates people knowledge about their selves, other people, and the world around them into maps or meaning systems, preserving and linking information, both concrete and abstract. People's meaning systems help them conceive of grand goals and aspirations for their lives, giving them a sense of purpose. Several other scholars have emphasized the cognitive sense-making nature of humans in relation to meaning (e.g., Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006).

Beyond motivation and cognition, some scholars have developed ideas about how people experience meaning through emotional means (e.g., Reker & Wong, 1988). People seem to decide whether their lives have meaning by using, in part, their gut feelings or emotions (Heintzelman & King, 2014). In fact, all else being equal, people rate their lives as more meaningful when they are in a positive mood (King, Hicks, Krull, & DelGaiso, 2006). That is, if I asked you how meaningful your life felt while you were watching a funny movie, you might rate it higher than if you were just sitting at home reading. However, some scholars feel that positive feelings are more important when they happen at a higher level of abstraction. While feeling good might make life seem more meaningful for a few minutes, it may be much more important to feel positively about your life as a whole, seeing that your life matters (George & Park, 2014). Thus, "meaning in life necessarily involves people feeling that their lives matter, making sense of their lives, and determining a broader purpose for their lives" (Steger, 2012, p. 177). More formally, *meaning emerges "from the web of connections, interpretations, aspirations, and evaluations that (1) make our experiences comprehensible, (2) direct our efforts toward desired futures, and (3) provide a sense that our lives matter and are worthwhile"* (Martela & Steger, 2016, p.538, italics added), which are known as comprehension (also known as coherence), purpose, and significance, respectively.

Tools for Measuring Meaning

Meaning research consists of two parts that are not very well connected. The first part, which we have just examined, is the background of theory that defines meaning to have three main parts. The second part is the empirical research tradition, which has established hundreds of links between meaning and living a life marked by happiness and well-being. This second part usually uses formal tools for measuring meaning, none of which really measure comprehension, purpose, and significance separately. Beginning in the 1960s, a series of measurement tools were developed. Early tools (i.e., Purpose in Life Test; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Life Regards Index, Battista & Almond, 1973), were criticized as having problems with their internal structure, item wording, and inclusion of unrelated content, among other issues (e.g., Dyck, 1987; Steger, 2006; 2007).

The two most widely used measurement tools today both benefitted from sophisticated statistical techniques that were not practical until somewhat recently, which produced psychometrically robust instruments. Ryff's (1989) Purpose subscale is a part of a larger measure of psychological well-being. This subscale assesses people's levels of energy, activity, worthwhile things to do, and goals that they can pursue. It is quite commonly used in health-related research. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) is more of a generic measure of meaning, asking people directly if they feel their lives have meaning and purpose. It also measures how much people are searching for meaning. These two subscales are quite commonly used in psychological and educational research. New tools continue to be developed, usually with the aim of helping researchers understand the different dimensions and components of meaning in life (e.g., George & Park, 2014).

Review of Research Assessing Relationships between Meaning and Well-Being

Particularly within the last 10-15 years, many studies have been conducted providing extensive knowledge about the connections between meaning and well-being. As you might expect from the title of this chapter, the overwhelming conclusion is that meaning is closely tied to a vast array of well-being indicators. In this section, the most-replicated results will be reviewed, broken into three categories: subjective or hedonic well-being indicators, psychological or eudaimonic well-being indicators, and general quality of life indicators. Although the general pattern will be to report only a single citation for

each finding, all of the results discussed here have been replicated. The importance of replication of results across multiple studies is a central foundation of science, and especially for a variable with its roots in philosophy and theology, knowing that different researchers have found the same phenomena several times gives solidity to meaning research. This is not a meta-analysis, however, so only one reference is provided for each finding, and it is not possible to provide an estimate of how many null findings it would take to outweigh the significant ones. In some cases, this chapter will highlight areas where singular results suggest an intriguing new angle that requires further research.

Subjective of Hedonic Well-Being Indicators

Subjective well-being (SWB) is a somewhat broad term for people's appraisals that their life is good with no particular boundaries or criteria imposed upon their responses. It is sometimes equated with hedonic well-being, which is an older philosophical idea that more or less boils down to the idea that if someone says she is happy, then she is happy, regardless of what information she uses to make that determination. SWB has been proposed to include variables such as happiness, life satisfaction, and positive and negative emotions (Diener, 1984).

Meaning is positively correlated with experiencing positive affect and emotions (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988), such as love, joy, vitality (Steger et al., 2006), curiosity (Kashdan & Steger, 2007), and hope (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005). In fact, so much of this line of research has been published that a meta-analysis among older adults was feasible, identifying a near-large effect size between meaning and diverse measures of positive emotions (Pinquart, 2002). Further, experimental evidence from one set of studies shows that increasing positive emotional states raises people's perceptions of meaning (King et al., 2006). As one might expect, meaning is inversely correlated with negative affect and emotions (e.g., Steger et al., 2006).

Meaning also is positively related to broader indicators of SWB, such as happiness (Debats, van der Lubbe, & Wezeman, 1993), general well-being (Reker, 2002), psychological adjustment (O'Conner & Vallerand, 1998), and life satisfaction (Ryff, 1989). This latter finding includes one of the rare long-term longitudinal studies, demonstrating that meaning and life satisfaction are positively correlated over one year's time (Steger & Kashdan, 2007). However, many of these results have been demonstrated over shorter periods of time such as one month (e.g., Steger et al., 2006) or 2-3 weeks (Steger & Frazier, 2005).

Psychological or Eudaimonic Well-Being Indicators

Psychological well-being (PWB) is a more narrowly focused term for a specific set of variables that are deemed by some expert source as being necessary for human flourishing. It is generally associated with eudaimonic well-being, which draws inspiration from Aristotle's philosophy. PWB variables are often viewed as being critical for the full development of human potential, and do not always include the kinds of information someone might use to judge if she or he is happy. PWB variables focus on personal growth, persistence, virtue, morality, and so on. Meaning itself is often put forward as a PWB or eudaimonic well-being indicator (e.g., Ryff, 1989), although it certainly can be considered to be both hedonic and eudaimonic (Steger, 2016). Many characterizations of PWB suggest that people should have a positive view of their selves. Accordingly, meaning positively correlates with self-esteem (Ryff, 1989), self-worth (O'Conner & Vallerand, 1998), and self-actualization (Phillips, Watkins, & Noll, 1974). PWB also is associated with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that humans must meet three needs in order to flourish psychologically: Autonomy, Positive Relationships, and Competence. Meaning has been positively correlated to these three needs in several studies and cultures (Church et al., 2014). Meaning also has been positively correlated with having a sense of personal control over one's life, or locus of control (Ryff, 1989), as well as positive perceptions of the world itself (Sharpe & Viney, 1973).

Quality of Life Indicators

The final category of well-being indicators is a diverse group of variables that can be lumped under the umbrella term, quality of life (QOL). QOL is most often associated with health and health research and includes factors such as whether people are free of illness or disease, physical impairments or symptoms, and mental health. It may bear recalling that the heritage of meaning research lies in clinical theory on how people develop and recover from disorders, like depression and anxiety. Although well-being often has been separated from research on disorders, several models of overall psychological flourishing argue that it is important to consider both distress and well-being (e.g., Keyes, 2002). Thus, this section includes indicators of positive QOL, such as health, as well as negative QOL, such as disorders.

Among the most common results in this area of research is the inverse relationship between meaning and depressive symptoms (Kleiman & Beaver, 2013). As with positive emotions, enough research has been done on this link that a meta-analysis was able to estimate a near-large effect size of -.46 among older adults (Pinquart, 2002). Although no meta-analysis has been conducted, inverse correlations between

meaning and anxiety symptoms are of similar size and also are frequently reported (Steger, Mann, Michels, & Cooper, 2009). People who have high levels of meaning report lower levels of perceived stress (Flannery & Flannery, 1990) and fewer symptoms of stress-related disorders, such as PTSD (DeViva, Sheerin, Southwick, Roy, Pietrzak, & Harpaz-Rotem, 2016).

One idea of early existentialists like Frankl was that people who cannot find meaning may give up on life, and indeed research has found that those low in meaning report more hopelessness (Edwards & Holden, 2001), a higher degree of drug and alcohol-related problems (Nicholson et al., 1994), and even stronger tendencies to want to end their own lives through suicide, known as suicidality (Henry et al., 2014). On the flip side, those who do feel their lives have meaning report more effective coping (Debats, Drost, & Hansen, 1995) and are more likely to say that they not only have survived trauma and tragedy but even have grown psychologically, spiritually, or socially as a result of those experiences (Steger, Frazier, & Zaccanini, 2008).

Finally, those who report having more meaning not only feel they are in better health than others according to their subjective health ratings (Battersby & Phillips, 2016), but they also live longer lives (Boyle, Barnes, Buchman, & Bennett, 2009).

Personality. Although not directly considered to be QOL variables, some personality traits consistently are linked to better health and well-being outcomes, so they are considered here. Meaning is positively related to extraversion (e.g., Pearson & Sheffield, 1974) and conscientiousness (e.g., Steger et al., 2008), and negatively related to neuroticism (e.g., DeViva et al., 2016). Finally, meaning has been positively linked to several ways of measuring a person's commitment to religious beliefs (e.g., Steger & Frazier, 2005), which, though not a dimension of personality often is related to dimensions of personality (e.g., conscientiousness) and well-being.

Discussion

Although there is appreciable breadth in the research that has been done on the many ties between meaning and well-being, there are several important areas where the field is reliant on one study (or less). Three areas in particular demand further study to clarify and expand upon tantalizing early research results. These areas are understanding mechanisms by which meaning helps create broader well-being, identifying how meaning impacts health, and exploring how meaning is construed or created in diverse cultural contexts.

How does meaning create well-being? While we may be at the point where we can assume that most people who have meaning also experience greater well-being, we do not know why that is so. One hypothesis is that meaning supports other parts of people's lives known to impact well-being. For example, positive relationships with other people are critical to people's psychological functioning and well-being, and as reviewed here people with meaning in their lives report better relationships. If meaning helps people establish better relationships, then that would provide one avenue for boosting well-being. There is evidence that people prefer to interact with those who have high levels of meaning, and even judge them to be more likeable, have greater potential as a friend, and even that this effect reduces the well-known impact of physical attractiveness on these markers of interpersonal appeal (Stillman, Lambert, Fincham, & Baumeister, 2011). There also is evidence that those high in meaning care more about helping and benefitting others (Martela, Ryan, & Steger, in press). Thus, the arrow seems to run both ways: better interactions and relationships foster meaning, and meaning creates better interactions and relationships.

A second hypothesis is that people with meaning engage in different activities, but very few studies have established these links. One of the only ones that has been conducted showed that levels of meaning were higher among people who tended relationships, did volunteer work, worked toward their goals, and persevered through challenge to a greater degree than other people (Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2006). Both of these hypotheses require more research in order to identify what people with meaning seem to be doing differently than other people. It may simply be that meaning *is* part of well-being, but greater possibilities for improving people's lives are suggested if meaning additionally is viewed as a *path* to well-being.

How does meaning lead to health? Similar to the case of well-being, we know that meaning is linked to a longer, healthier life, but the number of studies implicating biological or behavioral mediators is still small. Studies have found that people high in meaning engage less often in behaviors such as smoking cigarettes, or abusing substances, which would reduce risks to their overall health, particularly over time (e.g., Nicholson et al., 1994; Steger, Fitch-Martin, Donnelly, & Rickard, 2015; Steger, Mann, Michels, & Cooper, 2009). Other research has targeted biological mediators between meaning and health, focusing on people's levels of stress-related hormones and immune cells. These studies find that people with greater meaning have less evidence of potentially toxic levels of stress and immune response, as marked by such

things as inflammatory cytokines and killer T-cell levels (e.g., Bower, Kemeny, Taylor, & Fahey, 2003; Krause & Hayward, 2012). Thus, meaning seems to play a role in protecting people from the risk for physical harm, whether through their own behaviors or through the impacts of life and stress on their immune and hormone system functioning, but more research is needed to show that meaning really does predict these behavioral and biological precursors to health in longitudinal and experimental settings.

How is meaning construed in diverse cultures? Meaning, like much of the rest of psychology, draws its origins from Western European-influenced cultures. This limited cultural scope leaves open the possibility that meaning is to some degree a cultural artifact. Research strongly suggests that meaning and well-being are linked together in all of the couple of dozen countries where it has been studied (e.g., Church et al., 2014). The issue is that when cross-cultural research is conducted, what is learned is restricted to the questions that are asked. For meaning, we can say that when the MLQ is used, people say their lives have meaning regardless of which country they come from (at least in the countries studied so far). What we cannot say is whether we are asking the right questions about meaning. We are not able to estimate whether studying meaning requires asking totally different kinds of questions in New York versus New Guinea, New Zealand, or New Caledonia. Research is needed that builds from the ground up in many different cultures and nations.

Meaning is somewhat unique among psychological variables because of the historic emphasis on sources of meaning. This interest in where people find meaning lends itself to more open-ended inquiries than do methods that require people to simply answer a list of validated survey items. It should be reasonably straight-forward to ask people from diverse cultures and backgrounds where meaning comes from in their lives. However, even studies that look at sources of meaning around the world favor Europe and North America and tend to aggregate results rather than explore possible differences (Fave, Brdar, Wissing, & Vella-Brodrick, 2013). One intriguing exception comes from a study of both Arab and Jewish residents of Israel, in which rankings of the importance of sources of meaning differed by respondent's ethnicity (Bar-Tur, Savaya, & Prager, 2001). While it is interesting to know that cultural context may affect how people prioritize sources of meaning, even better would be to conduct research in such a way as to enable each culture's unique assemblage of sources of meaning to be revealed.

Conclusion

From some of our species' earliest writings to large scale scientific research conducted around the world, meaning has presented a compelling set of questions. Some of these questions continue to evade the field, such as how meaning helps foster well-being and health, and how much of the richness of the human striving for meaning remains unexplored. Given the explosive pace of meaning research, these topics undoubtedly will be tackled in the near future. Until then, it is clear that a great deal of research links meaning with well-being, that these links generally represent large effects, and despite some gaps in research coverage, meaning in life is justified in its position as a cornerstone resource for human well-being and flourishing.

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