ARENA OF IDEAS

Origins of the Psychology of Meaning—from Culture to Psychology

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Abstract

In the present work, an attempt is made to approach the cultural-psychological question of the human search for meaning. Different sub-areas of psychology are presented, which show a special relation to the psycho-hygienic conception of the experience of meaning. In this context, cultural and clinical psychology, developmental psychology, positive psychology and happiness research, industrial and organizational psychology, and the psychology of religion have stood out. It could be shown how different the inner-disciplinary perspectives on the underlying topic are, resulting in a rich conglomerate of historic, cultural-psychological, problem-oriented and future-oriented perspectives on an approach to the psychological examination of the question of meaning. It was also possible to show how the psychological theme of meaning inextricably links cultural and clinical psychology. From the analysis, it is clear how decisive the question of meaning is for the form of the present existence of cultural psychology. For the development of the cultural psychology of meaning, contemporary important authors are highlighted.

Keywords Meaning · Meaning-making · Sense · Sense-finding · Cultural psychology · Clinical psychology · Psychotherapy · Qualitative research · Critical life events

Part I: Introducing Psychological Concepts of Meaning

The question of meaning once started the snowball of science rolling. And so, it rolled from the basic question of the meaning of life in philosophy, to the most different disciplines, e.g., theology or biology. Finally, a comparatively young child of the history of the science of meaning emerged: psychology (Kanitscheider, 1995). Especially qualitatively researching psychological approaches focus on the study of meaning (Schnell, 2009a; Seligman, 2005, Valsiner, 2020). Particularly clinical and cultural psychology takes meaning and meaning-making processes of individuals into focus (Bruner, 1990; Straub, 2020; Valsiner, 2020). As will be shown in the following work, the question of sense or meaning is of particular interest for emergence of psychology in general and in particular

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in cultural- and clinical psychology. To cover the entirety of psychological theories of meaning-making in one paper seems impossible, which is why this paper is oriented towards some authors who have formulated summary thoughts and made significant contributions to the topic. Deliberately, we are dealing here with authors whose theories originate for the most part from the last decades, since they were able on the one hand to adapt older concepts to modern social contexts and on the other hand also knew how to expand them in a contemporary manner. In this context, Jochen Brandtstädter (2015), Bannik (2012), Steinebach et al. (2012), Tanja Schnell (2004, 2009a, b), Martin Seligman (1975, 2002), Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), Seligman et al. (2005), and Frankl (1971, 1979, 1981, 1990) are particularly noteworthy.

Originally, *sense in* Old High German comes from *sinnan* = "to strive," "to travel," "to go." In Indo-European, the origin is found in *sent* = "to go," "to travel," in the Latin verb *sentire* = "to feel," "to perceive" and in the corresponding noun *sensus* = "feeling," "sense," "opinion." In the etymology of the word, it becomes apparent how man, with the respective word constructions around "sense," tries to set a linguistic framework to create a construct, which is characterized as such but seems to be difficult to grasp. The etymological consideration is extremely insightful in that it illustrates the historical development of the respective terms and clarifies the cultural perception of the underlying constructs. Applied to itself, *etymology* comes from the commonly known Greek term *logos* for "word" and *etymos*, which in ancient Greek means something like "true," "genuine," or "real." Accordingly, etymology suggests what meaning is attached to words that may have acquired an alienated connotation through dialects or cultural historical development. As will become apparent in the context of this work, an etymological consideration is therefore significant for the explanation of some terms. To give a brief overview of the psychology of meaning and not to go beyond the scope, the present paper will present the most important fragments of the analysis of meaning. In the first section, some historically important definitions and paradigms are first introduced and contrasted, before the second section focuses on some outstanding psychological perspectives on *meaning crises*. Here, the focus is on potential meaning crises in development across the lifespan, dealing with meaning crises during critical life events, and *questions of meaning from the perspective of some psychotherapeutic approaches*. The third section will focus on psychological aspects of *meaning fulfillment*. The focus here will be on the fulfillment of meaning through the perception of transcendence and through the pursuit of a profession. Again and again, areas of application will be presented and contrasted to make the different psychological approaches and ways of dealing with meaning more tangible. In the fourth and last sections, the work will end with a reflective discussion and an outlook.

Psychology developed different concepts, partly complementary or in Kuhn's sense of paradigm shift (Kuhn & Vetter, 1976), building on each other, detaching and redefining each other, for a contribution to the question of psychic sense experience. Therefore, the following section will show how indispensable historical analysis is in order to gain a comprehensive view of the topic. Current paradigms of meaning research, shall be opened up by a historical reconstruction.

Paradigms of Meaning: on the Emergence of Meaning-Research

Better to be an optimist and a fool than a pessimist who is right
- Albert Einstein –

According to Brandtstädter (2015), *sense* is largely defined by three different dimensions: *Meaning*, *Goals*, and *Functions*. First of all, regarding the measurement of meaning: according to Brandtstädter (2015), this semantic content consists on the one hand of extensional references, which refer to concrete facts, and on the other hand of systemic relations, which represent network-like references, as well as structural connections and thus refer to other concepts. For example, the word "friend" gives rise to associations with loved ones, but our minds also give rise to relations with other concepts, such as relationship, trust, or helpfulness. Second, according to Brandtstädter (2015), meaning is defined by subjective goals for action. These purpose relations are derived from causal structures to which we give meaning. Brandtstädter characterizes this as the *pragmatic sensemaking* (Brandtstädter, 2015). With this definition, it is obvious to refer to Max Weber's (1969) concept of *subjectively meant meaning*, from which it can be deduced in this regard that the behavior, or the actions of a person can only be inferred through the meaning of the acting person behind it. This can be illustrated by the different judgments in jurisprudence in the case of a homicide. Is it a case of directed and instrumental use of force or is it a case of killing out of affect? The difference in sentences may be decades of imprisonment (e.g., §§ 211 III, 212, II, StGB—in German law). The third definition of sense according to Brandtstädter (2015) consists of its function within an effect structure, so-called *Singgestalten* (Brandtstädter, 2015, p. 141), which could be directly translated as *the gestalt of sense*. In contrast to the previous definitions, semantic and pragmatic reference are connected and tied to objects. These will be embedded in contexts of action and life, without which the Sinngestalt would lose its meaning. Exemplifying he calls the clock, which would lose its meaning in a coordinating and timeless context. In the sense of Gestalt psychology, an emergence arises through the subjective meaningfulness of the clock, which is more than the pragmatic sum of the parts of a clockwork and its meaning attribution in the concrete circumstance. A quality emerges through the watch: time. Meaning is therefore also defined by precisely this qualitative component. To understand this last definition, cultural contexts as well as subjective valuations must be included (Brandtstädter, 2015). According to Brandtstädter (2015), it is precisely this definition that is the starting point for the cultural psychological perspective on meaning, because the context just described is negotiated by the individual in an inner, dialogical self (Hermans, 2001). Although this is co-determined by a cultural-normative element, it is ultimately subjective. This perspective on the meaning of the agent, can best be contoured with the question of "why." To emphasize the importance of understanding this subjective perspective of meaning for the science of the psyche, he Brandstädter (2015) uses an allegory of Wittgenstein of a person struggling with the wind: A person's movements may seem strange if one does not know that he or she is fighting a storm (Brandtstädter, 2015). In summary, it can be stated here that the emergence of meaning has two origins: First, an intrinsic one, directed inward toward one's own psyche (which is most closely related to Latin etymology named in the introduction: *sentire* = "to feel," "to perceive"; *sensus* = "feeling," "sense," "opinion"). Second, an extrinsic one, outwardly directed and social (which is most likely to be associated with Indo-European and Old High German etymology: Old High German *sinnan* = "to strive," "to travel," "to go"; Indo-European: *sent* = "to go," "to travel"). Both make sense only in relation to each other. This insight can be historically linked to basic theories of cultural psychology, according to which the holistic experience of the individual's personality is constructed by an *I* and a *Me* (Mead, 1967), by the *I* and *It* (Freud, 1923), by a *For Itself* and *To Itself* (Sartre, 1943) which Jaan Valsiner (1998) calls *bounded indeterminacy*. For the psychological component of the possibility of finding meaning in life, on the one hand, the individual living environment plays a role, whereby the availability of

meaning-making resources is decisive (Brandstädter, 2015). On the other hand, certain personality traits can be defined, such as *optimism* or *accommodative flexibility* (Brandtstädter, 2015), which could be related to the personality dimensions of openness and extraversion.

Particular attention within psychology is paid to the latter dimension of influence. Whether in developmental psychology (Werner, 2011), clinical psychology (Bannik, 2012), positive psychology (Seligman, 2002), the psychology of religion (Grom, 2009), or industrial and organizational psychology (Steinebach et al., 2012)—in all of these subdisciplines, which will be discussed later in this paper, the question of the characteristics of personality that constitute the individual's sense of meaning in dealing with an event or stimulus plays a major role. Bannik (2012) stoically states in a chapter on sense-making and optimism, "It's not about what happens to you, but how you deal with it." (S. 58). Above all, expectancy, is a reliable predictor of behavior (Bannik, 2012). Optimistic people are more likely to attribute positive outcomes to internal and robust factors and more likely to see meaning in the circumstances under which their lives unfold. This psychological component of the possibility of finding meaning is—as far as this can be statistically measured—even significantly positively correlated with the person's sense of happiness (Seligman et al., 2005), which emphasizes the importance of optimism regarding finding personal meaning. People with personality factors such as extraversion, self-control, optimism and emotional stability are more likely to find meaning in life and are more satisfied and happier compared to others (Steinebach et al., 2012).

Another early paradigm of meaning research goes back to Viktor Frankl, the founder of meaning therapy also known as *logotherapy*. According to Frankl (1946), meaning is *orientation*. Accordingly, it is defined by orientation, respectively a focus on a specific value. Frankl (1981) distinguishes between two different orientation-forms: the *ontological* and the *existential* question of meaning. The ontological meaning asks for the reference of something, for the reason of everything that exists. Frankl characterizes it as the question of "The meaning of being." (Frankl, 1971, p. 17). The existential sense asks for the best possibility in a certain situation. This is limited by the abilities, powers, and circumstances of the person concerned at that time. This sense is de facto or naturally given and cannot be invented, like ontological sense, but only found (Petzold & Orth, 2005). Through this early interpretation of meaning, the definitions described further above become apparent in their etiology. Following Frankl (1971) further, tests on meaning crises and meaning experience are also currently being developed and further expanded. Schnell et al. (2009a) have been developing a test for some time that is based, among other things, on a vertical and horizontal dimension of sense experience. These dimensions are captured through a larger context that transcends natural laws (vertical dimension) and into a sense directed toward social behavior and the self (horizontal dimension) (Schnell, 2009a, b). Both dimensions are strongly reminiscent of Frankl's (1971) original dichotomy of meaning (ontological and existential).

The common thread running through all theses and paradigmatic extensions is the assumption that meaning is subject to a dichotomy into external and internal, micro, and macro, subject and object. In this respect, the theories resemble those of the question of the influence of disposition and environment in psychology and thereby also show how fundamental the question of meaning is for the development of contemporary psychology. Especially with the historically emerging paradigms of neuropsychology, the question of meaningful action arises in the context of materialistic reductionism, according to which our values and goals are ultimately due to neurophysiological causes (Brandtstädter, 2015). However, further comparative literature work would be needed in this regard.

Part II: Sense Finding and Meaning Crisis

It is assumed that finding meaning in human life and experience takes place incessantly. Many meaning researchers assume that psychological questions of meaning arise especially in times of upheavals and crises in the course of life (Bannik, 2012; Brandtstädter, 2015; Frankl, 1971). As already addressed in the "Part I: Introducing Psychological Concepts of Meaning" section, crises of meaning are an existential part of life and fundamental for finding meaning (Schnell, 2009a, b). In this section, not only the emergence of meaning crises but also especially the importance of dealing with those very crises and to look at them from a psychological perspective will be empathized.

Reflection: on the [Over-]Lifespan of Meaning

> Downward spiral or upward spiral. As I see it, that's your choice
> - Barbara Fredrickson –

The fact that the examination of the meaning of life cannot be divided into stages and even less generalized should not be questioned in the following. However, many studies show that over the lifespan, on average, there are especially three approximate points in time. These are caused by a change in the confrontation with the self and question the meaningfulness of life first directed to the future, then to the present and finally to the past. It will not surprise anyone that the first moment is during adolescence or adolescent. These are goals for future personal development (Brandtstädter, 2015) and "[…] finding one's own space of life and action." (Petzold & Orth, 2005). Brandtstädter dubs this "future meaning" (Brandtstädter, 2015, p. 151). As a second temporal cornerstone, the late midlife is mentioned, approximately between the 50th and 60th year of life (Petzold & Orth, 2005). The central factor here is the loss of values and habits that previously characterized life, such as the daily work routine or the educational function (Petzold & Orth, 2005). The result is a search for meaning focused on the present through the preservation of what has been achieved so far and the preservation of personally acquired values. The limitedness of one's own being and the decimation of one's own future become more and more conscious (Brandstädter, 2015). The feeling often arises that the previous reflection on one's own life no longer brings fulfillment, and an *existential vacuum* (Frankl, 1990) often sets in when there is no fruitful inner confrontation with the subjective meaning of life. Colloquially, this is known as a *midlife crisis* (Petzold & Orth, 2005). During the later stage of life, retrospective sources of meaning often gain importance and a reconsideration in the truest sense of the word occurs (Brandtstädter, 2015). In view of the transience of life, questions of meaning become particularly prominent here, which, if not addressed, can lead to disorders such as depression, insomnia, exaggerated anxiety, or even chronic pain, which are particularly common in old age (Petzold & Orth, 2005). Rusüming can be stated that the constant confrontation with one's own values, personal identification and contextuality are indispensable to help oneself to (make) sense. From the perspective of developmental psychology and positive psychology, a sharpened perception of the above-mentioned questions of meaning is therefore necessary, especially during these life phases of restructuring.

Meaningless and Meaningful: on Critical Life Events and Meaningfulness

> Once you have your why of life, you can get along with almost any how
> - Friedrich Nietzsche –

A loss of existence of meaning is often accompanied by a loss of existence of mental health. Viktor Frankl, who himself spent several years in concentration camps during the Nazi period, also developed a theory on this. Under the *Existential Vacuum* or *Existential Frustration*, he understands a state of the psyche that can develop under corresponding "meaningless" life circumstances and describes an inner emptiness or lack of value and indifference (Frankl, 1981). Martin Seligman (1975) also developed the theory of *learned helplessness,* through which he attempts to view depression as a crisis of meaning. According to Seligman, this is triggered by the affected person developing an expectation of no longer being able to control his or her actions, which results in motivational, cognitive and emotional deficits. Reappraisal of existence plays a central role after traumatic events. Why questions, such as *Why me?* and *Why did this happen to me?*, shape feelings and thoughts. Bannik (2012) describes the condition as "The incomprehensibility of the event and the hopeless search for meaning in the suffering or significance that has occurred, [leading] to the conviction for one's life that life is meaningless, cruel, random, and uncontrollable." (p. 148).

Regarding critical life events, the question of meaning does not only arise in psychopathology. In positive psychology, too, the question of individual potentials or resources for coping with aversive events arises again and again. Possible positive sides of the difficult situation want to be accentuated to prevent an "[…] exhaustion of the resources for action […]" (Brandtstädter, 2015, p. 149). Brandtstädter (2015) also describes this as "[…] *accommodative flexibility* […] [and] availability of meaning resources […]" (p. 149), which can be seen as an individual possibility to shape his or her life in a meaningful way. Resilience is also characterized, among other things, by dealing in an optimistic manner, with negative life events (Bannik, 2012). A central component of this is the inner reflection on the positive meaning of the event in question (Bannik, 2012). According to studies, experiences of meaninglessness and feelings of loss and helplessness can be better compensated if after a corresponding event, psychologically the search for something meaningful takes place. For example, Nolen-Hoeksema (2000) showed that when her clients were able to report meaning in their personal relationships after a loss or traumatic event, they experienced less long-term depression, anxiety, and stress than individuals who were unable to do so. Seligman et al. (2005) also provided evidence of this in an empirical study. In a control group design, they had the test subjects write down a life change that was significant to them and had a positive effect, which they were to associate with a specific person in their life. The persons conducting the experiment emphasized the subjective significance and the meaning that the respective event should have for the subjects. Afterwards, the study participants were asked to write down the event in 300 words and then to arrange an appointment with the previously associated person to read the short essay to him. What seems like a spontaneous and kind gesture surprisingly turned out to be a reliable predictor of later development in the subjects. The experimental group showed significantly less stress in everyday life, was less anxious and more self-confident than the control group. This shows how significant sense-making is in dealing with special and critical life events in a person's life.

Creating Meaning: on Psychotherapy and Meaningfulness

"If man finds a meaning, then (but only then) he is happy – on the one hand, because on the other hand, he is then capable of suffering."
- Viktor E. Frankl -

In this section, I would like to show how a variety of approaches to therapy have developed up to the present day as a result of dealing with the question of meaning. Here, I will deal with the three largest representatives, which deal with the question of meaning in an outstanding way: *Logotherapy, problem-centered- and solution-oriented psychotherapy*. The first and most influential of these three forms of therapy is *logotherapy* (from Greek *lógos* = "meaning," "content" and therapeúein = "to care," "to provide"). It goes back to the psychologist and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, who was strongly influenced in his approach to psychopathology by his experiences in the Second World War, which he had to make as a Jew in concentration camps, among other things. Originating around 1946, logotherapy is considered the third Viennese school of psychotherapy, along with Adler's individual psychology and Freud's psychoanalysis (Soucek, 1948). The existential striving for meaning is considered the central motivating force and basic requirement of human beings. Frankl contrasts the psychodynamics of Adler (*power*) and Freud (*desire*) with *meaning* (Frankl, 1981). Resilience represents the meaning of suffering for Frankl (1981), so the focus is attempted to be on dealing with challenges (Bannik, 2012). Frankl himself writes about this in 1979:

"The pessimist resembles a man who stands in front of a wall calendar and sees with fear and sadness how the calendar - from which he tears off one sheet each day - becomes more and more slender and slender; while a [hopeful] person, [...] resembles a man who puts the sheet [....] neatly and carefully to the rest, already torn off earlier, not without making a diary-like note on the back of the sheet and now, full of pride and joy, to remember [...] what there was everything 'lived' in his life. What is it even if this man noticed how he ages? Should he - could he therefore look with an envious heart at the youth of other people or with a wistful one at his own? What should he envy a young person for [...], perhaps for the possibilities [...], for his future? [...]' Thank you,' he will think to himself, 'I have instead realities - in my past; not only the reality of the works wrought, but also that of the love loved and also still that of the sufferings suffered'" (p. 149).

Logotherapy is applied in practice by supporting the search for meaning and the creation or construction of meaning through therapeutic conversation and the writing down of critical life events. The focus on the future is a significant part of the work. Together with the client, points of contact for new experiences of meaning are sought in order to find a way out of a seemingly hopeless situation (Brandtstädter, 2015).

The question of meaning also plays a central role in *problem-centered psychotherapy*, in which the client's strengths and resources are tried to be included in the therapy. The hope of the client wants to be strengthened by working towards a positive goal. Here, as in logotherapy, the future plays a major role. It is oriented to a meaningful ideal situation and in this way attempts to motivate a change in behavior. There should be a strong focus especially in moments of meaning and positive emotions and these should be given separate importance (Bannik, 2012).

Furthermore, the question of meaning is found in an outstanding way in *solution-oriented psychotherapy*. In this form of therapy, the focus is on the goal of the person

receiving therapy. As in problem-centered psychotherapy, this positive goal is worked toward (Bannik, 2012). King (2001) states that goal setting uses methods that seek to identify subjective meaning-making in relation to the life span. For example, the person receiving therapy is suggested to write down what one's life would look like in ten years if it turned out in the best way. When this has been written down in detail, the text is to be read through again and subsequently a goal or mission is to be worked out in order to achieve it. In the further course of therapy, an attempt is then made to work toward this meaningful goal. So, this initial methodological question is "In other words: What is the meaning in their lives [?]" (King, 2001, p. 798 ff).

Based on these three exemplary forms of psychotherapy, it becomes apparent to what extent the question of subjective meaning plays a role in psych-hygiene. Central themes such as *hope*, *optimism*, or *personal goals,* which are included in almost every form of psychotherapy to work toward an improved future, are obviously and inevitably linked to subjective meaning. Even if it is not dubbed as such, the crux of these issues, is always the attribution of meaning and significance to a given—whether the therapy is about other people, events, or personal circumstances. It can also be stated that so much attention has been paid to the question of meaning in psychopathology that it has even given rise to its own form of therapy and therapeutic school.

Part III: Meaning-Making

After the last chapter, which mainly dealt with *crises of meaning* and how to cope with them, I would like to focus on the perception of the *fulfillment of meaning in the* following section. With the discourse on meaning crises, the examination of meaning fulfillment has proven to be the cornerstone of psychological meaning research (Schnell & Becker, 2007). As will be shown, the latter in particular has moved more and more into the foreground of scientific debates in the past two decades.

Supersense: on Transcendence and Finding Meaning

> The condition in which a man performs something simple, everyday, can acquire transcendental character, and a prayer, which is nothing but a very worldly request, can be without transcendental character.
> - Karlfried Count Duerckheim -

As will be shown in this section, in the psychological discourse on meaning, the transcendental character of many meaning questions and answers deserves special attention. Man's striving to give meaning to life through an orientation toward a dimension transcending the individual self, ego-transcendent law and value, is found in almost all known cultures of the world (Martin & Oebel, 2007). In Maslow et al. (1970) sense, it is even a basic need of self-actualization and forms the top and final level of his pyramid of needs (Maslow, 1970).[1] Often the experience of transcendence in spiritual development in dealing with critical and existential life issues is linked to

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[1] Interestingly, it should be briefly noted here that Maslow (1970) did not add this last stage to his famous pyramid of needs until he was very old and shortly before his death, which exemplifies the reflection in old age mentioned in the "Part II: Sense Finding and Meaning Crisis" section.

the experience of a higher meaning. For example, as part of post-traumatic maturation, in which a new perspective on friendships and relationship or a changed philosophy of life, can be perceived through a new spiritual experience (Steinebach et al., 2012). As already briefly presented in the "Part I: Introducing Psychological Concepts of Meaning" section, self-transcendence is differentiated into two different dimensions in psychology. Tanja Schnell has dedicated her life's work to the question of meaning in psychology and distinguishes the dimensions: *Horizontal* and *Vertical Self-Transcendence* (2009b). Thinking in a vertical transcendence addresses questions of meaning to a higher instance (God) and is referred to the beyond. This transcendental experience of meaning can, of course, be found most clearly in conventional or explicit religiosity (Schnell, 2009a, b). Relative to contemporary times, however, the debate becomes particularly intriguing in those questions of meaning that arise from subjective thought in a horizontal, or inner-worldly, transcendence that tends to develop from social behavior and engagement with the self (Schnell, 2009a, b). Equivalently, then, horizontal transcendence could be described as relating to this world. We live in an everyday life full of technology and science with the help of which we try to explain the universe and nature. We live in a society where the human body and mind seem more and more demystified. We live in a world marked by Schiller's "de-godified nature" (1804) or Weber's "disenchantment of the world" (1969) and thus marked by a turning away from deities, an intellectualization, and a rationalization. According to Schnell (2009a, b), *implicit religiosity represents* the personalized religiosity of this present. Here, the transcendental search for meaning is directed less toward the afterlife than toward self-realization, a sense of "we" and constant reordering. Although life in private and at work is characterized by ritualized principles of order, flexibility and diversity in orientation and life practice are becoming increasingly important. Our experience has changed in that we (can) take responsibility for our own world view, which we construct through the abundance of information and knowledge we encounter. We do not so much easily adopt the beliefs of a denomination as we do the freedom to choose for our own individualized and personal transcendental form of belief. In summary, Schnell (2004) writes:

> "[Postmodern man] [...] draws meaning from the areas of responsibility, transcendence involvement, self-realization, or sense of we and well-being. He practices many personal rituals, including especially rituals of social engagement and rituals of reflection. He is open to transcendence experiences. He especially frequently experiences a sense of connectedness with everyone and everything, referred to here as a unity experience." (S.17)

Martin Seligman has also worked extensively on psychological components of meaning and transcendence. During his research in positive psychology, he found six categories of character strengths—one of which is *transcendence*. He describes it, as the ability to recognize values that are meaningful and unify the universe (Seligman, 2002). In everyday life, this ability is expressed through the following characteristics: being able to enjoy the specifics of life, showing gratitude and making time for it, experiencing hope and optimism, being humorous, and believing in spirituality for a higher purpose in life. He postulates that focusing on content of transcendence: self-confidence, motivation, coping strategies, and satisfaction, are strengthened by finding meaning (Seligman, 2002). In addition, the science of happiness research has focused extensively on meaning in life. In meta-studies that incorporate quantitative and qualitative research, it is evident that in addition to key predictors of happiness—such as partnership, friendship, helpfulness, or

frugality—religiosity and the experience of meaning through transcendence also play a major role (Steinebach et al., 2012).

Through Seligman (2002) and Steinebach et al. (2012), it can be summarized which far-reaching importance transcendence in connection with the question of the meaning of life has for positive psychology. This also points to the importance that spirituality and self-transcendence have (again) for people, although fewer and fewer people profess a religious denomination (Antes, 2013). In conclusion, this finding can also be linked to Schnell's (2009a, b) theory of implicit religiosity, according to which people's contemporary need for transcendence and spirituality is increasingly articulated in an implicit and person-centered religiosity. According to Schnell (2004), this can be captured by finding out "how meaningful this person perceives his or her life to be, and which life meanings contribute to this meaningfulness and to what extent." (S.6). Although the search for meaning today takes place, among other things, in another form of transcendence, it is nevertheless—or precisely because of this—all the more interesting for psychology and—as described in the introduction—the transcendental character of many questions and answers to meaning should be emphasized here. Summing up, it can also be stated that especially trauma help (Steinebach et al., 2012), positive psychology (Seligman, 2002) and psychology of religion (Grom, 2009) deal with the psychological experience of meaning through transcendence.

Finding Meaning in Work

> If you want to build a ship, don't drum up men to get wood, assign tasks and divide up the work, but teach them to long for the vast, endless sea.
> - Antoine de Saint-Exupéry—

A treatise on psychologically relevant aspects of the subjective experience of meaning would be nothing—however broken down—without considering the meaning that people live every day in work. According to Bannik (2012), for very many people, occupational work is one of the most significant sources of meaning in life. People feel called to do something when they see meaning in a job. Experiencing personal value for society, feelings of success, recognition, application of acquired skills, self-worth and self-responsibility are significant components (Bannik, 2012). In industrial and organizational psychology, the psychology of meaning is already a fundamental component (Kauffeld & Sauer, 2014). Turner et al. (2005), one of the leading occupational psychologists from Canada, postulates in his well-known *Job Characteristics Model* three conditions that he believes are central to motivation at work. The first and most significant of these is that the working person experiences his or her job as meaningful. Steinebach et al. (2012) also speaks of "three paths to happiness" (p. 198) for a job to become a vocation: Pleasure, Engagement, and Meaning-Experience. However, this meaningful experience of a profession does not arise from the achievement of career goals, which often even show exactly the opposite effects. After reaching career goals there is occasionally a loss of meaning, a so-called *topping-out*, because the working person has constructed the achievement of the career goal, as the meaning of their work, but this meaning then falls away due to career success (Brandtstädter, 2015). Rather, meaning is found in the job by being oriented to goals such as: Responsibility, Caring, and Courtesy, which would not be definitively achieved through "[…] a sequence of action steps […] [and] do not determine a specific outcome of action, but rather a particular form of action or life. […] Such open goals can become permanent orientations of the personal conduct of life—thus, at the same time, sources of meaning that do not dry up." (Brandtstäder, 2015, p. 144). Unfortunately, within many employment relationships, individual orientation toward such vocational goals cannot come

to free development because the work environment does not allow it (Brandtstädter, 2015). A central principle of our rationalized society is efficiency, through which action, production, and goal processes want to be standardized as much as possible in order to thus save effort, costs, and time (Bogner, 2012). Due to the resulting rule-governed system, the working person often finds himself in such a fragmented course of action that it becomes difficult to understand the work in a superordinate context of action. This makes orientation to individual or open goals infinitely more difficult (Brandtstädter, 2015). At the center of the profession should be the participation of the working person and should be obviously emphasized. Focused on a goal in the vision, the person finds meaning at work (Steinbach et al., 2012). In order not to paint too dystopian a picture of today's working conditions in the sense of Karl Marx (1996) of *alienated work*, it is still worth referring here to the quite already extensive practical application of the findings of meaning research in work and organizational psychology. Especially in the field of career counseling, leadership and coaching, techniques and methods of happiness and meaning research are often used to increase the subjective sense of meaning. Mindfulness exercises, feedback and reflection rounds, role and value constellations, etc. have become an indispensable part of the work process and corporate culture in many companies. The personalities of workers and the structural insertion in organizations play an increasing role and ultimately contribute to an increase in the subjective experience of meaning (Steinebach et al., 2012). Creusen and Müller-Seitz (2010) go so far that they see the first and foremost virtue of an organization in the creation of meaning for its employees.

It can therefore be stated that psychological work and organizational research focuses in many respects on increasing the sense of meaning in people's jobs. The question of whether the motivation for this is fed by a corporate need to increase efficiency through 'happier' working people or by a humanistic need for employees who feel called can ultimately only be answered individually and would lead too far at this point.

Discussion

As noted in previous sections, meaning is often used synonymously with significance (Bannik, 2012; Brandtstädter, 2015; Frankl, 1971). In neuroses, stress disorders, or psychoses, people often fundamentally question the meaning of their lives. But also in everyday circumstances: at work, in the choice of subjects or branches of education, in the process of aging, in a relationship or even just in relation to material things—we daily ask ourselves the questions: *Does this make sense? Doesn't it make no sense? Does it make sense any longer?* Especially in significant, almost hopeless situations, but also seemingly banal and everyday decisions, all people ask themselves these questions in one way or another. But is the conscious or unconscious decision that is finally made brought about by oneself? It seems obvious how cultural psychologically co-constructed answers to the question of meaning are expressed in the ideas of a good life, positive development or successful aging. A negative example of this would be *ageism*, a culturally constructed sense of age in the Western world. Accordingly, older people are increasingly connoted with infantility, neediness, and inability to work (Chrisler et al., 2016; Nelson, 2005). After a certain age, for example, people are often not hired or are treated as if they can contribute less to society. However, meta-studies on work behavior showed that stereotypes such as less performance, motivation, or productivity of older employees have little evidence (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). This culturally specific construction of age, of course, often conflicts with individual life plans, resulting in

a loss of meaning in everyday life for those affected. Also, in old age, experience of meaning often takes place in a work relationship (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). In conclusion, it can be said that too often cultural norms or social expectations, move people away from answering the questions of meaning in everyday life. Often people do not pay attention to the meaning they themselves (want to) find in things, because they neglect their subjectively lived meaning in favor of an external one. Far too often, our practice of action is guided by habituated and incorporated knowledge of action and orientation, and our subjectively lived meaning is forgotten. But it is this that gives a sense of meaning in life and it is constructed by the meaning that is attached to things. This sense is oriented to our inner value attitude—exactly this meaning attribution and the way in which a person wants to live. This is set against everything perceived, experienced and learned. How unconsciously neglectful this often takes place, however, is only noticed from time to time. Mostly, when the underlying entity, e.g., a person, training position or job is no longer available. Therefore, I believe that for significant decisions but also for everyday "banalities," we should ask more often: *What happens when I no longer have it?…* In this way, the subjective meaning, our *subjectively lived meaning,* could become more conscious and everyone could decide more meaningfully, to ultimately increase his or her well-being.

Another concern of this work was to show that in the psychology of the past decades, the processing strategies of meaning crises or critical life events were too much in the foreground. University psychology, especially in teaching, was still too often (only) concerned with the question of what "goes wrong" in people's lives. The treatment and prevention of psychopathologies, as part of the teaching of mental hygiene, is an indisputably significant part of the study of the psyche of man and his balanced life of the soul. The achievements are enormous, so that in the meantime many mental ailments are treatable or even curable and medications and predispositions for certain mental illnesses have been discovered (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Colloquially, then, it could be said that what psychology and psychiatry have managed to do is make unhappy people less unhappy. Ultimately, however, the science of the psyche dealt "only" with the mental well-being of a very small deviant segment of our society. Anomalies statistically move in the percentile ranks outside the so-called *three standard deviations around the mean norm*, which should put the percentage of mental disorders in a population at about 5% (Raschke, 1967). However, psychology has been concerned about the mental condition of the remaining "average" population (95%) only since the last years of the twentieth century (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Until then, scientific psychology had failed to consider how to make people (even) happier in everyday life, which are not psychopathologized. Perhaps "neglected" is a very harsh word in this context. It seems understandable that the science of the human psyche was initially concerned with the major abnormalities or anomalies of its subject. In the meantime, this field has now been explored in many respects and further fields can be devoted to it. Precisely because there cannot be a single one of these "average" (95%) lives without crises, upheavals or difficult psychological conflicts, I feel it is a significant task to devote attention to them. This attitude should not have a helpless appeal character or be understood as a focus extension to the previous psychohygiene, since it is precisely those crises that make life worth living, bring progress and create *meaning*. For this reason, science could be more concerned with an exploration of the productive, progressive and profitable handling of those everyday crises. Following the lead of Nancy Etcoff (2000), Seligman and Csikszentmihayli (2000), and Martin Seligman (2002), it would be significant to have a broader focus on expanding the diagnostic manual of strengths, happiness, and meaning. This is not to say that less attention should be given to

previous research on the psychopathological. The future should represent an equal weighting of the two perspectives in research, study, and teaching.

Furthermore, in the "Part III: Meaning-Making" section shows how inescapable the connection between finding meaning and transcendental experience is. Almost all people seek spirituality or transcendence to experience meaning in life. Schnell (2004) writes: "Despite all the expectations of modernity, we live in a time that Jürgen Habermas calls post-secular. People are in search of meaning and personally meaningful religiosity—and are leaving the churches." (p.3). Building on this, Schnell (2009a, b) argues that there is a shift from *explicit religiosity* (belief in higher power, ideas of the afterlife) to *implicit religiosity* (self-realization, sense of we, personalization of worldview). Although to many theologians the word "religiosity" may seem misplaced in the latter construct, it is worth mentioning here insofar as it points to the spiritual character of emergent experience in the implicit religiosity of many people. Faith and spirituality in Christian Western countries are experiencing a renaissance, so to speak, in that they are once again and increasingly gaining expression in an unconditional form. Here, the focus is less on thoughts of a deity, a higher and judging authority, or paradisiacal ideas. Rather, it is a conglomerate of the belief in self-determination and co-determination, self-realization, harmony with nature and metaphysics. It cannot be ruled out that the latter is accompanied in most people by an equally intense experience of transcendence and is perceived as equally supersensible or supernatural as explicit religiosity. The rise of the yoga cult or the increasing recognition of meditation in Western societies is just one example. Further evidence can be found in the popular literature of our time. If one passes a gas station or goes into an ordinary bookstore, one is primarily served with novels that spread an almost religious emanation of mysticism, magic and magical tales. The sales figures of books such as *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1997), *Sakrileg—The Da Vinci Code* (Brown, 2003), *Kite Runner* (Hosseini, 2003) or *Game of Thrones* (Martin, 1997) are exemplary of this. Whereas in the twentieth century more realistic adventurers, such as *Winnetou* (May, 1875), Narziß und *Goldmund* (Hesse, 1930), or *Jay Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925) were the model for readers, today it is increasingly heroic characters with supernatural abilities who have to save a world that has gone off the rails. Modern religiosity, then, does not see itself becoming obsolete in its support of people's search for meaning, but is experiencing a shift from the explicit-ecclesiastical to a personalized-worldly and more implicit context.

At the end of this fragmentary analysis of meaning, it should be noted that there are some significant limitations of the work. First, an extremely exciting extension would be to explore the extent to which the question of meaning is answered from the perspective of contemporary neuroscience. If our values and goals, which are constructed through intentional and extensional references, as shown in the "Part I: Introducing Psychological Concepts of Meaning" section, are ultimately due to minute biochemical reactions in our cortex, the question of meaning is posed in an expanded, entirely new light. Furthermore, as a limit of this work, the culture-specificity of the theses and arguments must be clearly attached. Alone the emergence of the concept of meaning is characterized by an individualistic worldview and developed first from a Central European and later American anthropocentrism. The cultural psychological development of meaning across the lifespan, meaning-inclusive clinical psychotherapy approaches, and work contexts are also strongly influenced by a Western context of life. Particularly culturally specific, of course, is the engagement with transcendence, which borrows from a Christian worldview. For these

reasons, it is explicitly pointed out at this last point that the expressed theses and theories exclusively describe a small cultural circle and have no global generalization potential.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval The ethics commission of Sigmund Freud University (guidelines of the Austrian Agency for Research Integrity (OeAWI—https://oeawi.at/en/).

Informed Consent An informed consent of participation with all rights was signed by all participating persons and institutions. This provided detailed information about the research project and publication circumstances. All participating persons also signed and consented that the survey may be carried out and the research published.

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