

Chapter 6

Meaning as a Framework for Integrating Positive Psychology and the Psychology of Religiousness and Spirituality



Crystal L. Park and Daryl R. Van Tongeren

Psychological science often reflects the contemporary trends and currents of culture. Two prominent subfields within psychology—positive psychology (PP) and the psychology of religiousness and spirituality (PRS)—appear especially relevant at this historical and cultural inflection point. The search for a deeper sense of meaning and a more authentic life is a persistent theme in human nature (Bland, 2020). Because PP and PRS are substantially invested in understanding meaningful human experience (Kim-Prieto, 2014), each may hold answers to this prevailing search for meaning. PP aims to highlight and capitalize on the strengths of individuals and communities to promote well-being, and PRS provides a critical perspective on individuals as they seek meaning and transcendent connection. The need for increased collaboration between researchers in these subfields (to integrate their respective bodies of knowledge) is clear (see Davis et al., Chap. 1, this volume). Synergistic collaboration can propel both subfields forward, generate actionable advances in knowledge, and address pressing existential questions that could improve the human condition.

Unfortunately, to date, little collaborative research has brought the knowledge and perspectives of these two subfields together. In this chapter, we propose to apply a meaning systems framework to help integrate these subfields. Because both emphasize many meaning-relevant aspects in their theories and empirical work, meaning provides a unifying scaffolding. This chapter uses a global meaning framework to review the contemporary conceptual and empirical work on meaning in both areas, allowing us to identify convergences and divergences between the two subdisciplines, as well as promising opportunities for future cross-pollination.

C. L. Park (✉)

Department of Psychological Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

e-mail: crystal.park@uconn.edu

D. R. Van Tongeren

Department of Psychology, Hope College, Holland, MI, USA

e-mail: vantongeren@hope.edu

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Bringing PP and PRS Together: A Meaning-Focused Approach

By definition, PP focuses primarily on positive aspects of psychology (Schnitker et al., 2017), and from its founding, PP has been especially focused on applications, with the special emphasis on promoting well-being. PP's focus on the "positive" features of human functioning inherently narrows its areas of potential intersection with other fields. By comparison, PRS has generally been open to both positive and negative aspects of psychological phenomena. For example, Allport and his colleagues (Allport & Ross, 1967) sought to identify which aspects of religiousness promoted versus protected against prejudice. Taken together, these two subfields of psychology—PP and PRS—are quite distinct, yet they clearly overlap in many ways.

To bring them together, we consider these two subfields using the model of global meaning as a unifying framework. Meaning plays a central role in both PP and PRS (see Davis et al., Chap. 1, this volume), so it provides a natural bridge to integrate these complementary but largely separate subdisciplines. Meaning has been conceptualized as the constellation of an individuals' *general orienting systems*—the frameworks of knowledge and motivation through which people understand and navigate their lives (Park, 2010). Although there are undoubtedly cultural variations in the expression of orienting systems, meaning systems consist of three distinct aspects—beliefs, goals and values, and the subjective sense of meaning in life. *Global beliefs* are individuals' fundamental views of the world and other people and their identity in that world. *Global goals* are individuals' unique hierarchies of motives and values. The extent to which people feel their experiences are congruent with their global beliefs and goals gives rise to their *subjective sense of meaning in life* (see Park, 2010). In the sections below, we use this global meaning framework to compare and contrast the approaches of PP and PRS, including the topics, methods, and applications of their work.

We organize our chapter around three primary areas of overlap: content, methods, and applications. First, we discuss the meaning-related topics of study in both PP and PRS, explaining how each subfield approaches that area of inquiry and how each perspective is both similar and unique. Next, we discuss the various methods that PP and PRS researchers use to study meaning. Finally, we review applications of meaning-based research in PP and PRS, highlighting areas of convergence.

Major Meaning-Related Topics of Study in PP and PRS

Beliefs

PP tends to focus on people's beliefs about themselves and their (earthly) futures. In PP, two core beliefs that are often studied are optimism and growth mindset. Optimism refers to generalized positive expectancies (Scheier & Carver, 2018), and

it has been associated with a myriad of mental and physical health benefits, including lower depression, anxiety, and stress, as well as lower rates of cardiovascular disease and even mortality (for review, see Scheier & Carver, 2018). Growth mindset refers to the belief that individuals' abilities can be developed (versus the belief that these abilities are fixed; Yeager & Dweck 2020). Although initially focused on intellectual abilities, the study of growth- versus fixed-mindset beliefs has encompassed other domains, including health habits and interpersonal skills. Research has demonstrated generally favorable effects that stronger growth-mindset beliefs have on a wide range of academic outcomes and well-being indices (Yeager & Dweck, 2020).

Within PRS, conceptualizations of religiousness often highlight the importance of beliefs in differentiating religious from nonreligious individuals (and religious individuals who ascribe to different religions). PRS also frequently examines how people's religious beliefs affect various cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes. In PRS, studies of belief tend to focus on people's metaphysical beliefs (e.g., existence and nature of God or the afterlife; Jong et al., 2019) and beliefs about God's role in their daily lives (Wilt et al., 2017). Religious beliefs have been studied explicitly (e.g., whether people endorse belief in God) and implicitly (e.g., God-related IAT, intuitive mindset; Park & Carney, 2021). Some research has been conducted on religious beliefs about suffering and God's role in it (Hale-Smith et al., 2012). However, although beliefs are considered central to religiousness, they have been studied relatively seldomly (Park, 2020).

Cognitive Processing

Relative to cognitions (beliefs) themselves, cognitive processing has not been a large focus of PP research. PP has paid relatively little attention to how people process information. One relevant line of research within PP is the *broaden-and-build theory*, which avers that positive emotions can influence thinking processes (Frederickson, 2001). One aspect of this theory maintains that individuals' thought-action repertoires can be broadened through positive emotions (resulting, for example, from play or exploration). Through this broadening, individuals can discover novel and creative ideas, actions, and social ties, thereby building their tangible, social, psychological, and spiritual resources. These personal resources can serve as reserves on which individuals can later draw to enhance their coping and well-being (see Van Cappellen et al., Chap. 20, this volume).

Within PRS, the cognitive science of religion subfield has highlighted many aspects of cognitive processes and how religious meaning operates within these processes (White, 2021). For example, Pyysiäinen (2013) and Davis et al. (2021) have described how the two parallel processing systems—sometimes referred to as intuitive and reflective (or systems 1 and 2; Stanovich et al., 2014)—may support different types of religious and nonreligious thinking. Some research has suggested religious beliefs are positively associated with intuitive/irrational thinking and inversely associated with rational thinking (Pennycook et al., 2016).

Goals

Goals were an early focus of PP, and indeed they are a natural fit for that field, given PP's general future orientation. Positive psychologists have focused not only on the motivations and values involved in goal pursuit but also on the contents of those goals (e.g., materialistic vs. nonmaterialistic; Kasser, 2016). An early PP volume by Schmuck and Sheldon (2001) presented fundamental perspectives on the importance of goals within PP. Although goals remain a continued area of study in PP, especially as they relate to happiness and life meaning (Schnell, 2009), theories and empirical work on goals are not a central feature of contemporary PP.

PRS has had relatively little to say about life goals. Some research has explored the notion of spiritual strivings (spiritual goals that can provide meaning, significance, and agency), which are ultimately related to higher levels of emotional well-being (Schnitker & Emmons, 2013). For many, religious goals may be their primary or ultimate aim (e.g., to serve God, to live as a good and faithful person), and many goals can be made holy through sanctification (Mahoney et al., 2021). However, this topic has not been a major focus in PRS, and the limited work that has been done has generally not considered the roles of religious goals within a larger perspective of individuals' goals (Schnitker & Emmons, 2013). Some recent work has demonstrated that religious believers report deriving more meaning from their relationships and religiousness, whereas atheists have fewer and less conventional sources of meaning, even though relationships remain their primary source of meaning (Nelson et al., 2021).

Values

Values are the aspect of global meaning comprising abstract ideals or principles (e.g., freedom, helpfulness) that guide behavior (Maio et al., 2003). PP lacks a strong focus on a broad set of values; however, from the birth of PP, the related study of character strengths or virtues has been a central focus (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; see Ratchford et al., Chap. 4, this volume). Peterson and Seligman (2004) created a taxonomy of character strengths and virtues, along with an assessment tool (the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths) that is still widely used to measure them. However, although this approach is considered to be "values in action," the construct of values is not directly addressed in most research on character strengths.

Despite their pervasive presence in major world religions, values have received little attention in PRS research either. Although a few PRS studies have focused on values, these studies generally focus on specific values rather than a full complement such as that outlined by Schwartz (1994; Sandy et al., 2017). For example, prior PRS work has examined the role of religion in worldview conflict (Brandt et al., 2019), including how people ranging in religious fundamentalism are prejudiced toward dissimilar others (Brandt & Van Tongeren, 2017) and how religious

individuals defend their values when under threat (e.g., Van Tongeren et al., 2021a). Only recently has PRS examined the interplay between religion and values (Van Tongeren et al., 2021b), such as moral foundations (Van Tongeren et al., *in press*) and Schwartz's values (Schwadel et al., 2021).

PRS researchers focusing on values and virtues could make a greater impact by integrating this work within the broader framework of values elaborated elsewhere in psychology. In addition, both PP and PRS researchers might usefully profit from elaborating how central constructs such as happiness or transcendence relate to different value profiles. This line of research would be one way to tap into the cultural influences and differences of different groups, given that values are a central cultural influence on behavior (Miles, 2015).

Motivation

Within PP, approaches to motivation tend to stress individuals' inherent inclination towards growth and development; these models of growth are collectively termed *organismic theories*. Chief among current organismic motivational theories is self-determination theory, which avers that humans have three basic needs: autonomy (volition), relatedness (connecting to and feeling important to others), and competence (effectiveness and mastery; Ryan et al., 2008). Self-determination theory is concerned with the development and influence of intrinsic (inherently rewarding to the person) and extrinsic (reward derived by someone or something outside the person) sources of motivation, especially as those sources of motivation relate to meeting people's basic needs and guiding their decision-making (Maurer & Daukantaitė, 2020).

Another motivational construct prominent in PP is hope (see Chap. 23, this volume). Within PP, hope is a trait-like variable that refers to individuals' characteristic ways of thinking about their goals, specifically the motivation to move toward goals and to have actionable ways to achieve them, sometimes called "the will" and "the ways." Thus, within PP, hope describes individuals' sense of agency towards their goals (Snyder, 2002). Many studies have demonstrated favorable associations of hope with physical and mental health (Scioli et al., 2016).

In contrast to PP's broad examinations of motivation, the study of motivation within PRS tends to focus narrowly on people's orientations towards their religious life. That is, the primary motivations studied within PRS are intrinsic and extrinsic religiousness, as originated with Allport (Allport & Ross, 1967) and described above. Within PRS, intrinsic motivation regarding religiousness refers to the extent to which religion is the central motive for one's life, whereas extrinsic religious motivation refers to the extent to which one is religious for some ulterior motive, such as comfort or social integration. This distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is echoed in self-determination theory and is compatible with it. Although originally developed in the context of studying prejudice, intrinsic and extrinsic religious motivations have been shown to be related to many other

important domains, including interpersonal relationships and mental and physical health (see Park, 2021, for an overview).

Subjective Sense of Meaning in Life

Eudaimonia, the Aristotelian perspective on happiness or flourishing, is a core topic in PP. In Seligman's (2011) PERMA theory of well-being, one pillar of flourishing is the feeling that life has meaning and purpose. Many studies within PP have suggested that effectively using one's primary character strengths makes life feel more meaningful (Allan, 2015). PP studies have examined the extent to which people experience life as meaningful and the conditions that promote this sense of meaningfulness. Across diverse samples and measures, researchers have found that people generally feel their lives are "pretty meaningful" (Heintzelman & King, 2014, p. 561). Many predictors of this subjective sense of meaningfulness in life have been identified, including social relationships, religious faith, positive affect, and an environment that is predictable and structured (Heintzelman & King, 2014; Heintzelman et al., 2013).

In PRS, the subjective sense of meaning in life has received surprisingly little research attention (Park, 2013). PRS theories often hypothesize that religion provides a strong sense of meaning in the form of comprehensibility, purpose, and mattering (George & Park, 2017). Some studies have compared atheists and religious believers on (e.g., Nelson et al., 2021)—or examined associations of strength of different aspects of religiousness with (e.g., FioRito et al., 2021)—meaning in life. These studies have generally found positive relationships between religiousness and subjective sense of meaning.

PP and PRS: Convergence and Divergence of Major Meaning-Related Topics

This brief overview suggests that meaning is a central topic in both PP and PRS. Research on beliefs, cognitive processes, goals, values, motivations, and subjective sense of meaning in life have been studied by both fields for many years. Yet this work has seldom overlapped, even though these meaning-related topics provide a rich terrain for cross-pollination. PRS perspectives on optimism, for example, might provide insights into how beliefs in God's nature and involvement in the world lead to developing and maintaining optimism.

In addition, neither PP nor PRS has a strong contemporary focus on studying life goals. Thus, theory and research on life goals might be a useful place for developing research on meaning that integrates perspectives from PP and PRS (Schnitker & Emmons, 2013; see also Davis et al., Chap. 18, this volume). For example, theories

and constructs from PRS, such as specific religious beliefs, intrinsic and extrinsic religious motives, and sanctification processes, could be woven into studies of the construction and modification of goal hierarchies and the occurrence and resolution of goal violations in important life domains (Park, 2013). Another potential point of intersection for PP and PRS is the notion that the *depth* of a person's sources of meaning can range from "demoralizingly shallow to awesomely transcendent" (Reker & Wong, 1988; Steger, 2021, p. 1724). Hence, both PP and PRS researchers might focus on the depth or quality of sources of meaning as a way to integrate their respective approaches to meaning. Finally, we acknowledge that these intersections are embedded in particular cultural contexts, and future work could examine not only the specific cultural variations of these processes but also the degree to which some of these dimensions are universal or pancultural.

Methodological Approaches to Studying Meaning: Design and Method

Another potential area of convergence between PP and PRS is in their methods. Finding compatibility in their approaches to meaning-related constructs could build bridges between these fields. In this section, we examine methodological approaches to studying meaning in PP and PRS, along on two dimensions: design and data source (see also Tsang et al., Chap. 8, this volume).

Design The most common design implemented by both PP and PRS researchers is cross-sectional correlational (see Tsang et al., Chap. 8, this volume). Cross-sectional analyses of associations between constructs of interest are likely employed so often because of the ease by which such designs can be executed with convenience samples. Although such designs are often necessary first steps in a research program, they suffer from the inherent limitations of precluding temporal sequencing, and they are unable even to hint at causal explanations for observed relationships. Nonetheless, cross-sectional correlational approaches are frequently used in both subfields.

Fortunately, longitudinal designs are becoming more common in both PP and PRS. Such investigations can draw from existing datasets designed to answer other questions (e.g., Sibley & Bulbulia, 2012) or involve studies specifically conducted to examine meaning-focused questions over time (e.g., Abe, 2016). The benefit of such time-series designs is the ability to identify whether the degree of a particular construct at one time predicts the presence (and degree) of other constructs at future timepoints, suggesting a temporal ordering of the variables. Yet as with cross-sectional correlational designs, causal relationships cannot be established definitively, given the role of potential third variables or alternative explanations (cf. VanderWeele et al., 2020). Hence, the gold standard for many research questions is the experimental design.

In both PP and PRS, experimental designs are important for advancing understanding of the causal mechanisms involved in psychological processes. For example, within PRS, a great deal of studies have involved using social cognitive priming to activate constructs of interest experimentally (e.g., Van Tongeren et al., 2021a). Within PP, experimental work on meaning has been more limited and consists mostly of experiments examining small “mini-interventions” (e.g., writing a letter of gratitude to induce feelings of meaningfulness; Van Tongeren et al., 2016). Future experimental work may be particularly valuable in examining meaning-related constructs bridging the interests of PP and PRS.

Another research approach worth mentioning here is a meta-analytic review. Intended to provide an overview of extant research and a “state of the science” regarding a particular effect or relationship, meta-analyses depend in part on the amount of existing data available to inform the research question. Given the recency of PP relative to PRS, meta-analyses related to meaning appear more frequently on PRS-related topics, such as religious coping (e.g., Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005) and the association between religion and well-being (e.g., Jim et al., 2015; Lefevor et al., 2021). PP, founded much later than PRS, has a smaller corpus of work, resulting in fewer meta-analytic papers on meaning-related constructs (e.g., Fischer & Chalmers, 2008).

Data Sources A common (and relatively easy) data source is the *self-report survey*, in which participants provide responses to questions or items administered by the researchers. Such data can be qualitative (i.e., descriptive written or oral accounts), quantitative (i.e., numerical responses), or mixed methods (i.e., a combination of both qualitative and quantitative data). Qualitative data can be particularly powerful for revealing the depth of people’s ability to make meaning (e.g., Davis et al., 2019). Self-report surveys are quite common in both PP and PRS. Whereas the benefits of expediency, convenience, and scalability often impel researchers to rely on self-report sources of data collection, the obtained data may be biased or inaccurate. For those reasons, researchers might consider relying on *behavioral studies*, in which they directly examine participants’ behavior, including specific actions, physiological responses (e.g., cortisol, galvanic skin conductance, blood pressure, or heart rate variability), or more intensive objective observations (e.g., fMRI studies). Studies assessing easily observable behavioral indicators are common in both PP and PRS, whereas physiological observations are relatively rare in both.

For both PP and PRS, surveys and behavioral studies often take place in controlled environments via *laboratory studies*. However, PRS research also examines meaning-related constructs in *field studies*, such as examining how people experiencing illness or trauma make meaning (Park et al., 2008). Other field studies examine individuals in their daily lives, using such methods as *daily diary* (which typically assess participants once daily over the course of several days) and *experience sampling* methodologies (which signal participants to respond to prompts in the midst of their daily lives, usually multiple times per day for several days). Field studies have been more common in PP than PRS. Finally, considerations regarding

the particular cultural context within which data are sampled—and encouraging cross-cultural research—are important for catalyzing research at this nexus.

Applications of Meaning-Related Concepts

Since its founding, PP has embraced as its explicit mandate “to make life better for all people” (Seligman, 1999, p. 559), and a robust literature is available on interventions to promote strengths and flourishing. Unlike many psychological interventions focused on those in distress or at high risk of psychological difficulties, PP interventions are often conducted with the general population. Some of this work centers on promoting meaning in life, based on the assumption that enhanced meaning will promote happiness. PP interventions to enhance meaning have been shown to be modestly successful (e.g., Gander et al., 2016). In addition to attempting to bolster meaning, intervention trials have been conducted to increase hope (Rye et al., 2013). In addition, PP has generated a large literature on applying PP in the workplace, some of which involves the concept of “meaningful work” (Steger et al., 2012), which is associated with meaning in life and has been shown to buffer effects of work stress on meaning in life (Allan et al., 2016). Although PP interventions have been used extensively in schools, almost none of this work directly focuses on meaning (Chodkiewicz & Boyle, 2017; see King et al., Chap. 17, this volume).

In contrast to PP, PRS as a discipline has generally been oriented towards advancing scientific understanding rather than practical applications. Thus, relatively few PRS studies have directly attempted to apply theory or empirical work to intervene with general populations. Within specific clinical populations, however, PRS has generated substantial interest. For example, many religious/spiritual interventions have been studied for their efficacy in helping substance-abusing populations (Captari et al., Chap. 26, this volume). Similarly, some clinical religious/spiritual interventions have been studied among people with physical health problems (Gonçalves et al., 2017), but they rarely have focused directly on meaning. In the workplace, PRS researchers have studied vocational calling, the process of connecting one’s work with one’s deepest life meaning and religious roots (Dik & Alayan, Chap. 27, this volume).

By comparison, PP explicitly aims to improve people’s lives, and it is therefore quite application-oriented. Meaning-focused applications for healthy populations and those with identified challenges may be an obvious place for integrating these subfields (Rye et al., 2013). In particular, PP and PRS research could collaboratively develop and test the effectiveness of spiritually integrative, meaning-focused interventions. Such interventions could focus on not only meaning in life but also beliefs, cognitive processes, goals, values, and motivations. In other topic areas, some intervention studies have compared secular and spiritual versions (e.g., Wachholtz et al., 2017); this approach may work well in testing PP- and PRS-relevant interventions. Another application with clinical relevance is studying strengths and virtues. Cultivating and capitalizing on individuals’ strengths has been a focus of prevention

and intervention efforts (Jankowski et al., 2020). To date, these interventions have rarely integrated spirituality, but bringing spirituality into virtue-based models of change is a promising direction.

Overall Summary and Conclusions

Meaning has been a central feature of both PP and PRS, but little research has integrated these two subfields. We see several promising areas for bridging these two areas and promoting collaboration. First, the intersection of religious virtues or character strengths and their association with global meaning is a new frontier. To what degree do some people experience gratitude toward God or hold supernatural hope, and how might those emotions and beliefs affect the goals people set, their motivation to reach such goals, and the values that help sustain them along the way? Second, PP and PRS might naturally intersect in the domain of coping with stress and trauma: how do religious beliefs about the divine and the nature of suffering interact with individual differences in humility or optimism, especially in the process of metabolizing negative life experiences and potentially experiencing growth? What roles do PP constructs, such as courage and awe, play in how people make meaning during adversity? Third, we suspect that both subfields might leverage their common focus on transcending the self; PP often focuses on connections with others, whereas PRS focuses on connections with the divine or nature. How might these experiences of transcendence similarly affect global beliefs, goals, or values?

Finally, PP may be moving toward a “second wave” (Wong, 2011), in which it adopts a more balanced approach to human functioning by acknowledging both the “dark” and “light” side of human life. As it does, PRS may offer many insights. PRS is particularly attuned to existential questions and considerations, and work at the intersection of existential-PP and PRS seems particularly promising. We encourage researchers to integrate meaning across PP and PRS perspectives, using some of the sophisticated study designs and data sources described above, as well as using cutting-edge methods such as artificial intelligence approaches. PP and PRS are thriving scholarly domains. Given their conceptual composition and trajectories, we contend that they can profitably advance by leveraging their common focus on meaning. Collaborative endeavors can catalyze future work and help answer some of life’s more pressing questions.

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