

Learned Meaningfulness and Learned Helplessness: The Relationship Between Meaning in Life and Task Perseverance

Daniel Fridley

California State University Chico, CA, USA

Existential psychologists have suggested that the most important task for an individual is to find meaning in a finite life. Previous research has found that higher levels of meaning in life are related to positive well-being. Perceived meaning in life is related both to pattern coherence and an internal locus of control. Perhaps when an individual believes life is organized and that there is an element of control that can be exerted over one's life, meaning in life is rated higher. Additionally, the construct of Learned Helplessness is also thought by some researchers to be related to feelings of global uncontrollability. The present study sought to examine these theoretical assumptions by exploring the relationship between levels of presence and search of meaning in life and persistence in completing a task. Data was collected from 77 undergraduate students. Each participant completed the Meaning in Life Questionnaire and a perseverance task (amount of time a participant continued to work on unsolvable anagrams). Results of several Pearson-product moment correlations indicated no statistically significant correlations between performance on the perseverance task and each subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ). This calls into question the theoretical validity of these constructs. Of specific concern is whether learned helplessness is related to feelings of generalized uncontrollability.

Keywords: learned helplessness, meaning in life, external validity

Introduction

Meaning in life has been seen as the paramount goal of a person and the human condition from many thinkers spanning philosophy, psychology, and spirituality. Many psychologists have come to similar conclusions and focused on one's perception of meaning in life having a critical role in psychological functioning. Humanistic psychologists such as Maslow have hypothesized that meaning in life is a rarity and signals the highest level of psychological functioning (Maslow, 1968). Existential psychologists theorized that one of the main tasks of all individuals is to find transcending meaning in a finite life. When this meaning is not found, individuals have diminished functioning and quality of life (Frankl, 1946/1984).

Meaning in life can be described as having an overarching sense of purpose and significance (Baumeister, 1991). When people seek a meaningful life rather than a happy one, they seek a deeper and cohesive understanding of their actions. Meaning in life is different from happiness in that it is not about momentary pleasure. In fact, it is actually related to experiencing life in its entirety. Struggling, and striving to overcome all

aspects of life to achieve one's goals that create something greater that transcends our finite self, and lives (Baumeister & Roy, 2013).

Meaning in life is more than just a spiritual and academic venture saved for the erudite. In a clinically setting, mental health patients, specifically those suffering from depression, often report lower levels of life meaning. There is some evidence to suggest treatment that is focused on increasing their perception of meaning in life and focusing on the lesson that life is worth living will have more positive outcomes for those with mental disorders (Volkert, Schulz, Brütt, & Andreas, 2014). A sense of meaning in life is even linked to a multitude of other positive constructs in the general population. For example, those who score high on self-reports of meaning in life also tend to have higher self-esteem (Tan, 2013) and higher quality of life (Krause, 2007). In non-clinical populations, we find that people rate their own lives as very meaningful, suggesting that it plays an important part in everyday life (Heintzelman & King, 2014).

Much experimental research has been done to decipher causes of different levels of perceived meaning in life. In laboratory settings, when a positive affect is induced, reports of meaning in life increase (Hicks & King, 2009). This suggests that not only does a feeling of meaning in life promote well-being and happiness as previously thought, but it also shows that feelings of happiness can cause a subjective sense that life is meaningful. Additionally, and rather surprisingly, it has been found that meaning in life is positively associated with pattern coherence. When individuals identify patterns and the world they live in is predictable, they rate their own lives as more meaningful (Heintzelman & King, 2014). In the same vein, researchers have also discovered that meaning in life differs among people with internal and external locus of controls. People who have internal locus of controls report higher levels of meaning in life (Tan, 2013).

Combining these results, we can surmise that when people believe life is organized and that there is an element of control that can be exerted over their lives; they are more likely to rate meaning in life as higher. This brings to mind Segelman's idea of learned helplessness. According to Segelman (as cited in Teodorescu & Erev, 2014), learned helplessness is the behavioral phenomena that occurs when an organism is subject to an uncontrollable environment which results in the lack of exploratory behavior even after the organism gains control over the environment. Teodorescu and Erev argued that learned helplessness is not explained by feelings of uncontrollability, but instead it is related to reward prevalence and recent reinforcers. Additionally, they stated that the original assumption for feelings of uncontrollability being responsible for learned helplessness was flawed because of a lack of trials, and that reward prevalence is a better indicator of exploratory behavior. The fact that reward prevalence and more recent schedules of reinforcement have an effect on learned helplessness exploratory behavior does not necessarily rule out feelings of uncontrollability being responsible for less exploratory behavior. Given that levels of meaning in life are sensitive to experimental change, it would be reasonable to assume that overall feelings about the world as a whole are subject to change from recent events. This implies that feelings of uncontrollability can be induced and changed through recent events and are related to meaning in life. Given these results, people who have learned that their actions have an impact over their lives and the world around them will see life as meaningful and those with feelings of uncontrollability will rate life as less meaningful. This study will attempt to find a link between meaning in life and learned helplessness through the meaning in life questionnaire and a perseverance task. Those who engage in the perseverance task longer, which is analogous to more exploratory behavior, will have rated their lives as more meaningful because they believe that their actions have meaningful consequences.

Method

Participants

77 undergraduate students (52 women, 23 men, and 2 unidentified) participated in this study. The participants had a mean age of 23 ($SD = 5.9$). Participants may have received extra credit or credit for their participation and were recruited through fliers posted in California State University, Chico psychology building.

Materials

Participants completed the two 5 item subscales of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), the Presence of Meaning subscale and the Search for Meaning subscale (Steger et al., 2006). Items are rated on a 7 point likert scale from 1 to 7, 1 being not at all true and 7 being very true. A sample item for the presence of meaning subscale is "I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful". A sample of the search for meaning subscale includes the statement "I am always searching for something that makes my life feel significant". Combined MLQ scores ranged from 32 to 70, with higher scores representing higher levels of meaning in life. In an analysis of 62 studies using the meaning in Life questionnaire, Scores on the presence of meaning in life subscale have been shown to be reliable with reported α s ranges from 0.64 to 0.95, $M = 0.86$ (Heintzelmen & King, 2014). The MLQ has demonstrated both convergent and construct validity. Several related constructs such as sense of coherence, life satisfaction, and mental health have been found to be associated with the presence of meaning in life subscale.

Participants also completed a perseverance task consisting of 4 sets of anagrams. The third set of anagrams was impossible to solve, and the time the participant spent working on this set was recorded as the individual's perseverance score. Perseverance scores were calculated as the amount of time spent on the task before giving up. The minimum amount of time spent on this task was 17 seconds and the maximum was 35 minutes. The shorter duration of time the participant spent on this task, the more it is considered to be associated with learned helplessness.

Procedure and Design

Informed consent was first obtained from participants. They were then asked to electronically complete the MLQ. Following this assessment, participants were asked to take part in a perseverance task in order to assess their susceptibility to learned helplessness. The perseverance task consisted of an impossible set of anagrams hidden among 3 other sets. The time spent attempting to solve the task was measured. Once the individual was finished with the perseverance task, a debrief was provided as well as the researcher's contact information.

This is a correlational study between learned helplessness behavior and meaning in life. Learned helplessness is measured by the time spent on the perseverance task, and meaning in life is measured through both subscales of the MLQ.

Results

Several Pearson product-moment correlations were conducted to measure the association between performance on the perseverance task and each subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire. Results indicated there were no statistically significant findings between performance on a perseverance task and

responses on the MLQ ($r(73) = -0.02, p = 0.87$) for presence of meaning and perseverance, as well as the search for meaning and the perseverance task ($r(73) = 0.17, p = 0.17$).

Interpretation

The results of the study were contrary to the premise that both of these constructs have their roots in feelings of uncontrollability. After considering the limitations of the study, such as small sample size, and measurements (MLQ and the perseverance task), the results seen in this study are still unlikely if the previously stated premise were true. This could logically lead one to the conclusion that at least one of these constructs is not, in fact related to feelings of uncontrollability. Since meaning in life is more well conceptualized in real world human models, this casts doubt on learned helplessness. More specifically, perhaps this study is evidence for Learned Helplessness being a response to specific stimuli and not feelings of overall helplessness. Given that animal models are widely used in studies of learned helplessness, maybe the conceptualization of human learned helplessness in real world situations is flawed.

In a sense, the behavior of learned helplessness is a way to stop global and universal feelings of uncontrollability; it is not an individual shutting down because of overall feelings of uncontrollability. In the real world, there are other outlets for reinforcement. It would make sense for an individual to devalue the impossible task and place more meaning in other outlets to support one's self esteem. Existential research supports this by showing that individuals are constantly constructing meaning in life (Heintzelman & King, 2014). Through this continuous development, individuals can shift meaning when one meaningful aspect of life is threatened by placing more meaning into other aspects of their life.

Even in animal studies, researchers are split on whether or not cessation of exploratory behavior is explained by feelings of uncontrollability but a 2014 study conducted by Teodescuru and Erev suggest that learned helplessness may not be related to feelings of uncontrollability but instead related to reward prevalence. Furthermore, running more experimental trials have shown that learned helplessness behavior is easier to extinguish than originally thought.

The findings of this study along with previously mentioned research indicate that learned helplessness outside of a skinner box is an adaptive self-handicapping tool that helps individuals from failure that could potentially harm their self-esteem and global world view. Cessation of exploratory behavior, or in the case of this study, giving up on a perseverance task, may just be the result of devaluing that task to protect the participant's self-esteem and view of controllability in the world. A fair criticism can be made that perhaps the perseverance task used in this study was not a strong enough manipulation, but it can also be argued that the weaker manipulation allows for more external validity.

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