Chapter 22
Attachment Orientations and Meaning in Life

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In recent years, attachment theory (e.g., Bowlby 1973, 1980, 1982, 1988), which was originally formulated to describe and explain infant-parent emotional bonding, has been applied, first, to the study of adolescent and adult romantic relationships and then to the study of individual-level psychological processes, such as emotion regulation, goal pursuit, identity formation, career development, and religiosity (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007a). To distinguish Bowlby's child-oriented attachment theory from our elaborated version of the theory, which has been supported by hundreds of studies of adolescents and adults, we use the term "adult attachment theory." In this chapter, we extend the theory to contribute to the field's understanding of individual differences in the experience of life's meaning – the central issue of the present volume. Our main claim is that attachment security – a felt sense, rooted in one's history of close relationships, that the world is generally safe, that other people are generally helpful when called upon, and that I, as a unique individual, am valuable and lovable, thanks to being valued and loved by others – provides a foundation for an authentic sense that life is coherent, rewarding, and meaningful. That is, attachment security encourages beliefs and feelings that contribute to life's meaning, such as feeling that one's life has a purpose and direction; that one has a stable, coherent identity; and that one's life is anchored in a philosophically or spiritually coherent framework.

We begin with a brief overview of attachment theory and of our theoretical model of the activation and functioning of what Bowlby (1973, 1982) called the attachment behavioral system (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007a). We then apply the model to individual differences in perceptions of life's meaning. We review research

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showing that, like other kinds of threats, the possibility that life has no meaning activates the attachment system, increasing one's desire for proximity to a trusted "attachment figure" as a way of reestablishing a sense of safety, security, and personal value. We also review studies showing that the availability of a loving and supportive external or internalized (remembered or imagined) attachment figure, and the resulting feeling of security, sustains one's sense that life has meaning. We also show how different attachment orientations (defined in terms of security, anxiety, and avoidance) shape psychological processes that augment or erode the sense of meaning – processes such as personal goal pursuit, identity formation, career development, and religious faith.

Attachment Theory: Basic Concepts

In his books on attachment theory, Bowlby (1973, 1980, 1982) proposed that human infants are born with a repertoire of *attachment behaviors* (e.g., vigilance, crying, clinging) "designed" by evolution to assure proximity to supportive others (*attachment figures*) in times of need. These psychological and behavioral responses increase the chances of being protected from physical and psychological threats, and they also encourage the development of coping skills related to emotion regulation, interpersonal communication, and healthy exploration of the physical and social environment. Although the attachment system is most essential to survival and well-being early in life, because of human infants' extreme immaturity and dependence on others, Bowlby (1988) claimed that it is active throughout life and is manifested in thoughts, emotions, and behaviors related to proximity- and support-seeking in the service of a fundamental sense of safety and security. This idea has been greatly elaborated by social-cognitive research (e.g., Mikulincer et al. 2002) showing that various kinds of threats to adults (dangers, troubles, disappointments) automatically activate mental representations of attachment figures, with cognitive and emotional effects that depend on the nature of these historically based memories and expectations.

Although all human beings are born with the capacity to seek proximity, support, and comfort from protective others in times of need, important individual differences arise in the context of relationships from birth on. According to Bowlby (1973), these individual differences are shaped by reactions of attachment figures to one's bids for support in times of need and from representing these reactions in *attachment working models* of self and others. When attachment figures are reliably available when needed, sensitive to one's attachment needs, and willing and able to respond warmly to one's bids for proximity and support, a person of any age feels more secure and self-efficacious and is more able to explore the physical and social environment curiously and enjoy life's many challenges and opportunities. However, if one's key attachment figures have not been reliably available and supportive, this sense of security is not attained, doubts about one's lovability and worries about others' motives and intentions are raised, and affect-regulation strategies other than healthy proximity-seeking are formed (*secondary attachment strategies* characterized by *avoidance* and *anxiety*).

In social-psychological studies of adolescents and adults, tests of attachment theory have focused on a person's *attachment orientation* or *style* – a systematic pattern of relational expectations, emotions, and behaviors conceptualized as psychological residue of each person's unique attachment history (Fraley and Shaver 2000). Beginning with Ainsworth et al.'s (1978) studies of infant attachment, and followed up in hundreds of adult attachment studies, researchers have found that attachment orientations can be measured along two orthogonal dimensions: attachment-related *avoidance* and *anxiety* (Brennan et al. 1998). Attachment-related *avoidance* is rooted in a person's distrust of relationship partners' goodwill, which causes him or her to maintain behavioral and emotional independence and distance from others. Attachment-related *anxiety* is based on self-doubt and worries that relationship partners will not be available in times of need. In contrast, people who score low on these two dimensions are said to be secure with respect to attachment or to have a secure attachment style. The two dimensions can be measured with reliable and valid self-report scales (e.g., Brennan et al. 1998) and are associated in theoretically predictable ways with relationship quality and affect-regulation strategies (see Mikulincer and Shaver 2007a, for a comprehensive review of hundreds of studies).

We have proposed that the two-dimensional space defined by attachment anxiety and avoidance is important for understanding the different strategies people use to deal with threats and stressors (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007a). Those who score low on these dimensions hold more positive beliefs about self and others, use more effective affect-regulation strategies, and enjoy higher levels of psychological well-being than people who score high on either avoidance or anxiety (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007a). Secure individuals generally appraise stressful events in less threatening terms (e.g., Mikulincer and Florian 1995), possess more optimistic expectations about being able to cope effectively (e.g., Berant et al. 2001), hold more favorable views of human nature (e.g., Collins and Read 1990), describe relationship partners in more positive terms (e.g., Feeney and Noller 1991), have more positive expectations regarding their partners' behavior (e.g., Baldwin et al. 1993, 1996), and report higher self-esteem (e.g., Mickelson et al. 1997). Secure people often cope effectively with stressful events by relying on others' support and adopting problem-focused strategies rather than less effective emotion-focused defenses, such as denial, suppression, or extreme, dysregulated expression of emotions combined with demands for help (e.g., Mikulincer and Florian 1998; Simpson et al. 1992). Secure individuals experience more frequent and prolonged bouts of positive affect, compared with insecure individuals, and are more resilient in times of stress (e.g., Berant et al. 2001; Mickelson et al. 1997).

People who score high on measures of either attachment anxiety or avoidance differ from their more secure peers in using less effective coping strategies, and they differ from each other in adopting different affect-regulation strategies that we, following Cassidy and Kobak (1988), call "hyperactivating" or "deactivating" (of their attachment behavioral system). Those who score high on attachment anxiety typically adopt *hyperactivating attachment strategies* – energetic attempts to achieve proximity, support, and love combined with a lack of confidence that these resources will be adequately provided and with feelings of intense sadness or anger when

what is wanted is in fact not provided. These reactions originate in relationships in which an attachment figure was sometimes responsive but not reliably so, placing the needy person on a partial reinforcement schedule that rewards emotional exaggeration and persistence in proximity-seeking because these strategies sometimes succeed (Ainsworth et al. 1978). Hyperactivation of the attachment system includes increased vigilance to threat-related cues and quick detection of real or imagined cues of attachment-figure inadequate availability. As a result, the attachment system is chronically activated, psychological pain related to attachment-figure unavailability is frequent, and doubts about the chances of achieving relief from anxiety and a reliable sense of security are heightened (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007a).

In contrast, people who score relatively high on attachment-related avoidance tend to adopt *attachment-system deactivating strategies*, manifested in distancing themselves from stimuli and occasions that activate the attachment system and preferring to handle distress alone. These strategies develop in relationships with attachment figures that disapprove of and punish frequent bids for closeness and open expressions of need (Ainsworth et al. 1978). They involve dismissal of threat- and attachment-related cues, suppression of threat- and attachment-related thoughts and emotions, and repression of threat- and attachment-related memories. These tendencies are reinforced by adopting a self-reliant stance that decreases dependence on others and discourages acknowledgment of personal faults, weaknesses, or needs.

Here, we wish to explore the possibility that attachment security and the different kinds of attachment insecurity color the ways in which people experience meaning or a lack of meaning in life.

Attachment Orientations and the Experience of Meaning

Because attachment security is associated with various kinds of positive affect (feeling valued by others, feeling competent in various domains), it is also likely to be associated with a sense of meaning in life, since positive affect seems to lead directly (perhaps not cognitively or rationally; King 2012) to meaning. Moreover, because attachment security contributes to the formation and maintenance of satisfying close relationships (see Mikulincer and Shaver 2007a, for a review), and because such relationships are important contributors to a sense of life's meaning (e.g., Baumeister 2005; Williams 2001), security should be positively related to meaning.

Unresponsive, unsupportive attachment figures and the insecurities they arouse can leave a person vulnerable to doubts and worries about life's meaning and pessimism about future developments and experiences. Moreover, attachment insecurities can interfere with meaning-making systems, such as a coherent framework of ambitions, ideals, and goals; the formation of a stable and positive self-identity; and the adoption of an encouraging, sustaining philosophy or spiritual perspective. Fortunately, there is substantial research support for this line of reasoning.

Concerns About Life's Meaning

Having a solid sense of coherence and meaning in life is crucial for emotional balance and psychological well-being (e.g., Steger and Frazier 2005; Updegraff et al. 2008), and people react defensively when their sense of meaning is threatened or shattered by life circumstances (e.g., Solomon et al. 1991). From an attachment perspective, we would expect threats to one's sense of meaning, like any other serious threat to one's welfare, to trigger a search for comfort, love, and reassurance from attachment figures. As a result, the availability of supportive attachment figures, in actuality or in one's mind (imagination or memory), and the resulting sense of attachment security, should contribute to a resilient sense of life's coherence, value, and meaning. In contrast, attachment insecurities are likely to leave a person vulnerable to threats of meaninglessness and in desperate need of ways of creating meaning.

The Threat of Meaninglessness and Attachment-System Activation

Although adult attachment research has not focused intensively on meaninglessness or on the effects of meaninglessness on attachment-system activation, we (Shaver and Mikulincer 2012) conducted a study to examine the influence of meaninglessness on proximity-seeking. In this study, Israeli undergraduates were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: high meaning, low meaning, and neutral control. Participants in the high-meaning and low-meaning conditions wrote a brief essay about how the statement "Human life is purposeful and meaningful" might be viewed as either true or untrue, respectively. Participants in the control condition wrote an essay on a neutral topic (shopping at a drugstore). Immediately after writing the essay, participants completed a self-report scale assessing their desire for honesty, spontaneity, and closeness in relationships. Those in the low-meaning condition reported a stronger desire for romantic intimacy than those in the high-meaning or the neutral control condition. There was not a significant difference between the latter two conditions. Thus, raising the possibility of life's meaninglessness led to an increased wish for closeness and intimacy. This preliminary finding needs to be followed up with studies that include behavioral or implicit psychological measures (of the kinds we have used in other attachment studies; Mikulincer and Shaver 2007a), not just self-report measures.

Attachment Orientations and the Perception of Meaning in Life

Adult attachment researchers have not yet examined whether people differing in attachment orientation also differ in their experience of meaning in life. However, there is good evidence that feelings of closeness and social support (which are aspects of the sense of attachment security) are associated with a heightened sense

of life's meaning (e.g., Hicks and King 2009; Steger et al. 2008). Similarly, Lambert et al. (2010) reported that perceived closeness to family members and support from them was associated with greater meaning in life among young adults, even when self-esteem, feelings of autonomy and competence, and social desirability were statistically controlled. Moreover, implicit priming of relational closeness increased the perception of life's meaning when participants were in a bad mood (Hicks and King 2009). In contrast, experimental manipulations of rejection, social exclusion, and loneliness (which are related to attachment anxiety and avoidance) reduce people's sense that life is meaningful (e.g., Hicks et al. 2010; Stillman et al. 2009; Williams 2007, 2012).

We (Mikulincer and Shaver 2005) conducted a preliminary study to examine the association between attachment insecurities and meaning in life. Participants who had previously completed a self-report attachment measure were primed with representations of either a security provider (we asked them to think about a supportive other) or a person who did not serve attachment functions. They then completed a self-report measure of the extent to which they perceived the world as understandable and life as "making sense" (Antonovsky 1987). Lower scores on attachment anxiety and avoidance (i.e., greater attachment security) were associated with higher levels of meaning and coherence in life. Moreover, as compared to neutral priming, security priming increased the sense of meaning and coherence even among dispositionally insecure participants, showing that their experiences of meaning can be improved.

Attachment Orientations and Meaning Systems: Sense of Purpose

Attachment orientations can also affect perceptions of life's meaning by contributing to other thoughts, beliefs, and feelings that add to or bolster the sense of meaning. One such belief concerns the purpose and direction of one's life – that is, believing that one has a stable, valued, and congruent set of ambitions and goals, combined with the belief that one is able to accomplish these goals. People often derive meaning from setting personal goals and striving to achieve them (Emmons 2003, 2005). These personal strivings provide structure, unity, and purpose to one's life (Baumeister 1991), especially when one experiences traumatic losses (e.g., Emmons et al. 1998).

Attachment insecurities have been shown to interfere with goal-setting, means-ends organization, and goal attainment. Anxiously attached individuals are unusually afraid of rejection, failure, and loss. As already mentioned, they suffer from self-doubts about their abilities and worth, and they easily succumb to pessimism and hopelessness about attaining important personal goals (see Mikulincer and Shaver 2007a, for a review). Held back by these self-defeating beliefs, anxious individuals focus on protecting themselves from real or imagined pain rather than striving toward growth-promotion goals. In the case of attachment-related avoidance, defenses against getting involved with other people or having to admit defeat in goal-pursuit

can cause a person to choose safe activities and interaction strategies that then lead to boredom (Tidwell et al. 1996), result in missed opportunities for personal growth and self-expansion, and constrict the sense of purpose and direction in life.

These theoretical ideas have received research support. First, several studies have shown that attachment security (with respect to parents, teachers, or a romantic partner) is associated with a stronger desire for challenge and mastery in achievement settings and weaker fear of failure and less frequent adoption of avoidance goals (e.g., Elliot and Reis 2003; Learner and Kruger 1997; Lopez 1997). Elliot and Reis (2003) also found that avoidant attachment was associated with a weaker need for achievement and less frequent adoption of mastery goals. It was also associated with downplaying the excitement involved in achievement activities and with disengaging prematurely from these activities when encountering even minor difficulties. Attachment anxiety was associated with greater fear of failure, exaggeration of achievement-related threats, and a tendency to avoid challenging goals.

Second, there is evidence that attachment insecurities bias the formation and organization of personal goals (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007b). Attachment anxiety is associated with pessimistic appraisal of goal pursuit (lower ratings of success and higher ratings of difficulty in goal pursuit) and relatively high inter-goal conflict (i.e., the extent to which being successful in one area of striving had a harmful effect on another striving). Avoidant attachment is associated with low commitment to goal pursuit and lower levels of abstraction (higher-level organization) in framing personal goals. Moreover, both forms of insecure attachment are associated with reduced goal integration (i.e., the extent to which two strivings were perceived as parts of a single broader purpose in life). In other words, both attachment anxiety and avoidance seem to prevent people from perceiving different goal strivings as coherently integrated into an overall sense of purpose and direction. (These associations between attachment dimensions and features of people's goal organization are not explained by other measured variables such as trait anxiety and self-esteem.)

Third, attachment insecurities can impair effective goal pursuit by restricting exploration, openness to new information, and the learning of new means-ends associations and stimulus-response contingencies. For example, avoidant people score lower on self-report measures of novelty seeking (e.g., Chotai et al. 2005), trait curiosity (Mikulincer 1997), and exploratory interest (Aspelmeier and Kerns 2003; Green and Campbell 2000), and they have more negative attitudes toward curiosity itself (Mikulincer 1997). Attachment-anxious people report fewer exploratory interests, exaggerate the potential threats involved in exploration (e.g., discovering painful things, jeopardizing relationships), feel less joy during exploration, and engage in exploratory activities for curiosity-irrelevant reasons, such as distracting oneself from distress or seeking others' love and approval. Similar findings have been obtained in observational studies assessing actual exploratory behavior (e.g., Aspelmeier and Kerns 2003).

Attachment insecurities are also associated with cognitive closure, dogmatic thinking, intolerance of ambiguity, and rejection of information that challenges the validity of one's beliefs (e.g., Green-Hennessy and Reis 1998; Mikulincer 1997). For example, Mikulincer (1997) and Green-Hennessy and Reis (1998) found that

attachment anxiety and avoidance were associated with the well-known "primacy effect" – the tendency to make judgments based on early information and to ignore later data. Mikulincer (1997) also found that attachment insecurities, either anxiety or avoidance, are associated with stereotype-based judgments – the tendency to judge a member of a group based on a generalized notion about the group rather than on exploration of specific information about the member. Based on these findings, Mikulincer and Arad (1999) examined attachment-style differences in revising knowledge about a relationship partner following behavior on the part of the partner that seemed inconsistent with prior conceptions. Compared to secure people, both anxious and avoidant people displayed fewer changes in their perception of their partner after being exposed to expectation-incongruent information about his or her behavior.

Fourth, there is preliminary evidence that attachment insecurities can impair goal pursuit by preventing effective task organization and self-regulation. We (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007a) found that anxious and avoidant people score lower on self-report scales measuring problem analysis, plan rehearsal, task concentration, task persistence, and behavioral reorganization, and they score higher on procrastination. Attachment anxiety, but not avoidance, is associated with higher scores on self-report measures of pessimistic rumination and difficulties in concentrating, goal prioritizing, and decision making, perhaps reflecting a tendency to devote time and attention to attachment-related worries. Beyond these correlational findings, Mikulincer and Shaver (2007a) also found that experimental priming with representations of attachment security (visualizing a supportive, caring relationship partner) leads people to concentrate harder and to be more persistent in reasoning tasks than the priming of neutral mental representations (visualizing a drugstore clerk). In contrast, an insecure attachment prime (visualizing a rejecting, unsupportive relationship partner) leads to lower task concentration and less persistence than the neutral priming.

Fifth, attachment insecurities can cause people to make poor decisions about goal disengagement. As explained earlier, avoidant individuals often react defensively to obstacles by disengaging prematurely from goal pursuit. In contrast, anxiously attached individuals may continue to pursue unattainable goals, perhaps because they learned years before to strive for love and reassurance in a relationship that they perceived as not adequately or reliably supportive. This often produces a chain of self-fulfilling prophecies and "Oh-woe-is-me" experiences in couple relationships (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007a). The payoff for this strategy, if there is one, is that it allows a person to continue to feel that he or she has suffered unduly and deserves greater sympathy and support.

In a series of studies, Jayson (2004) obtained evidence for these theoretical musings. Participants read about hypothetical scenarios in which they had invested money in a new anticancer drug. They were then told that development of the drug was not going well. They were given an amount of money and were asked to allocate it as they wished for further development of the questionable drug or creation of an alternative product. The amount they chose to invest in the as-yet-unsuccessful drug was interpreted as indicating continued commitment to the original investment.

Jayson also experimentally manipulated participants' expectations of success in further developing the questionable drug (low, high). He observed the expected inverse association between attachment-related avoidance and goal persistence: The higher a person's avoidance score, the less money he or she allocated to the troubled project. There was also some evidence concerning anxious individuals' typical difficulties: When expectations about continuing to develop the original drug were portrayed as favorable, attachment anxiety was not associated with goal disengagement. But when participants thought that the goal of successful development might be unattainable, attachment anxiety was associated with a paradoxical escalation in the amount of money allocated to the poor investment. They seemed to find it difficult to disengage from an unattainable goal.

In sum, these five lines of research highlight the problems that insecure people have with goal setting, goal commitment, organization of a goal hierarchy and goal-oriented activities, and pursuit and attainment of goals. These problems can raise serious doubts about one's life plans and life direction, making it less likely that life will be perceived as meaningful.

Attachment Orientations and Meaning Systems: Personal Identity

Another meaning system that can be affected by attachment orientation is self-identity – the set of personal qualities, traits, values, and beliefs that provides a person with an inner sense of sameness and continuity (Erikson 1968; Marcia 1980). In his lifespan theory of psychosocial development, Erikson (1968) considered the process of identity formation (and the overcoming of role confusion and identity diffusion) to be the central task of adolescence and young adulthood and a source of personal adjustment and subjective well-being. According to Marcia (1980), identity formation involves both exploration and commitment. Exploration, as used in this context, is an active quest for personal meaning that involves a search for information about alternative life styles, beliefs, and values. Commitment is based on integrating the different possibilities, deciding which fits better with one's unique personality, and implementing this decision in a variety of personal projects. As such, these two processes can optimally end in the formation of a unique self-identity that provides personal meaning to one's life (e.g., Hartung and Subich 2011; Hogg 2000; Sedikides and Gaertner 2001).

We suspect that attachment security facilitates the formation of a stable and coherent self-identity. As shown earlier, secure individuals feel confident when examining alternatives and exploring opportunities, and they generally have sufficient resources and abilities to organize new information and effectively pursue personal goals. They feel loved, valued, and accepted by others, even if they question familial or cultural worldviews and do not automatically incorporate these worldviews into their identity. Moreover, their positive self-regard, rooted in prior unconditional love from relationship partners, often beginning in childhood, confers upon secure individuals a strong sense of self-direction and autonomy. This psychological bedrock makes it

easier to commit to a chosen ideology, philosophy, role, career, or occupation without feeling shame, guilt, or remorse for having violated other people's expectations. In contrast, insecure people tend to experience problems in exploration generally and in the search for a personal identity in particular, and this can result in identity diffusion or foreclosure (i.e., early personal commitment to a certain identity that is achieved with little or no exploration for personal meaning).

In support of these hypotheses, several studies have shown that adolescents' secure attachment to parents is associated with higher scores on identity achievement and lower scores on identity diffusion (e.g., Schultheiss and Blustein 1994; Zimmermann and Becker-Stoll 2002). Self-reports of attachment security in romantic relationships have also been found to be associated with identity achievement (e.g., Hoegh and Burgeois 2002; although Schultheiss and Blustein 1994, found the beneficial effects of attachment security on identity achievement to be more pronounced among women than men).

Attachment orientation is also related to another component of identity – gender-role identity or one's basic sense of femininity or masculinity. According to Bem (1981), one important developmental task of adolescence is to explore femininity (expressiveness, interpersonal communion) and masculinity (agency, instrumentality) and to integrate them in a mature, flexible, and adaptive gender-role identity while resisting rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles that may be encouraged by family or culture. The successful resolution of this task often results in a unique, personalized mixture of femininity and masculinity – an androgynous gender-role identity that allows a person to engage flexibly in expressive or instrumental behavior when situationally appropriate. It seems possible that insecure individuals' cognitive closure and reliance on stereotypic thinking may favor endorsement of traditional gender roles, thereby discouraging exploration of less conventional ideologies and the development of psychological androgyny. In particular, we might expect anxious individuals' doubts about their self-efficacy and mastery to interfere with "masculine" agency and avoidant individuals' preference for interpersonal distance and their tendency to suppress emotions to interfere with "feminine," expressive qualities.

Indeed, research indicates that secure attachment to parents correlates with psychological androgyny in both adolescent boys and girls (e.g., Kenny and Gallagher 2002). Moreover, Shaver et al. (1996) found that people who were secure in romantic relationships scored higher on psychological androgyny than anxious or avoidant people. Other findings indicate that attachment anxiety is associated with lower scores on measures of masculinity, and avoidance is associated with lower scores on femininity (e.g., Alonso-Arbiol et al. 2002; Shaver et al. 1996). In addition, some researchers have found that insecure men are more likely than secure men to feel stressed by failing to live up to masculine ideals and to report stronger conflicts regarding the "feminine" trait of emotional expressiveness (e.g., Schwartz et al. 2004).

Attachment orientation has also been connected to another component of identity– career selection and commitment (Erikson 1968). These processes involve exploring one's skills, abilities, preferences, and external opportunities as well as committing oneself to specific career goals and plans (e.g., Super et al. 1996).

Effective resolution of these tasks results in effective, reality-attuned career plans and formulation of coherent career goals that are well integrated with an emerging sense of personal identity (Super et al. 1996). Research shows that secure attachment to parents is associated with more complete exploration of career alternatives and career-related skills (e.g., Felsman and Blustein 1999; Lee and Hughey 2001), a stronger sense of self-efficacy in career exploration (e.g., Ryan et al. 1996), more frequent engagement in thinking about and planning a career (e.g., Lee and Hughey 2001), and a reduced inclination to commit to a particular career without sufficient exploration (e.g., Scott and Church 2001). In addition, adolescents who are more securely attached to parents make more progress in committing to particular career goals (e.g., Felsman and Blustein 1999; Scott and Church 2001), report greater self-efficacy in career decision-making, and make more realistic career choices (e.g., O'Brien et al. 2000). Finally, attachment anxiety and avoidance in romantic relationships are associated with indecisiveness about a career path and reduced satisfaction with one's choice (e.g., Roney et al. 2004).

Most of these studies have been based on cross-sectional, correlational research designs and therefore do not reveal the direction of causality between attachment orientations and the formation of career-related identities. However, O'Brien et al. (2000) found that secure attachment to parents during adolescence contributed to greater self-efficacy in career decision-making and higher career aspirations 5 years later. Moreover, Roisman et al. (2000) found that attachment security in infancy uniquely predicted more complete career exploration and planning during adolescence.

Overall, it seems likely, based on both theory and the extant evidence, that attachment security facilitates various components of identity (e.g., gender roles, careers) and that attachment insecurity can interfere with a person's attaining a coherent personal identity, which may, in turn, make it more difficult to sustain a sense of meaning in life. Insecure individuals may ask themselves, "Who am I?", "Are my activities a reflection of my true self?", "Why I'm spending energy and time in this particular activity?" This kind of rumination almost certainly interferes with a sense that one's life has meaning, although the implied causal model has not yet been empirically tested.

Attachment Orientations and Meaning Systems: Philosophy and Faith

One of the most common and powerful meaning systems, present throughout recorded history, is religion (e.g., Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005). According to Hood et al. (2005), religions are well-suited to provide a powerful source of meaning in life, because all religions provide people with answers to questions about human nature, stories about the purposeful creation of the world, expectations about an afterlife, guidelines for selecting and pursuing goals, ways to distinguish good from evil, and rewards for proper behavior as well as severe punishments for bad

behavior. In addition, religions connect people with something greater than their own individual, biological existence, which can contribute to an ultimate sense of meaning in life.

Research confirms that religiousness is related to meaning in life (e.g., Steger and Frazier 2005; Tomer and Eliason 2000), with intrinsic spirituality being more strongly related than socially oriented, extrinsic religiousness (e.g., Francis and Hills 2008). Moreover, studies indicate that religiousness contributes specifically to maintenance and restoration of meaning during and after stressful life events (e.g., Pargament 1997).

An attachment perspective leads us to expect that security can contribute to more mature forms of religiousness. Secure individuals' cognitive openness should allow them to explore spiritual possibilities and engage in what Batson (1976) called a religious "quest" – an exploration of existential questions and the development of an autonomous, individualized faith that includes tolerance of the ambiguity, uncertainty, and confusion inherent in an open-minded quest. In addition, secure individuals' positive mental representations of others and their caring and compassionate attitudes toward others' suffering (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007a) may help them sustain the humanistic values (e.g., the Golden Rule) embodied in most world religions.

This does not mean that insecurely attached people have no religious experiences or religious beliefs. In fact, they sometimes attempt to compensate for their frustrating human attachment experiences by directing their unmet attachment needs to God (see Kirkpatrick's 2005, "compensation" hypothesis). However, whereas secure people's religiousness may result from exploratory, growth-oriented, self-expansion motives, insecure people's religiousness may include defensive efforts to overcome mundane frustrations and pains. Moreover, insecure people may project the insecurities and negative working models acquired in other attachment relationships onto God. In addition, cognitive closure motivated by insecurity may prevent a comfortable religious quest and interfere with the attainment of autonomous religiosity. Insecure people may be especially prone to dogmatic, fundamentalist beliefs, which portray God as an angry, sometimes arbitrary, judgmental figure who needs to be obeyed and placated lest he explode in violent rage.

In line with these ideas, studies have found that people who report greater attachment security to parents or romantic partners are more likely to report having a personal relationship with God ("I feel that I have a relationship with God") and to believe in a personal God ("God is a living, personal being who is interested and involved in human lives and affairs") (e.g., Granqvist 1998; Granqvist and Hagekull 2000; Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1992). In addition, attachment security has been associated with a more intrinsic (autonomous) religious orientation (e.g., Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990), greater commitment to religious beliefs and practices (e.g., Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990, 1992), and higher scores on a measure of mature spirituality (TenElshof and Furrow 2000).

With regard to the religiosity of insecurely attached adults, research has shown that attachment insecurities are associated with sudden religious conversions – i.e., increases in religiousness characterized by a sudden and intense personal experience

(see Granqvist and Kirkpatrick 2004, and Granqvist et al. 2010, for reviews of the literature). In fact, whereas people who were, or are, securely attached to parents report gradual changes in religiousness, the changes experienced by insecure people are more sudden and emotionally turbulent. In addition, secure people's increases in religiosity are characterized by themes of affiliation and correspondence with significant others' religious standards, such as becoming more religious in connection with close friendships with believers (e.g., Granqvist and Hagekull 2001). In contrast, insecure people's religious changes are characterized by themes of compensation, such as becoming more religious in response to problematic close relationships, personal crises, and mental or physical illness (e.g., Granqvist 2002; Granqvist and Hagekull 2001). Furthermore, whereas secure people are generally more religious if their parents were religious, insecure people are generally more religious if their parents displayed low levels of religiosity (e.g., Granqvist 1998). These findings imply that religiosity associated with attachment insecurities may be a defensive attempt to distance oneself from parents and compensate for insecurities and personal crises rather than identifying positively parents' values and beliefs.

Attachment-related differences have also been found in people's conceptions of God. More secure individuals are more likely to view God as a loving, approving, and caring figure (e.g., Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990, 1992), a finding that has been conceptually replicated using a less explicit measure of God images. Gurwitz (2004) found that whereas secure individuals reacted to subliminal exposure to the word "God" (as compared to a neutral word) with faster reactions to positive trait terms (e.g., loving, caring) in a lexical decision task, insecure individuals reacted faster to negative trait terms (e.g., rejecting, distant). Researchers have also found that people with less secure attachments in human relationships are more likely to have an insecure attachment to God (e.g., Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1992; McDonald et al. 2005; Rowatt and Kirkpatrick 2002).

Concluding Remarks

From a scientific perspective, life has no inherent meaning, except for whatever meaning is involved in biologically prepared motives and activities. Given that humans evolved, like other creatures, from earlier animal forms, there is no more inherent meaning in a human life than there is in the life of a lizard, dog, or monkey. But humans are notable for their symbolic abilities, their extreme sociality, and their awareness of eventual death (e.g., Baumeister 1991; Becker 1973; Solomon et al. 1991). Less complex animals have inherent goals and capacities, and they seem to live well and be "happy" enough while pursuing those goals and exercising those capacities, as long as they are not overly stressed (including by the loss of key relationship partners) or physically incapacitated.

In the human case, the possible goals are essentially infinite and the eventual loss of relationship partners and one's own life is guaranteed. Humans need to organize their personal goals in relation to the goals of others, and their goals include

maintaining a symbolic sense of internal coherence and social value. Given those conditions, social acceptance and familial scaffolding from the very beginning matter a great deal to a person's sense of coherence, competence, and value – and hence to his or her deep sense of meaning.

Attachment theory is, at present, the best and most evidence-based conception of how close relationships build a person's sense of coherence, safety, and value. Being secure, socially – and eventually within oneself, bolstered by positive social experiences – makes it easier to feel that life is meaningful and rewarding. It makes it easier to form healthy relationships and to strive coherently, and without debilitating doubts, for sensibly chosen goals. It makes it easier to have what Erikson (1993) called "basic trust" – in other people and in the universe more globally. Part of this basic trust, for religious individuals, is trust in a beneficent God. For secure people who are not religious, it may include trust that life is valuable and that the world is interesting, exciting, and challenging without a god.

"Meaning" is a complex construct, partaking of cognition, emotion, and motivation. Attachment research has established in detail how a person's beliefs, feelings, motives, and goals are affected by security and, in different ways, by the different forms of insecurity. Not surprisingly, therefore, the sense that life is meaningful, which is interwoven with other important beliefs and feelings, is partly a product of a person's attachment history.

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