

Religious commitment and positive mood as information about meaning in life ☆

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Abstract

Two studies examined the role of religious commitment in moderating the relationship between positive affect (PA) and meaning in life. In Study 1, Sample 1, religiosity was found to moderate the relationship between naturally occurring PA and meaning in life, showing that high levels of religiosity attenuated the effects of PA on meaning in life. In Study 1, Sample 2, religiosity similarly moderated the effects of induced mood on meaning in life. In addition, this pattern of results was shown to be unique to meaning in life compared to another life domain (life satisfaction). In Study 2, subliminally priming Christians with positive religious words (e.g., “Heaven”) was further shown to weaken the association between PA and meaning in life, whereas subliminal primes of negative religious words (e.g., “hell”) weakened the association between religious commitment and meaning in life. A competition of cues model is proposed to account for these effects.

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“...religious faith...satisfies...the most fundamental human need of all. That is the need to know that somehow we matter, that our lives mean something, count as something more than just a momentary blip in the universe.”

Rabbi Harold Kushner (1987).

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1. Introduction

The experience of meaning in life has been recognized as an important contributor to health and well-being (e.g., Ryff & Singer, 1998; Wong & Fry, 1998). Indeed, in his classic work, Frankl (1963/1984) maintained that the need for meaning is a chronic, basic need (see also, more recently, Heine, Travis, & Vohs, 2006). The importance of meaning in life is supported by research demonstrating its relations to a number of mental health variables such as depression, anxiety, hope, and life satisfaction (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987; Ryff, 1989; Steger & Frazier, 2005; Zika & Chamberlain, 1987, 1992).

Although past research and theory has generally emphasized the notion that meaning in life leads to greater levels of subjective well-being, recent research has demonstrated that at least one aspect of well-being, positive affect (or PA), enhances the feeling that life is meaningful (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006). In those studies, King and colleagues (2006) found correlational evidence for a strong relationship between PA and the experience of meaning in life, in general, and the experience of meaning in a day, even controlling for goal-directed activity, thought, and progress. Furthermore, induced PA caused enhanced meaning in life, particularly for those for whom no attributional cue for mood was provided (King et al., 2006, Study 5). These results indicate that, as with other abstract qualities of their lives, people may rely on mood as information when judging life's meaning.

The mood as information hypothesis posits that current mood may be used as a cue when making evaluative judgments (Schwarz, 2001; Schwarz & Clore, 1996). Essentially, when confronted with a question about an abstract quality of life, an individual might interpret his or her current feelings as relevant to the target (Schwarz & Clore, 1996). Positive moods, therefore, may lead to more favorable evaluations of meaning in life, to the extent that individuals interpret mood as relevant to the question of life's meaningfulness.

In the present studies, we examined judgments of meaning in life as a function of PA, religiosity and positive or negative religious primes. Before describing the studies, it may be helpful to briefly review the meaning of meaning in life, itself.

1.1. *The experience of meaning in life*

In the present studies and in our previous work, we have focused on the subjective experience of meaning in life or the feeling that life is meaningful. Most questionnaires used to measure meaning in life typically rely on respondents' subjective assessment that their lives feel meaningful. For example, consider these items drawn from measures of meaning in life, "My personal existence is very purposeful and meaningful" (from the Purpose in Life test, Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964) and "I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful" (from the Presence of Meaning Scale; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). These self-report measures tap into an intuitive understanding of meaning in life as a sense that one's life matters, that experiences are coherent, and that one has a sense of the answers to life's big questions (e.g., "Why am I here?"). This definition does not exhaust the concept of meaning in life (see Reker & Wong, 1988). However, research studying the relations of meaning in life as a broad construct (not necessarily meaning making about a particular event) has used these kinds of questionnaires and the results of that work speak to the importance of this phenomenological feeling of meaningfulness

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