

THE RELEVANCE OF THE MEANING IN LIFE QUESTIONNAIRE TO THERAPEUTIC PRACTICE: A LOOK AT THE INITIAL EVIDENCE

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Since the seminal inspiration of Frankl,¹⁰ practitioners and scholars have examined the role of perceiving meaning and purpose in one's life in how people suffer from and surmount psychological difficulties. Logotherapy in particular has maintained a steadfast focus on helping clients discover their own sense of meaning and purpose in life, seeking to buttress clients' senses of who they are, how they wish to interpret their distressing circumstances, and what they want to become in their unfolding future. Logotherapy's focus is on the importance of perceived meaning and purpose in life and how these constructs enhance well-being.²³



Consistent with, but progressing in a somewhat different venue, researchers increasingly have focused on meaning in life as a normative marker of human functioning. This broad research endeavor has unfolded in professional journals that speak to people studying death, coping, chronic illness, nursing, vocational health, social psychology, substance abuse, gerontology, epidemiology, poverty, and preventative medicine.²⁷ The sheer diversity and widely dispersed nature of this literature presents challenges to anyone interested in keeping up with the state of the art on basic meaning in life research. Adding to this task is the fact that a number of distinct assessment strategies have been used to assess meaning in life, often with very different ideas of what a meaningful life should look like. Steger and colleagues developed a new instrument a few years ago in an effort to provide an easy to use measure that could quickly assess people's subjective sense of whether they experience meaning and purpose in their lives, as well as whether they were currently and actively seeking meaning.³⁰ The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) consists of two five-item scales that respondents use to identify the *presence* of meaning in their lives and their *search* for meaning in their lives. It was hoped that by providing a brief measure that allows people's own subjective judgments of meaning and

purpose in their lives, clinicians, as well as researchers, would be able to easily incorporate assessment of this important construct into their craft. In this article, we provide a look at the clinical relevance of the MLQ to logotherapists. We will first provide a quick assessment of the MLQ's psychometric quality, and then review research linking scores on the MLQ to clinically-relevant constructs.

Psychometric Properties and Clinically-Relevant Utility of the MLQ

The initial development and validation of the MLQ drew upon a subjective, constructivistic perspective on meaning in life – that is, the judgment about whether a person's life is or is not meaningful was considered to best be made by that person.³⁰ A second conceptual notion drove the development of the MLQ. Previously developed meaning in life measures had largely neglected assessing the search for meaning, a central idea in logotherapeutic thinking (exceptions: Crumbaugh,⁵ Reker²⁰) – this construct was prioritized in the development of the MLQ. Finally, the inclusion of items that clearly assessed other constructs, like depression, suicide, positive emotions, etc., had plagued many meaning in life measures. Therefore, in developing the MLQ, a set of 84 items were written that contained no content other than meaning and purpose content. This set of items was tested, and both exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses of data collected from several samples of college students were used to refine this set of items to the final configuration of two 5-item scales, each with internal consistency coefficients above .80 in multiple samples. The venerable technique of constructing a multitrait-multimethod matrix was used to establish the convergent validity of ratings on the MLQ (as measured by initial self-report, 1-month re-test, and informant report) as well as the discriminant validity of these ratings from ratings people made on measures of life satisfaction, optimism, self-esteem, and social desirability. Thus, it was with some confidence that we were able to argue that the MLQ provided a clean, direct, face valid, and psychometrically robust measure of the presence of and search for meaning in life.

Since the initial presentation of the MLQ, research has consistently supported the two-subscale structure using rigorous confirmatory factor analysis methods, the high reliability of scale scores, and relationships in the expected direction with conceptually related variables.^{30,36} In addition, MLQ scores were shown to be reasonably stable over one year, and distinct from life satisfaction.³² The consistently strong psychometric track record is a bit of a contrast with the two most-often used measures of meaning in life, the Purpose in Life Test and the Life Regard Index,^{1,6} which have yielded a variety of potential factor structures over the years.²³⁻²⁵ Finally, a short form has been validated that assesses search for meaning and presence of meaning using three items per scale.³⁴ The three-item measure of presence of meaning is currently being used internationally to monitor well-being on a

population scale (e.g., the United States' Centers for Disease Control; Oxford's global poverty and human development initiative).

The MLQ can reliably provide information to therapists about levels of experienced and sought meaning among their clients. Reliable measurement of these two dimensions of meaning allows for sophisticated hypotheses to be tested. For example, research is emerging that supports Steger and colleagues' ³⁰ idea that the search for meaning might be particularly positive when people are seeking deeper meaning from an already established perspective that life is meaningful. ^{19,35,36,39} In these studies, searching for meaning (among American samples) was negatively related to life satisfaction for those low in presence of meaning, but unrelated or slightly positively related to life satisfaction among those high in presence of meaning. In clinical settings, understanding whether a client is attempting to find some initial foothold for meaning, or whether she or he is invested in continually deepening a sense of life's meaningfulness could inform intervention. ⁵ In satisfying the most fundamental psychometric requirements for an assessment tool, reliability and validity, and providing ease-of-use and utility, the MLQ may be an appealing tool for logotherapists to consider employing in their practice. In the following sections, we examine what is known about how scores on the MLQ relate to distress and psychopathology, well-being and health, existential variables, and people from special populations.

Distress and Psychopathology

Empirical research findings have shown that MLQ scores correlate with a wide range of indicators of psychological distress and pathology. Multiple lines of research have found that presence of meaning scores negatively correlated with depression, anxiety, perceived and experienced stress, negative affect, and posttraumatic stress disorder symptom severity. ^{9,18,21,30,31,33,35,37} Meaning in life was negatively related to declines in psychological functioning following trauma, as well. ³ Beyond symptoms of specific disorders, strong links have been found between perceptions of meaning in life and experiences of social rejection. When people feel socially rejected or lonely, they also tend to feel less meaning in life. ⁴² Typically, among American samples, search for meaning has been positively associated with psychological distress.

Well-Being and Health

Although there are well-established theoretical and empirical links between meaning in life and psychopathology, meaning in life is perhaps more commonly regarded as an important cornerstone for happiness or the 'Good Life.' ²⁶ Therefore it should not be surprising that most of the research conducted using the MLQ has focused on well-being and health. Presence of meaning has been positively associated with many other indicators of well-being, including positive affect, self-esteem, life satisfaction, optimism, hope,

happiness, curiosity, self-actualization, and daily positive social interactions,^{2,9,12,14,19,29,30,32,34,35,38-41,45} in addition to more positive perceived health.³⁷

These positive findings also extend into people's positive attitudes and experiences with work, including positive relations with work enjoyment, job satisfaction, perceived meaningfulness of work, career decidedness, and viewing one's work as a meaningful and socially important calling.^{40,41,46} In fact, this relationship seems especially important, as college students who were searching for meaning in their lives appeared more satisfied with life and work if they felt they had found meaning in their work (vis-à-vis having a calling).²⁸

Existential and Logotherapeutic Factors

Logotherapy and existential approaches to the human experience emphasize authenticity, creativity, forming relationships, embracing ambiguity, self-transcendence, coming to grips with our inevitable death, and, of course, finding meaning and purpose in life. Research using the MLQ has supported many of these factors, and is consistent with the central ideas of logotherapy.

Beginning with the biggest questions facing humanity from a logotherapeutic perspective, experimental research has shown that people seek to reaffirm their sense of meaning in life after they've been subliminally primed with death-related material.⁴⁴ Having one's religious views receive support seems to help some people reaffirm their meaning in life,⁴³ and other research has found that thinking explicitly about death is associated with higher levels of meaning in life.¹⁶ Other people turn to religion to help them cope with death and mortality. As would be expected, meaning in life is positively related to beliefs in the afterlife,⁴¹ as well as religious beliefs and practices.^{30,41} In fact, meaning in life appears to mediate the relation between religious activities and attitudes and self-reported well-being.²⁹ In contrast, negative religious coping appears to be associated with people's search for meaning.⁹

One answer to the existential dilemma of death is to transcend one's mortal self. Prayer can be seen as an inherently self-transcendent act, manifesting people's relationship with a superseding entity that transcends earthly life. Meaning in life is thought to benefit from self-transcendence, and research positively linking presence of meaning with people's use of the six principal categories of prayer is consistent with this idea.⁴⁵

Another source of existential strength is authenticity and self-actualization. The most direct evidence that these topics matter comes from experimental research showing that having greater accessibility to one's true self is positively related to the presence of meaning in life.²² Beaumont studied both search for meaning and presence of meaning in relation to identity and self-actualization.² Presence of meaning was positively correlated with identity commitment, negatively related to a diffuse-avoidant identity style, and positively correlated with both normative and informational

identity styles. Search for meaning showed a generally opposite pattern of relations, with two exceptions. First, search for meaning was also positively correlated with normative identity style, and it was uncorrelated with an informational identity style. Thus, the presence of meaning reflected a more deliberate approach to identity and higher well-being, and search for meaning reflected a more reactive approach, as well as lower well-being. Finally, people who are materialistic – which should be at odds with the full maturation of their individuality – report less meaning in life.¹³

Logotherapy also prizes how people handle unavoidable suffering.¹⁰ We find evidence of this in that people's reports that they have grown psychologically as a result of trauma are positively related to meaning in life.^{11,31} On the other hand, negative coping strategies, such as emotion-focused coping, are negatively related to meaning in life.¹⁷

When everything comes together, people find a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Purpose is most often depicted as being a long-range goal of extreme importance that helps people organize their behavior and to which people dedicate significant effort. People's goals and strivings should therefore be related to meaning in life. In fact, people who are striving to improve their spirit, pursue their calling in life, and increase their self-efficacy report greater meaning in life.⁸

Finally, there have been few intervention-based studies that have used the MLQ. Among these was a study of a 6-week interpersonal mindfulness training program, which aimed to reduce perceived stress and enhance interpersonal well-being. This therapeutic approach appeared to reduce levels of searching for meaning in life among participants, but with marginal statistical significance.⁴ The other intervention study we know of randomly assigned college students to various conditions of a career workshop program. Significant increases in presence of meaning were reported among those who were in the condition in which their workshop facilitator used self-disclosure.⁷

Thus, MLQ scores seem to correspond as expected to logotherapeutic and existential variables.

Using the MLQ in Special Populations

Finally, because many therapeutic practices are specialized, we consider the range of populations who have been studied by researchers using the MLQ. Most of the research reported so far has been conducted on college students. However, a small number of empirical studies using MLQ has been conducted with diverse populations. One study examined MLQ scores in a large sample of participants ranging in ages from 18 to over 65, revealing that presence of meaning in life is generally higher among older groups, whereas search for meaning was generally lower among older groups.³⁸ Researchers have also examined whether meaning in life differs across national/cultural contexts. For example, American young adults reported greater presence of meaning, while Japanese young adults reported greater

search for meaning, and unlike their American counterparts, Japanese participants revealed a positive relation between search for meaning and both happiness and presence of meaning.³⁶

Other research has looked at populations that are distinguished in terms of the events they've experienced. This research has found that meaning in life is associated with better mental health among military veterans and mothers of children with disabilities.^{17,18} One research study brings together relationships, coping, and how one's social and cultural environment challenges the individual. This study compared lesbian, gay, and bisexual people who were either single, dating, in a committed relationship, or in a legally recognized relationship.²¹ Meaning in life was the highest among those who were in legally recognized relationships.

Finally, psychologists have examined themselves! Overall, researchers have found that helping others in their professional work, and investing in solid relationships in their private lives helped them find meaning in life.¹⁵

Conclusions

Early research on the MLQ provides a strong foundation for using this new instrument in therapeutic and research activities. It is brief (10 items, or a 6-item short form), reliable, measures both experienced and sought meaning, and has been used in a nice range of research already. However, it is not without limitations. Most importantly from a logotherapeutic perspective, this instrument does not capture idiosyncratic, complex, and rich aspects of meaning in life. The MLQ does not answer the question of what aspects of their lives individuals are thinking about when they judge how meaningful their lives seem. However, the MLQ appears to be a promising tool for understanding where clients may begin their therapeutic journey on the road to discovering and building meaningful and purposeful lives.

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