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Through the windows of the soul: A pilot study using photography to enhance meaning in life

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ABSTRACT

A pilot study is presented using a photographic method for participants to explore where meaning in their lives comes from. Eighty-six university students were instructed to take 9–12 photographs of "things that make your life feel meaningful." One week later, participants returned, viewed, and described their photographs. Significant within-person improvements in levels of meaning in life, life satisfaction, and positive affect were observed following the intervention.

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1. Introduction

One of the central goals of psychotherapeutic approaches such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is to help clients live more authentically, in touch with and acting according to their identity and values (e.g., Hayes & Strohsal, 2010). ACT provides practitioners with a range of tools to facilitate self-understanding, values clarity, and purposeful activity (e.g., Luoma, Hayes, & Walser, 2007). In the present report, we describe results from a pilot study for a novel intervention that pursues similar aims by targeting meaning in life.

Among therapeutic modalities, ACT provides a natural context for exploring and utilizing meaning in life for clinical improvement (Steger, Sheline, Merriman, & Kashdan, 2013). Meaning in life has been defined as the sense people make of their existence and the overarching life purposes they pursue (e.g., Steger, 2009). Meaning in life theory emphasizes helping people discover what truly matters to them and flexibly pursue their life aims and aspirations (e.g., Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006; Park & Folkman, 1997; Steger, 2009, 2012). For these reasons, psychologists long have argued that meaning in life is a critical component of human well-being (e.g., Ryff, 1989). Accordingly, research has established links between meaning in life and better functioning in nearly every domain of life (for review, see

Steger, 2009, 2012). A small but growing research literature has demonstrated the relevance of meaning in life to clinical phenomena, including lower levels of psychopathology and better response to therapy (Debats, 1996), lower levels of fear, anxiety and depression (Steger, Mann, Michels, & Cooper, 2009; Steger & Kashdan, 2009) and less suicidal ideation (Harlow, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1986), as well as posttraumatic stress and experiential avoidance (Kashdan, Kane, & Kecmanovic, 2011). Additionally, research has suggested that people are able to draw on their sense of life's meaning to help them cope with traumatic life events (Triplett, Tedeschi, Cann, Calhoun, & Reeve, 2012).

Unfortunately, little research attention has been paid to the question of how to cultivate meaning, particularly in clinical contexts. Some meaning-cultivation programs have been described in the literature: Meaning-Centered Group Psychotherapy (MCGP; Greenstein & Breitbart, 2000), the Meaning-Making intervention (MMi; Lee, Cohen, Edgar, Laizner, & Gagnon, 2006) and meaning-centered counseling and therapy (MCCT; Wong, 1999). These efforts seek to help people find meaning through understanding what is important to them and mobilize meaning as a coping resource. Although encouraging results have been reported for the MMi (Lee et al., 2006), data on other interventions is scarce.

We sought to develop a simple intervention that could be incorporated into therapeutic approaches like ACT and would enable people to intuitively explore meaning in their lives. This intervention draws on a method called *auto-photography*, which is a visual research method widely used in ethnographic field research that aims to "see the world through someone else's eyes"

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(Thomas, 2009, p. 244). This method allows participants to clearly represent their own perspectives, and has been widely used in self and identity research (Dollinger & Clancy, 1993; Noland, 2006; Ziller & Lewis, 1981). In this report, we describe a pilot study using an adaptation of autophotography to enhance meaning.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Eighty-six psychology major undergraduate students were recruited from a research pool at a large, Western university in the United States. A qualitative report using this sample has been published previously, though there is no overlap with the data reported here (Steger, Shim, Brueske, Rush, Shin, & Merriman, 2013). One participant did not complete Time 2 activities, leaving 85 total participants (age $M=19.3$ years; $SD=1.9$ years; 73.8% female, and 83.3% European–American).

2.2. Procedure

Participants completed a battery of questionnaires (Global Questionnaire) at Time 1 and were given a Kodak digital camera with 8.2 megapixel resolution. They were instructed to take photographs of "things that make your life feel meaningful." The camera's built-in memory set a limit of 9–12 photographs. One week later, at Time 2, photos were downloaded from the camera and participants completed a brief survey (State Survey). Participants were then asked to write a response to the prompt "What does this photo represent, and why is it meaningful?". Finally, they completed duplicate forms of the State Survey and Global Questionnaire.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Global Questionnaire

The Global Questionnaire consisted of four widely-used and psychometrically sound instruments used to examine change in meaning in life, life satisfaction, and symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress. Scores from the Global Questionnaire showed good reliability (Table 1).

2.3.1.1. Meaning in life. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) consists of two 5-item subscales measuring the Presence of Meaning (MLQ-P) and the

Search for Meaning (MLQ-S), with items rated from 1 (*absolutely untrue*) to 7 (*absolutely true*).

2.3.1.2. Life satisfaction. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is a 5-item scale, with items rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

2.3.1.3. Psychological distress. The Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) consists of three subscales—depression, anxiety, and stress—each assessed using 7 items rated from 0 (*did not apply to me at all*) to 3 (*applied to me very much, or most of the time*). For this study, one item in the depression subscale that measures meaning in life was deleted to reduce the chances that the intervention would falsely influence depression because of that item.

2.3.2. State Survey

To measure state levels of meaning in life, life satisfaction, and positive and negative affect, the State Survey was created based on items from the MLQ, the SWLS, and a popular measure of positive and negative affect (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). MLQ items were supplemented with items drawn from meaning in life theory (Steger, 2009), intended to assess comprehension and purpose. Each item presented with a unique rating scale with 100 dots, with a vertical slash after every 10 dots. Participants were asked to put an X on the scale where it best reflected how they felt "at this moment" scale of 0 (*not at all* [_____], or *no* [_____] *at all*) to 100 (*as* [_____] *as anyone could ever be, complete and total* [_____], or *absolutely* [_____]). Scores from the State Survey had good reliability (Table 2).

2.3.2.1. Positive affect and negative affect. State positive affect was measured using five adjective: happy, strong, excited, enthusiastic, and relaxed drawn from an existing measure (Watson et al., 1988). State negative affect was measured using seven items: sad, nervous, distressed, irritable, guilty, afraid, and stressed.

2.3.2.2. Meaning in life. State presence of meaning in life was measured using five items, three of which assessed the comprehension component of meaning in life (e.g., Steger, 2009): "I understand myself," "I understand the world around me," and "I understand how I fit in the world." One item was assessed purpose ("I have a mission or purpose in my life") and

Table 1
Correlations among Time 1 and Time 2 measures from the Global Questionnaire.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1 MLQ-P	*0.86*											
2 MLQ-S	−0.12	*0.85*										
3 SWLS	0.38**	−0.18	*0.86*									
4 DASS-D	−0.37**	0.16	−0.54**	*0.82*								
5 DASS-A	−0.30**	0.10	−0.33**	0.54**	*0.62*							
6 DASS-S	−0.34**	0.15	−0.39**	0.69**	0.65**	*0.80*						
7 T2MLQ-P	0.50**	−0.33**	0.50**	−0.35**	0.00	−0.30**	*0.84*					
8 T2MLQ-S	−0.18	0.64**	−0.05	0.09	0.06	0.07	−0.27*	*0.92*				
9 T2SWLS	0.44**	−0.15	0.74**	−0.53**	−0.16	−0.43**	0.70**	−0.13	*0.85*			
10 T2DASS-D	−0.29**	0.18	−0.43**	0.76**	0.38**	0.54**	−0.39**	0.12	−0.54**	*0.81*		
11 T2DASS-A	−0.10	0.19	−0.38**	0.44**	0.62**	0.43**	−0.15	0.16	−0.25*	0.56**	*0.74*	
12 T2DASS-S	−0.21	0.02	−0.32**	0.57**	0.38**	0.71**	−0.33**	0.14	−0.46**	0.69**	0.49**	*0.81*

$N=84$ *Note:* alpha coefficients presented in diagonal. MLQ-P=Meaning in Life Questionnaire-Presence subscale, MLQ-S=Meaning in Life Questionnaire-Search subscale, SWLS=Satisfaction with Life Scale, DASS-D=Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale-Depression subscale, DASS-A=Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale-Anxiety subscale, and DASS-S=Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale−stress subscale.

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$