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ScienceDirect
Journal of Research in Personality 42 (2008) 660–678
JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN PERSONALITY
www.elsevier.com/locate/jrp

The meaningful life in Japan and the United States: Levels and correlates of meaning in life ☆

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Available online 18 September 2007

Abstract

Culture supplies people with the provisions to derive meaning from life. However, no research has examined cultural variation in the two principal dimensions of meaning in life, presence of meaning and search for meaning. The present investigation adapted theories of self-concept and cognitive styles to develop a dialectical model of meaning in life, which predicted cultural differences in the tendency to experience search for meaning as opposed to, or harmonious with, presence of meaning. Using data from American ($N = 1183$) and Japanese ($N = 982$) young adults, mean levels and correlates of presence of meaning and search for meaning were examined. As predicted, Americans reported greater presence of meaning; Japanese reported greater search for meaning. In accordance with the model, search for meaning was negatively related to presence of meaning and well-being in the United States (opposed) and positively related to these variables in Japan (harmonious). Thus, the search for meaning appears to be influenced by culture, and search for meaning appears to moderate cultural influences on presence of meaning.

Keywords: Meaning in life; Cross-cultural; Dialectical model; Well-being; Search for meaning

☆ We express our gratitude to Shigehiro Oishi and Ty Tashiro for commenting on an earlier draft of this manuscript.
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doi:10.1016/j.jrp.2007.09.003

1. Introduction

Life challenges us with a potentially bewildering complexity of ambiguous information, adverse events, and unpredictable circumstances. Yet, most people find this stream of experiences to be sensible, and maintain that they have found meaning in life (Baumeister, 1991). People are aided in their efforts to order and interpret their existence by a robust and flexible tool: culture (Allport, 1961). The purpose of the present study was to provide an investigation of the potential influence of culture in meaning in life, including an examination of cultural variance in levels of the presence of meaning and the search for meaning, as well as relations with well-being. Illuminating the relations among culture, dimensions of meaning, and well-being would deepen our understanding of one of the factors that shape how people think about themselves and their place in the world.

Two important dimensions of meaning in life have emerged in theory and research (e.g., Crumbaugh, 1977; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). The first concerns the degree to which individuals perceive their lives as significant and meaningful, referred to here as presence of meaning in life. The second concerns the degree to which people are engaged in a search for meaning in life. Presence of meaning in life refers to the degree to which people experience their lives as comprehensible and significant, and feel a sense of purpose or mission in their lives that transcends the mundane concerns of daily life (Steger, in press). It is a prominent component of several theories of broader human well-being (e.g., King & Napa, 1998; Ryff, 1989), and abundant research has supported associations between self-reported meaning in life and a wide range of other well-being indices (e.g., Reker, 2000). Search for meaning in life pertains to the dynamic, active effort people expend trying to establish and/or augment their comprehension of the meaning, significance, and purpose of their lives (Steger, in press; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, in press). The search for meaning is related to less presence of meaning, and lower well-being overall (e.g., Crumbaugh, 1977; Steger et al., 2006; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, in press). Thus, whereas presence of meaning is concerned with a valued outcome (my life is meaningful), search for meaning is concerned with an important process (how can I make my life more meaningful?). Some have theorized that searching for meaning is a basic human motivation (e.g., Frankl, 1963; Maddi, 1970), which presumably leads to the desired outcome of increased presence of meaning in life. However, correlational, factor analytic, and longitudinal evidence suggests that presence of meaning and search for meaning are only moderately related and are distinct from one another (Steger et al., 2006, in press; Steger & Kashdan, 2007). Thus, in addition to presence of meaning and search for meaning, their relationship and potential interactions warrant consideration.

As has been the case with much of psychology, most of the theory-building and empirical investigation relevant to meaning in life has originated within Western cultures. For example, the theories that explicitly identify meaning as an important feature of human functioning largely derive from Aristotelian notions of the good life (e.g., Ryff & Singer, 1998), or experiences intimately associated with Western European history (e.g., Nazi concentration camps, Frankl, 1963). Although there is little controversy about the general value of meaning to human functioning in current, Western well-being research (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006), it is largely unknown whether these meaning dimensions are similarly prominent in non-Western cultures.