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# The three meanings of meaning in life: Distinguishing coherence, purpose, and significance

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Despite growing interest in meaning in life, many have voiced their concern over the conceptual refinement of the construct itself. Researchers seem to have two main ways to understand what meaning in life means: coherence and purpose, with a third way, significance, gaining increasing attention. Coherence means a sense of comprehensibility and one's life making sense. Purpose means a sense of core goals, aims, and direction in life. Significance is about a sense of life's inherent value and having a life worth living. Although some researchers have already noted this trichotomy, the present article provides the first comprehensible theoretical overview that aims to define and pinpoint the differences and connections between these three facets of meaning. By arguing that the time is ripe to move from indiscriminate understanding of meaning into looking at these three facets separately, the article points toward a new future for research on meaning in life.

**Keywords:** eudaimonia; meaning; meaning in life; motivation; well-being

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## Introduction

The eternal question over meaning in life has recently become a target of increased theoretical (e.g. Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Wong, 2012), and empirical interest (e.g. King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). It has become clear that experiencing meaning in life is an important contributor to well-being and health (see Steger, 2009 for a review; see also Heintzelman & King, 2014a), and research looking at different contributors toward our sense of meaning in life has proliferated (e.g. Hicks, Schlegel, & King, 2010; King et al., 2006; Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2009).

Despite these advancements, many observers (e.g. Heintzelman & King, 2014a; Leontiev, 2013) have noted that the field still suffers from definitional ambiguity and simplified approaches that neglect the complexity and conceptual range of meaning in life as a construct. In much of empirical work, multidimensional models (e.g. Reker & Peacock, 1981) have been eschewed in favor of a reductionistic approach that tends to just measure 'meaning.' Yet, Wong finds four separate components of meaning (2012) and six different questions connected to existential meaning (2010), while Leontiev (2006) and Reker and Wong (1988) have both developed their own three-dimensional models of meaning. Others have noted that *meaning* and *purpose* have been treated as 'identical constructs in some instances and distinct constructs in others' adding up to the confusion (George & Park, 2013, p. 365). Thus, before the field can make significant theoretical and empirical advancements, we need to overcome 'the nagging definitional ambiguity of the construct' (Heintzelman & King, 2013, p. 471) and have further clarification on the basic question: What do we ask when we ask about meaning in life?

In recent psychological literature, it has been argued that the greatest consensus in defining meaning has centered on two dimensions: coherence, or one's comprehension and sense made of life, and purpose, or one's core aims and aspirations for life (Steger et al., 2006). Other work has hinted at a three-dimensional model of meaning (Heintzelman & King, 2014a, 2014b; Steger, 2012a; see also Leontiev, 2005; Reker & Wong, 2012). This is reflected, for example, in King et al.'s (2006, p. 180) conclusion as regards the different ways meaning in life has been understood: 'Lives may be experienced as meaningful when [1] they are felt to have significance beyond the trivial or momentary, [2] to have purpose, or [3] to have a coherence that transcends chaos' (numbering added for clarity). We thus seem to be moving toward understanding meaning in life as having three facets: one's life having value and significance, having a broader purpose in life, and one's life being coherent and making sense (Heintzelman & King, 2014a; Steger, 2012a).[1]

However, even though scholars have pointed toward this distinction, thus far the characteristics of and differences between these three facets of meaning have not been properly fleshed out. Even though some recent investigations have looked at one or two of these three

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elements separately (George & Park, 2013; Heintzelman, Trent, & King, 2013), no research up to date has properly examined all three proposed facets of meaning in life simultaneously. If they represent fundamentally different ways to understand what we mean by *meaning in life*, the field would need a proper examination into their respective natures; their commonalities, differences, and how they are connected with each other. This is the aim of present paper.

The core argument made here is that the three facets are tapping into different basic dimensions of human experience, and future research would benefit from treating these facets of meaning as separate. As we aim to show below, the three facets have different psychological roots and fulfill different functions in human life. It can also be argued that their presence or absence is caused by different factors. Altogether, through elaboration of the three facets of meaning, this article aims to point toward a new future for research on meaning in life.

## Three meanings of meaning in life

An initial step in understanding psychological research on meaning *in* life is to separate this question from the more philosophical question about meaning *of* life (Debats, Drost, & Hansen, 1995). This latter question looks at life and the universe as a whole and asks what, in general, is the point of life: Why does it exist, and what purpose does it serve? These kind of metaphysical questions are, however, 'out of reach of modern objectivist scientific methodology' (Debats et al., 1995, p. 359), and not questions for psychology to answer. The aim of psychological research on meaning in life is more modest. It aims to look at the subjective experiences of human beings and asks what makes them *experience* meaningfulness in their lives.

Quite a variety of potential dimensions of meaning have been proposed in the literature. From the earliest empirical investigations of meaning there has been a risk of over-inclusion of other constructs in meaning. For example, questions about energy, despair, and even suicide have been used to measure meaning (i.e. Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). More systematic efforts identified multiple dimensions of meaning, encompassing purpose, acceptance of death, goal strivings, perceptions that the future will hold meaning, existential vacuum, feelings of control in life, and a desire to seek more meaning (Reker & Peacock, 1981). As the field evolved, certain dimensions came to be viewed as more central and intrinsic to meaning in life, while other dimensions were better understood as potential antecedents and consequences of meaning. The rapid expansion over the past couple of decades in well-being and positive psychology research overall helped clarify additional constructs, making it more critical to distinguish them from meaning in life. These developments have led to increasing rigor in meaning in life research with more emphasis on validating fewer dimensions rather than simply proposing a greater number. This has, in turn, led to the current focus where especially three dimensions of meaning in life are often seen as central.

The earliest version of a trichotomy of meaning sought to overlay meaning with a classic taxonomy of human behavior. Reker and Wong (1988, 2012) expanded upon earlier work by Battista and Almond (1973) by suggesting that there are three components in personal meaning: (1) *cognitive component*, which is about making sense of one's experiences in life, (2) *motivational component* that is about pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and (3) *affective component* that is about feelings of satisfaction, fulfillment, and happiness accompanying goal attainment. They regard the cognitive component to be the cornerstone of meaning that 'directs both the selection of goals and engenders feelings of worthiness' (Reker & Wong, 2012, p. 434). Goal striving, in turn, leads to feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment. Of these components, the cognitive one mirrors what we here call the coherence dimension of world making sense. Similarly, the motivational component reflects the sort of goal striving that is thought to grow from purpose (e.g. Mcknight & Kashdan, 2009). However, the affective component has received almost no further theoretical elaboration or empirical investigation. Nevertheless, we discuss it further at the end of this article where we examine other suggested facets of meaning.

Setting aside the problematic affective dimension, when psychologists talk about meaning in life they mainly seem to have three different dimensions in mind: coherence and purpose were already part of Reker and Wong's (1988) conceptualization, and significance has more recently emerged as the third facet. This trichotomy is most explicitly present in Heintzelman and King's work who see purpose to be about goal direction, significance to be about mattering, and coherence to be about one's life making sense (Heintzelman & King, 2014b, p. 154). They also argue directly that 'although these three aspects of meaning are often treated as synonymous (with each other and with meaning in life), they are potentially distinct' (Heintzelman & King, 2014b, p. 154). For them, purpose and significance are motivational components, while coherence is a cognitive component of meaning in life. However, although they refer to this distinction in a number of articles (Heintzelman & King, 2013, 2014a, 2014b), it has not been elaborated further.

Other writers have also come to the same conclusion about the three different facets of meaning. Steger, for example, points toward the same trichotomy in stating that 'meaning in life necessarily involves [1] people feeling that their lives matter, [2] making sense of their

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lives, and [3] determining a broader purpose for their lives' (Steger, 2012a, p. 177 numbers added for clarity). Similarly, Park and George (2013, p. 484) conclude that feelings of meaningfulness include 'a sense of significance, comprehension, and purpose regarding one's life and existence.' But again, in both cases the distinction is just briefly mentioned and not elaborated.

It thus seems that the existence of these three distinct dimensions of meaning in life has been widely acknowledged, but no throughout theoretical examination of their differences has been conducted. Furthermore, empirical research has thus far proceeded without differentiating them from each other. For example, the developers of the most popular scale to assess meaning in life, Meaning in Life Questionnaire Presence of Meaning Scale (MLQ-P), define meaning in life as 'the sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one's being and existence' (Steger et al., 2006, p. 81). The MLQ-P includes items that tap both into coherence (e.g. 'I understand my life's meaning') and purpose (e.g. 'My life has a clear sense of purpose'), but they are summed into a single scale score. The same ambiguous consortium of coherence (e.g. 'The meaning of life is evident in the world around us') and purpose (e.g. 'I have discovered a satisfying life purpose') is present in other popular measures of meaning in life, such as the Life Purpose subscale of Life Attitude Profile (Reker & Peacock, 1981 quoted here) as well as in Antonovsky's (1993) Sense of Coherence Scale (SOC). This problem of ambiguity among widely recognized dimensions of meaning in life often is compounded by the inclusion of even more dimensions in other popular measures such as the Purpose in Life Test (e.g. suicide, despair, etc.; Crumbaugh, 1968) and the Purpose subscale of the Psychological Well-Being scale (e.g. activity level, future orientation, etc.; Ryff, 1989).

While scales like the MLQ have demonstrated robust psychometric properties (e.g. Brandstätter, Baumann, Borasio, & Fegg, 2012; Steger et al., 2006; Steger, Kawabata, Shimai, & Otake, 2008), none of the frequently used scales can be used to examine the three facets of meaning separately. Thus, there is little to no data that can be used to distinguish among dimensions. Therefore, we turn to the theoretical literature to begin our examination of these three ways to understand meaning in life. Table 1 gathers together the basic definitions and distinctions between them.

### *Coherence as meaning in life*

Meaning in life is often associated with people making sense of the world, rendering it comprehensible and coherent. This is often referred to as the *cognitive component* of meaning in life, which is about 'making sense of one's experiences in life' (Reker & Wong, 1988, p. 220). Life is coherent when one is able to discern understandable patterns in it to make the wholeness comprehensible. In other words, meaning as coherence is seen to be about 'the feeling that one's experiences or life itself makes sense' (Heintzelman & King, 2014b, p. 154).

This perspective is inspired, for example, by James (1950) notion of subjective rationality of experience. The earliest articulation of this perspective inspired the development of an influential survey, the Life Regards Index (Battista & Almond, 1973). The LRI was predicated on the theory that people develop a framework for understanding life, which enables them to feel it is meaningful. Some also cite Antonovsky's (1993) notion of *sense of coherence* (SOC) as a further inspiration. SOC has three dimensions of which the first one, feeling confident that one's environment is structured and predictable, seems especially to be emphasizing this perspective on meaning as making sense of the world.[2]

A number of approaches to meaning have argued that being able to make sense, find patterns, and establish predictability in the world confers a survival advantage to organisms, including humans (e.g. Steger, 2009; Steger, Hicks, Krueger, & Bouchard, 2011). The fullest elaboration of this argument to date is the *Meaning Maintenance Model* (MMM; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006), where meaning is seen to be about 'the expected relationships or associations that human beings construct and impose on their world' (Heine et al., 2006, p. 90). MMM builds on the assumption that humans have an inherent need to make sense of their environment, and thus, in situations where meaning is disrupted, we experience notable distress spurring our innate capacity to construct meaning to become activated.

Similarly, Heintzelman and King (2014b) take a theoretical stance that explicitly concentrates on the coherence dimension of meaning, arguing for its distinction from other dimensions. They argue that human beings have an adaptive trait that motivates us to aim to detect reliable patterns and connections in the environment, and rewards us when we are able to find such coherence that we can rely on in our lives. They view the cognitive experience that world makes sense as being accompanied by a certain type of feeling, the 'feeling of meaning,' that provides us with information about the presence of reliable patterns in the environment. We desire to experience this feeling of meaning and thus this feeling directs us to seek experiences that comply with our perceptions of coherence and avoid encounters with uncertainty. Empirically, they have shown that encountering coherent patterns in the environment increases people's self-reports of meaning in life (Heintzelman et al., 2013; see also Trent, Lavelock, & King, 2013).

In conclusion, coherence has been identified as one important and potentially separate facet of meaning in

Table 1. Distinguishing among the three facets of meaning.

| | Coherence | Purpose | Significance |
|---|---|---|---|
| Definition: | Sense of comprehensibility and one's life making sense | Sense of core goals, aims and direction in life | Sense of life's inherent value and having a life worth living |
| Opposite: | Uncertainty and incomprehensibility | Aimlessness and loss of direction | Absence of value |
| Normativity: | Descriptive | Normative | Normative |
| Domains: | Understanding | Motivation | Evaluation |

life. Beginning at the discrete level of moment-to-moment experiences, coherence centers on the perception that stimuli are predictable and conform to recognizable patterns (Heine et al., 2006; Heintzelman & King, 2014b). From here, it would appear that ever more elaborate models of patterns and predictability can be constructed, eventually building to overarching meaning models that help people make sense of one's self, the world, and one's fit within the world (Steger, 2012a). Some empirical research exists that aims to explicitly focus on this aspect of meaning and they show that objective coherence in the environment increases sense of meaning in life. However, thus far most research has been conducted with scales that do not discriminate between the three facets of meaning. So although the theoretical focus of this research is on the coherence dimension of meaning, they operate with scales that measure general sense of meaning in life.

### *Purpose as meaning in life*

The second most prevalent construal of meaning in life is that meaning arises when people have a clear purpose in life, a perspective inspired by Frankl (1963). While *purpose* is in many cases used synonymously with *meaning* (e.g. Reker & Peacock, 1981), when a separation between these two concepts is made, purpose refers specifically to having direction and future-oriented goals in life, although different conceptualizations vary in terms of the magnitude and grandeur attributed to purpose. For example, Ryff (1989, p. 1072) offers a somewhat short-term and perhaps even mundane version of purpose, arguing that purpose in life is about having 'goals in life and a sense of directedness.' At a more broad and over-arching level, Mcknight and Kashdan (2009, p. 242), define purpose as 'central, self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning.' Their view is consistent with much of the theoretical literature in that the effectiveness of a given purpose relies upon its scope, its strength, and its presence in people's awareness. Thus, in the tradition of Frankl, purposes have nobility and breadth of impact that ideally is measured in terms of a lifespan rather than a day. Mcknight and Kashdan also argue that instead of a single all-encompassing purpose, a person may have multiple purposes in life. Efforts have been initiated to conduct empirical research focusing especially on the effects of having a purpose in life. For example, in a daily diary study focusing on people with social anxiety disorder, it was found that on days when people devoted considerable effort toward a purpose in life, they experienced increases in self-esteem and positive emotions (Kashdan & McKnight, 2013).

George and Park have also started an effort to examine purpose in life, defining it as 'a sense of core goals, direction in life, and enthusiasm regarding the future' (2013, p. 371). They explicitly argue that purpose is distinct from the other two dimensions discussed in the present study, coherence and significance. Further, they link purpose with research on the benefits of pursuing highly valued goals (e.g. Carver & Scheier, 1998). Most importantly, they have found direct empirical support for the idea that meaning and purpose are distinct constructs. They constructed two scales, one measuring specifically purpose in life, and the other measuring more general personal meaning (however, without separating between coherence and significance perspectives) and showed in a longitudinal setting that, despite being strongly correlated ($r = 0.61$), these two measures had different predictors and correlates. For example, Time 1 religiousness and spirituality was positively related to Time 2 meaning but not purpose, while Time 1 optimism was correlated to Time 2 purpose but not meaning. They thus argue that purpose in life should be seen as distinct from general meaning in life (see also Weinstein, Ryan, & Deci, 2012), and therefore in future it should be researched and measured separately.

Despite some differences in definition, researchers on purpose in life seem to agree that it is essentially about some future-oriented aims and goals that give direction to life. These overarching goals then lend significance to one's present actions. And both Mcknight and Kashdan (2009) and George and Park (2013) argue that it should be explicitly separated from a general sense of meaning in life, and have started empirical efforts to do precisely that. Thus, contemporary theory and research continues to build the *motivational* aspect of meaning proposed by Reker and Wong (1988).

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***Significance as meaning in life***

The third dimension of meaning examined in the current paper is significance, which focuses on value, worth, and importance.[3] In this manner, significance has been understood to be about the worthwhileness and value of one's life. It is 'a sense of life's inherent value' (Morgan & Farsides, 2009b, p. 354). Traces of this understanding of meaning can be found, for example, in Ernest Becker's (1973) idea of 'primary value' (p. 5), and Terror Management Theory's idea of self-esteem as 'a sense of personal worth in the context of a broader cosmology' (Sullivan, Kosloff, & Greenberg, 2013, p. 21). Similarly, George and Park (2014, p. 39) recently argued that 'Existential Mattering' is a neglected but central aspect of meaning, defining it as 'the degree to which individuals feel that their existence is of significance and value.' Overall, this aspect of meaning in life can be defined as a value-laden evaluation of one's life as a whole regarding how important, worthwhile, and inherently valuable it feels (George & Park, 2014; Morgan & Farsides, 2009b, p. 354; Steger, Fitch-Martin, Donnelly, & Rickard, 2014; Weinstein et al., 2012, p. 82). As Shmotkin and Shrira put it, being able to find meaning 'makes the world worthy enough to live in' (2012, p. 146). This sense of having a life worth living is understood to be an independent notion of value not reducible to mere happiness or other similar experiences (Wolf, 2010).

As a *life worth living* this facet of meaning in life connects closely with the idea of *eudaimonia*, an ancient Greek word that has sometimes been translated as happiness, but which is more precisely about living well, successfully, and responsibly (e.g. Annas, 1995; McMahon, 2006; Steger, Shin, Shim, & Fitch-Martin, 2013). Eudaimonia has recently become the target of increased interest within psychology (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Waterman, 1993), where it has been conceptualized as an intrinsically worthwhile way of living (Ryan, Curren, & Deci, 2013; Ryan & Martela, in press). Empirically, existing research on eudaimonia has looked at what strivings and goals are worth pursuing, using meaning in life as one of the outcome variables (Huta & Ryan, 2010). Thus, research on eudaimonia has concentrated on the question of what gives rise to an experience of life worth living, while significance is precisely about this experience of a life worth living, thus making these two concepts intimately connected.

Additionally, significance as a facet of meaning in life is directly connected to the Japanese notion of *ikigai*, which has no direct equivalence in English language, but has been defined as 'that which most makes one's life seem worth living' (Tanno & Sakata, 2007, p. 114) and as a sense of 'life worth living' (Sone et al., 2008, p. 709). Empirical research using a nation-wide cohort study in Japan has shown that a sense of ikigai in one's life was connected with lowered risk for mortality (Tanno & Sakata, 2007; Tanno et al., 2009). More specific analyses have revealed that ikigai is inversely related to cardiovascular disease, stroke (for men) and external cause mortality, but not with cancer mortality (Koizumi, Ito, Kaneko, & Motohashi, 2008; Sone et al., 2008). Although the construct of ikigai is culturally specific, these are intriguing findings that make it interesting to ask whether similar results would be obtained in other cultures, if sense of having a life worth living would be directly measured.

Empirically, besides research on ikigai, not much research can be found that concentrates explicitly on significance as a dimension of meaning in life. However, research on suicide prevention provides one indirect attempt to look at the reasons that make life worth living. The presence of meaning in life is associated with less suicidal ideation and lower lifetime odds of a suicide attempt, thus emphasizing the idea that meaningful life indeed is a life worth living (Harlow, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1986; Heisel & Flett, 2004; Henry et al., 2014; Kleiman, Adams, Kashdan, & Riskind, 2013; Kleiman & Beaver, 2013; Lester & Badro, 1992). Another strand of research in this area has tried to identify *reasons for living*, the reasons people give for not killing themselves, finding a number of reasons from family responsibilities to having a purpose in life or life being too beautiful and precious to end it (Jobes & Mann, 1999; Linehan, Goodstein, Nielsen, & Chiles, 1983). One set of beliefs found in the research had to do with 'imbuing life and living with specific value' (Linehan et al., 1983, p. 284). Although this stream of research is not explicitly connected to significance in life, it nevertheless provides one attempt to examine the reasons for having a life worth living. In fact, research on suicide might be one of the best sources of information upon which to draw for an understanding of the significance dimension of meaning.

*Significance in life and philosophy*

Leo Tolstoy recognized that one of the critical questions facing people, especially those who may be contemplating suicide, is 'Why should I live?' (2000, p. 17). Tolstoy found this question so intransigent that in his later years he sometimes thought that 'the best that I could do was to hang myself' (2000, p. 16). The weighty matter of one's life's worth has been addressed by philosophers for centuries, beginning perhaps with Socrates' admonishment that an 'Unexamined life is not worth living' (Plato, 350 BCE/1871, v. 38a). Two millennia later, philosopher Albert Camus proclaimed that 'judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental

question of philosophy' (Camus, 1955, p. 94). This is why suicide was for him the ultimate philosophical problem; finding one's life worth living is a matter of life and death. More recently, Thomas Nagel (2000) discussed the meaning of life in terms of whether one's life matters or not in the larger scale. For these philosophers, meaning in life is thus ultimately about finding what makes life worth living. In fact, this seems to be the way the question of meaning is usually conceptualized in philosophy (see e.g. Hanfling, 1988; Klemke, 2000; McDermott, 1991).

Herein lies one of the potentials unveiled by distinguishing between the three facets of meaning. By separating significance from purpose and coherence, future research on meaning in life can more closely align itself with this rich philosophical tradition on meaning as an answer to the question of why should one live.

## Separating the three facets: coherence as descriptive, significance and purpose as evaluative

Having now reviewed all three facets of meaning by themselves, let's turn to the question, why they should be seen as separate. Beyond meaning *in life*, there is a more general stream of research looking at what *meaning* itself as a concept is all about. In the introduction to the recent volume about *The Psychology of Meaning* (Markman, Proulx, & Lindberg, 2013), the editors state that 'all accounts of meaning converge at *sense making*', which is about 'the ways that we *make sense* of ourselves and our environment' (Proulx, Markman, & Lindberg, 2013, p. 4; for other analyses of a consensual definition of meaning, see also Steger, 2009; Steger et al., 2006). Understanding what something means is about it becoming comprehensible. The opposite of this kind of understanding is a situation that is messy, chaotic, and lacking structure. Descartes famously described the feeling of *drowning* caused by lack of certainty: 'feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles around me so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim to the top' (Descartes, 1642, p. 80; quoted in Proulx et al., 2013, p. 5). These kinds of incomprehensible situations are experienced as noxious and unsettling for people, prompting efforts to reestablish more soothing feelings of comprehensibility (Heine et al., 2006; Park, 2010).

There is a crucial distinction between understanding something and evaluating something. In other words, we need to separate between *meaning as comprehensibility* and *meaning as significance* (Shmotkin & Shrira, 2012, p. 150). For example, in their study on coping with the loss of a family member, Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Larson (1998) argued that two different forms of meaning are most relevant to the recovery from adverse events: making sense of the event and finding benefit in the experience. Their research demonstrates that these two are different processes with different clinical outcomes. Meaning as comprehensibility is thus about a value-neutral process where we make sense of something, while meaning as significance is about evaluating something in order to find out whether it has positive or negative value. Although there is a bias in the clinical and research literature toward finding positive value, as in benefit-finding after adversity, negative value may be just as informative and vital.

This is the essential difference between coherence on the one hand and significance and purpose on the other hand. Coherence is value-neutral and descriptive whereas purpose and significance are inherently evaluative and normative (Heintzelman & King, 2014b, p. 154). Coherence is about describing the world as it appears to the individual, while significance and purpose aim to find value in the world in the present, as well as in the world that might arise from the pursuit of one's purpose. Human effort to find coherence is thus an attempt to create accurate mental models of the world to facilitate predictability and consistency. Human effort to find significance and purpose, in turn, is an attempt to find justification for one's actions, an enduring foundation for self-worth, and worthwhile pursuits and ways of living that extend into the future. This dualism is widely recognized within meaning in life literature (Heintzelman & King, 2014b; Reker & Wong, 2012; Steger, 2012b).

Another conceptual way to make this separation is to talk about *meaning* and *meaningfulness* (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). In this distinction meaning refers to coherence, the 'output of having made sense of something', while meaningfulness is about 'the amount of significance something holds for an individual' (Rosso et al., 2010, pp. 94–95). We can also clarify this distinction by borrowing from philosophy. Within philosophy, epistemology is the study of knowledge and justified belief, while ethics is the study of values and what is good and bad. Put into philosophical language, meaning as coherence is thus an *epistemic* notion, it is about what we know, whereas meaningfulness as significance and purpose is an *ethical* notion, it is about what we value in evaluative and motivational terms. This essential difference thus separates coherence on the one hand, and purpose and significance on the other hand.

## Separating significance in the present from purpose in the future

As demonstrated above, both significance and purpose are clearly value-laden concepts. However, they differ in other essential ways: significance is about finding value in life and purpose is about finding valuable goals. More generally put, significance is about evaluation, while

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purpose is about motivation. Thus, one is about evaluating one's life as a whole, including past, present, and the future, while the other is distinctively future-oriented: it is about evaluating the potential future value of one's life through sustained goals that give life direction and momentum.

The distinctiveness of purpose and significance is present in many theorizations of meaning in life. For example, George and Park (2013, p. 366) argue that: 'having goals to which one is committed and having a sense of direction (purpose) will likely generate a sense of significance and value in life.' As one is here a source for the other, they are separate. Similarly, Baumeister (1991) and Baumeister and Vohs (2002) sees purpose as one of the four *needs of meaning* rather than being about meaning in life itself, and Mcknight and Kashdan see purpose as a 'source of meaning' (2009, p. 242). For these writers, having purpose in life thus seems to lead to meaning and significance in life. For example, someone who finds life to be empty and worthless can draw inspiration from the impact they can make by pursuing a purpose. Purpose and significance are thus separate notions, although one is argued to be an important source for the other.

Further, significance is not predicated on the attainment of worthwhile goals. Rather, we assume that there are other ways to experience significance beyond goal pursuit. For example, research around *Personal Meaning Profile* (McDonald, Wong, & Gingras, 2012; Wong, 1998) has identified seven or so sources of meaning. While some of them, such as achievement seeking and self-transcendence can be readily connected with purpose, some others seem to be further removed from it. It is relatively easy to imagine why *fair treatment*, the feeling that one is treated fairly by others, could contribute to the feeling that one's life is significant. But it is harder to see how this would be connected to having or attaining worthwhile goals. As another example, when Lambert et al. (2010) asked participants to 'pick the one thing that makes life most meaningful for you' in an open-ended question, 68% of participants responded by mentioning their families in general or a specific family member. Although good relationships with the family could also be constructed as a goal, one can argue that spending time with one's family in the present moment might make our lives feel filled with value and significance whether or not it is a conscious goal of ours or not.

Empirically, the distinctiveness of purpose in life and significance in life is demonstrated by Morgan and Farsides (2009a, 2009b). Combining items from a large number of meaning measures they were able to discern through factor analysis five latent factors, of which the interesting ones for present investigation are purposeful life (tapping into purpose in life) and valued life (tapping into significance in life). In addition, when a number of predictors were regressed on these factors, the purposeful life factor was predicted by environmental mastery, altruism, personal growth, positive relationships, and spirituality, while the valued life factor was predicted by self-esteem, spirituality, and personal growth (Morgan & Farsides, 2009b). Although more empirical studies on the matter would be needed, this provides some preliminary evidence for treating purpose in life and significance in life not only conceptually but also empirically separate.

Thus, it can be argued that when we evaluate our lives as a whole to establish how valuable and worth living they are, we most probably draw from many sources. Having worthwhile goals in the future and having achieved some goals in the past most probably play a major role in this evaluation. In other words, purpose as a *future-oriented* goal can lend significance to the *present moment*. But there is no reason to believe that these are the only factors that we use in making this evaluation. Other factors, such as positive affect (King et al., 2006), good relationships (Lambert et al., 2013), or being treated fairly (McDonald et al., 2012) could also play a role in the evaluation of significance. Purpose in life is anchored in the future; purpose is about the goals ahead of us that give significance to our present actions. Significance is not in the same way trapped in certain form of temporality. We can find significance from our future goals, but we can find significance also from our past experiences and from the present moment.

## Toward unification: the meaning behind the three facets of meaning

Until this moment, we have spent our efforts on trying to separate the three facets of meaning from each other. This, however, raises the opposite question: If these three facets are as separate as suggested herein, why are they so often conflated and gathered under one label, meaning in life? To answer that question, we need to go to the root of what *meaning* means.

Meaning, as a word, comes from the Old High German word *meinen*, to have in mind (Klinger, 2012, p. 24). This already reveals that meaning is tied up with the unique capacity of human mind for reflective, linguistic thinking. Meaning is based in our mind's capacity to form mental representations about the world and develop connections between these representations. As Baumeister (1991, p. 15) defines it 'meaning is shared mental representations of possible relationship among things, events, and relationships.' When we ask what something means, we are trying to locate that something within our web of mental representations. Meaning is about mentally connecting things. This is true whether we ask about the meaning of a thing or the meaning of our life.

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Meaning is thus about life as interpreted by a being capable of reflective thinking. While the question whether animals can experience pleasure and happiness has been debated within science at least since Darwin (1872; see also McMillan, 2005), we are aware of no serious argument for animals experiencing a sense of meaning in life. Meaning, at least in its more developed forms, is thus exclusively human affair. In order to wrestle with the fundamental questions of meaning in life, one must be capable of looking at life through mental representations that can be created, selected, combined, and interchanged. Instead of merely *experiencing* the world, meaning requires that we *interpret* it.

This capability for reflectively interpreting one's life is what unites all three facets of meaning in life. Coherence, purpose, and significance concern different dimensions of experience, but they are all about a reflective approach to their respective dimensions. Thus, coherence is about not merely experiencing the world as it is, but about forming a coherent mental representation about that world, having a cognitive map of the world that makes sense out of our experiencing. Purpose is not merely about doing things, but about articulated and valued motivations toward aligned behavior. All animals are motivated to behave in certain ways, but 'without meaning, behavior is guided by impulse and instinct' (Baumeister, 1991, p. 18). Purpose thus makes possible intentional behavior: having goals and aspirational strivings in life that have been intentionally chosen and that can be expressed in language. Finally, significance is not merely about any kind of positive and negative feelings in life, but about the sense of value that arises when we evaluate our lives against some conceptual criteria. Instead of an automatic process where life experiences elicit certain emotions, sense of significance is dependent on how we reflect on our life in the context of our values, expectations, and standards, as well as how we conform to those criteria given our circumstances. The deep, abstract, conceptual work required to find coherence, purpose, and significance in life may be the most fundamentally human capability we have. The amorphous yet impactful mental representations we wield make it possible to reflect on one's cognitive representations about the world, to reflect on one's pursuits, and to reflect on the standards used in evaluating one's life.

Building on a previous definition (Steger, 2012a, p. 165), we thus define meaning in life as emerging 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. Making meaning is an integrative process that draws together various aspects of our understanding, experience, and valuation to form a cognitive grasp around fundamental reflective questions about life, such as who we are, what the world is like, and how do we fit in. More specifically, there are three basic facets of this search for meaning in life, corresponding to three different domains of human experience: coherent understanding (cognitive), worthwhile pursuing (motivational), and valuing living (evaluative). Meaning is about rising above the merely passive experiencing, to a reflective level that allows one to examine one's life as a whole, making sense of it, infusing direction into it, and finding value in it.

Given this background, an essential question to ask is whether there is enough unity behind the three facets of meaning that it makes sense also in the future to look at general meaning in life besides the three facets of it. As noted above, the different elements seem to have some background that they share. One could also argue that there could be a distinct 'feeling of meaning' that arises from all three elements. But this is essentially an empirical question that should be settled in the future by looking at some research clearly separating the three facets from each other and from general meaning in life, enabling an examination of the differences and similarities among them. Krause and Hayward (2014) provide some preliminary data, where they separate meaning into five facets – values, purpose, goals, past, and making sense – and show that the loadings of these factors on a higher order general meaning factor is quite high, and thus argue that there would be 'an overarching more abstract phenomenon representing an overall sense of meaning in life that can be measured globally' (p. 251). However, their analyses did not include a factor for significance and their purpose factor includes items like 'I am living fully' that have questionable content validity. Thus, we would need evidence more directly tapping the three factors identified in this article to be able to evaluate the value of an overarching meaning in life construct.

### *Three connections between the three facets of meaning*

We have attempted to make sense of the differences as well as commonalities among the three facets of meaning: coherence, purpose, and significance. In addition, it is important to look briefly into the ways in which these facets could be connected with each other. Here we are able to identify at least three potential connections between them, which can further serve to explain why they often have been treated as one phenomenon. However, the connections suggested here are at this moment mostly conceptual and speculative, and thus serve as suggestions for future empirical work.

First, it could be argued that making sense of our lives is a prerequisite for valuing our lives. In situations where our life doesn't seem to be making any sense, where it is chaotic and messy, it might be very hard to uphold a sense of life's worthiness. This is essentially

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what Socrates said when he argued that unexamined life is not worth living (Plato, 350 BCE, v. 38a). We need something to anchor our values upon, and when our lives feel incomprehensible, finding the things that make our lives worth living might be hard if not impossible. A person might feel that this kind of chaotic life is not worth living. In these situations, finding a new sense of comprehensibility and coherence for one's life probably would increase the sense of significance in one's life. So when lack of significance is caused by lack of coherence, finding coherence most probably will help one also to find some significance. Because significance is defined to refer especially to positive evaluations of life, a life not worth living lacks significance, even though some evaluation of it is being performed.

Coherence thus might be a necessary condition for significance, but it is not a sufficient condition. Not understanding one's life might make it valueless, but merely having a coherent life doesn't automatically make it worth living. As a real-life example, a famous Finnish music critic and journalist Seppo Heikinheimo decided to commit a suicide (the case is discussed e.g. in Donskis, 2011, p. 189). He discussed the matter with his friends and family, he even wrote an autobiography of his own life where he explained his reasons – and then he did it. Even though his autobiography revealed that he was able to make sense of the realities of his life with an admiringly clear eye, he still was unable to find enough value in it to continue living. Increasing coherence thus usually might lead to increasing significance, but there can also be situations where increased coherence is actually combined with decreased felt significance. In order to feel that our life is worth living, we thus need more than merely a sense of coherence.

Second, as already mentioned, purpose could be an important source of significance (e.g. George & Park, 2013, p. 366; Weinstein et al., 2012, p. 82). When we have some goal in the future that we value, it can render our present efforts and our present life valuable. When we feel that our lives lack value, finding a strong sense of purpose in life can serve as a powerful way of restoring a sense of significance to our lives. There are therefore many practical situations where significance and purpose are entangled together, situations where losing one's purpose leads to lack of significance and finding a new purpose leads to re-established sense of significance. These two are thus often closely related, but, as already discussed, there could be also other sources of significance in life, such as feeling closeness toward other people. Conversely, significance may give people a sustained motivation to retain and to keep working toward their purposes. From the perspective of self-efficacy, for example, people are more likely to pursue goals that they feel capable of achieving. People are more likely to pursue a purpose with their lives when they feel that their lives are valued and worthwhile.

Thirdly, coherence and purpose likely work together synergistically. As has been argued elsewhere, it is difficult to imagine the kind of overarching, self-organizing, sustained aspiration as a purpose becoming established in the absence of being able to make sense of one's life (Steger, 2009). At a basic level, a person must have some basis for deciding what would be an apt purpose, and thus cognitive coherence can direct the selection of goals (Reker & Wong, 2012, p. 434). After all, people consciously select, identify, and commit to their purposes. Even if we break a purpose down into subcomponents like intermediary goals, there is a fundamental requirement for some understanding of personal capacities and tastes, some conceptualization of things that need doing in the world, and some ideas about how to do them. One could thus argue that coherence creates the field from which people draw their purposes. Further, if purpose is to be an engine for well-being and positive outcomes in people's lives, there should be a good degree of match between who one is and the purpose one seeks to achieve (cf. self-concordant goal research; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999).

At the same time, it certainly could be argued that purpose is important for coherence as well. Finding a clear purpose can provide predictable structure to one's life. Purpose helps to decide what are the things that should be done and things that should not be done, things to pay attention to, and things to ignore. As Mcknight and Kashdan (2009, p. 248) note, 'purpose stimulates behavioral consistency.' Examples of the structure-giving capacity of purpose abound, from violent extremism to rigorous sobriety, dedication to political change, or selfless altruism. The consequences of committing to and pursuing a purpose should help people make sense of life not only because it provides predictability, structure, and consistency, but also because when people 'try on' a purpose, they likely learn something about themselves. People might very well adopt combatting climate change as a purpose, but if months go by and they are still driving their SUV to the nearest fast food joint every day and their eyes glaze over when they are exposed to news about unseasonal weather or receding glaciers, it ought to help them understand themselves better, at least to the extent that environmental advocacy is not their thing. From there, they may be better positioned to select a more concordant purpose.

These proposed potential connections between three facets of meaning serve as examples of how articulating and distinguishing among the three facets of meaning in life could represent a significant step forward for research on meaning in life. Despite a 50-year history within psychology, most empirical research on meaning

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in life has been conducted within the past two decades. Several scholars (e.g. Heintzelman & King, 2014a; Leontiev, 2013) have voiced the concern that the field still suffers from the lack of adequate and agreed-upon definition of its central concept, *meaning in life*. One way to seek clarity into this concept is to acknowledge that meaning actually involves at least three separate and more clearly defined facets: coherence, purpose, and significance.

### *Other proposed facets of meaning and suggestions for future research*

We have argued that the three proposed facets of meaning in life are the ones that have the most comprehensive theoretical backing in the current literature, but we should remain open to the possibility of there being other facets. Different researchers have separated meaning into different facets, for example, Krause and Hayward (2014) separate meaning in life into five first-order dimensions: having values, sense of purpose, striving toward goals, reconciling the past, and life making sense. Baumeister (1991), in turn, argues that the general need for meaning can be broken down into four needs for meaning: purpose as goals and fulfillments, values as justification for actions, efficacy as feeling that one can reach one's goals, and positive self-worth. However, as demonstrated in his empirical research (e.g. Stillman et al., 2009), he sees these four as antecedents that contribute toward the general sense of meaning in life, rather than being facets of this meaning itself. Similarly, we would see Krause and Hayward's (2014) dimensions of having values and reconciling the past as potentially important antecedents of meaning, not what meaning itself is about.

In their trichotomy of meaning discussed at the beginning of the article, Reker and Wong (1988, 2012) suggest that in addition to life making sense (what we label coherence) and pursuing of worthwhile goals (what we label purpose), there is also an affective component to meaning in life. They include into this affective component various feelings such as happiness, satisfaction, and fulfillment. It is not uncommon for other early meaning in life measures to include items about these feelings, along with energy, vitality, optimism, excitement, and interest (e.g. Battista & Almond, 1973; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Ryff, 1989). Such conflation of meaning measurement with other established constructs poses a serious problem to accurate conceptualization and assessment of meaning (e.g. Dyck, 1987; Steger et al., 2006). Being happy or satisfied is better understood as *one of the factors* a person might use when evaluating how meaningful one's life is, and accordingly it has been treated as a *source of* meaning rather than a *part of* meaning in many recent investigations (e.g. King et al., 2006). An affective component that is unique to meaning in life has not yet been proposed to our knowledge. However, if we shift the construal of this third dimension from an emotional dimension to an evaluative dimension, then the significance component of meaning in life would capture existential evaluations that one's life has value and worth – that it matters.

Morgan and Farsides (2009a), in their turn, gathered together a large number of items from existing MIL measures, and through a factor analysis arrived at five factors of meaning in life: exciting life, accomplished life, principled life (close to coherence as defined here), purposeful life (close to purpose as defined here), and valued life (close to significance as defined here). While the last three map well onto the present trichotomy and in fact provide the first potential measures for significance and coherence dimensions we are aware of (though with certain shortcomings), exciting life and accomplished life go beyond this trichotomy. As regards exciting life, we already stated our reasons above why we don't see happiness and excitement as inherent parts of meaningfulness but rather as potential sources of meaning for some. Similarly, we would see that a sense of accomplishment and achievement is a separate experience from the experience of meaning, but an experience that potentially increases our sense of meaning. So here again we would warn against confusing sources of meaning with the actual experience of meaning.

Further suggestion about a potential facet of meaning is provided by Leontiev (2006) who sees experience of involvement, understood as the feeling of authenticity and owning one's actions, as one central aspect of meaning. We agree that feeling autonomous and authentic about one's actions and one's way of living probably is important for human sense of meaning, but based on suggestions made by Weinstein et al. (2012), we would argue that such feeling of authenticity is better understood as one central source of meaning rather than a facet of meaning as such. In fact, both our own research (Martela, Ryan, & Steger, 2015), and research by others (e.g. Kernis & Goldman, 2006; McGregor & Little, 1998) have shown that authenticity and autonomy are positively correlated with meaning in life. We thus see authenticity as a centrally important source of meaning rather than a facet of meaning, but we are interested to see future research that aims to further clarify the role of authenticity and autonomy in meaning in life.

Another suggestion about a potential facet of meaning is provided by Schnell (2014). Echoing the present trichotomy, she argues that sense of meaning is based on an appraisal of one's life as coherent, directed, and significant. However, she also has a fourth dimension, belonging, defined as 'being part of something larger than the self' (Schnell, 2014, p. 178). This dimension is

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thus about integration of oneself into a larger whole. However, here again we would argue that sense of belonging and relatedness might be better understood as a centrally important source of meaning rather than a facet of meaning. In other words, belonging might increase one's sense of coherence, purpose, and significance. In fact, we have empirical research showing that relatedness indeed increases one's sense of purpose and significance (Martela et al., 2015), and a number of other researchers have looked at sense of belonging as an antecedent of meaning, showing that when we experience belonging, our sense of meaning increases (e.g. Lambert et al., 2013). On the opposite end of the spectrum, Williams and his colleagues have shown that sense of being ostracized leads to people experiencing their lives as less meaningful (see Williams, 2012; Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004).

It is also worth noting that Leontiev (2006, 2013) separates between meaning understood as belonging to the subjective reality, to the objective reality, or to the inter-subjective reality. He sees that in addition to the psychological aspect of looking into the subjective sense of meaning, we should also look at the inter-subjective and objective aspects of meaning. The present trichotomy of meaning, however, is limited to the subjective and psychological sense of meaning. Integrating this subjective understanding of three facets of meaning with the objective and inter-subjective conceptualizations of meaning is thus a task for future research.

Another potential avenue for future research is to look at the *search* of these three facets of meaning. The search for meaning is separate from the presence of meaning (Steger et al., 2006) and here we have concentrated on the experience and presence of coherence, purpose, and significance. There already exists a literature concentrating on the search for coherence dimension of meaning (Heine et al., 2006), but in the future it is important to examine whether there exists similar processes for the searching and attainment of purpose and significance in living.

Most importantly, what is needed next is empirical research that would establish and hone operationalizations of each of these three facets of meaning. This would make it possible to investigate their natures separately, to see how similar and dissimilar they actually are in terms of the factors influencing them and the psychological and behavioral outcomes that they influence. Research has shown, for example, that positive affect (Hicks et al., 2010; King et al., 2006), relatedness to other people (Hicks & King, 2009; Lambert et al., 2013; Stillman et al., 2009), true self-concept accessibility (Schlegel et al., 2009), and death-relevant thoughts (Vess, Routledge, Landau, & Arndt, 2009) all influence our judgments of meaning in life. However, as this research has operated with an undifferentiated conception of meaning in life, it becomes essential to ask which antecedents influence which of the three facets of meaning in life. Nascent research supports the hypothesis that different experiential aspects influence different facets of meaning differently (see George & Park, 2013; Heintzelman & King, 2014b), which is an early signal that the facets are distinct. However, whether facets have different antecedents, developmental trajectories, sensitivity to life events, responsiveness to intentional change efforts, or psychological and behavioral consequences remains largely uncharted territory. Above, we have outlined some potential relationships that could exist between the facets. Our suggestions could serve as testable research hypotheses for future empirical research.

## Conclusion

This article seeks to contribute to a new stage of meaning in life research by providing a conceptual analysis of the predominant dimensions of meaning. The pursuit of a clearer model of meaning represents an opportunity to gain theoretical precision, uncover new and more powerful research paradigms, and give birth to badly needed methods for fostering meaning in life. As practical and empirical investigation into meaning in life has burgeoned in recent years, the time seems ripe to work toward a greater degree of conceptual clarity and precision. The field needs to move beyond looking at meaning in life as an omnibus construct and instead to begin researching separately the three general facets that have been associated with it.

In order to live in the world as reflective beings, humans seem to need three things: they need to comprehend the world around them, they need to find direction for their actions, and they need to find worth in their lives. Distinguishing and examining each facet would ideally provide a more accurate model of this fundamentally important dimension of human condition. There already exists an empirical tradition examining the coherence aspect of meaning and the ways in which we make sense of our lives (Heine et al., 2006; Park, 2010). Initial steps also have been taken to begin researching purpose as a separate construct (George & Park, 2013; Kashdan & McKnight, 2013). Currently, however, there is a lack of empirical investigation explicitly focused on the third aspect of meaning in life, significance. This untapped potential represents a grand quest for psychology: to empirically investigate what makes life worth living.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes

1. A distinction has been made in the literature between experiencing meaning and searching for meaning (Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987; Steger et al., 2006). We do not feel that this distinction interferes with the three-dimensional model discussed here. Although we focus on the experiencing and thus the *presence* of coherence, purpose, and significance, it is also possible that people may *search* for coherence, purpose, and significance.
2. The other two dimensions are having the necessary resources to cope with the environment, and feeling that the challenges ahead are worthy of one's investment.
3. The term significance is sometimes used to refer to the sense people make or the interpretations people make regarding life. In the present paper, we refer to this sense-making dimension as coherence, and use significance to denote the quality of being of value.

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