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Meaning in Midlife: Content or Process?

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Abstract

This study takes a qualitative approach to examine midlife experiences of meaning. The trend in previous research has been to find sources of meaning in people's lives. Reker and Wong's (1988) theory of the structure of meaning is explored in relation to previous studies. Depth of meaning is reviewed, and a model proposed of the dimensions of meaning including sources; cognitive, motivational and affective components; breadth; and depth. There were difficulties with the measurement of depth which was found to be non-linear. The model was confirmed by in-depth interviews with 38 adults in midlife, especially the dimensions of components and categories. The results support a process (dimensions) approach to meaning in life. The model was revised in the light of the data, to incorporate the dynamic movement between dimensions, and the formation of cognitive frameworks of meaning.

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I. INTRODUCTION

I. i. Meaning: The Concept

felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas,
atque metus omnis et inexorabile fatum
subiecit pedibus strepitumque Acherontis auari.

Happy are they who know meanings in life, and who have
conquered the fear of meaninglessness and death.

(Virgil, Georgics I 490-492)

Since the beginning of recorded time, human beings have pursued the ever elusive answers to questions of meaning in life. The twentieth century is frequently described as an era contending with issues of meaning. The existential philosophers described the givens of existence as death, freedom, meaning and existential isolation. They observed that humankind, having lost a meaningful world and a sense of self that lives in a context of meanings, is beset by the anxiety of doubt and meaninglessness.

The first principle of existentialism is that we are nothing else but what we make of ourselves (Sartre, 1967). Objective answers to life's great questions are not there for the finding. Rather, in the certainty of meaninglessness, we must take courage and create our own meanings (Tillich, 1952). The existentialist view of reality has implications for psychology.

Existentialism has had an impact on psychotherapy, resulting in an approach or attitude towards therapy rather than a school. Existential psychotherapy focuses on concerns that are rooted in the individual's existence (May, 1969; Yalom, 1980). As human beings, we have to come to terms with Being-in-the World, in three simultaneous modes: *umwelt*, the biological world; *mitwelt*, the world of relationship with other humans; and *eigenwelt*, the mode of relationship with oneself. We live in three dimensions, the somatic, the psychic, and the spiritual; and our existence is characterised by its spirituality, freedom and responsibility (Pervin, 1960). This dynamic process of becoming underlies human development and the daily problems of living.

Victor Frankl (1963, 1967; Fabry, 1988) developed a therapeutic theory and approach he called Logotherapy.

According to logotherapy, the striving to find meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man [sic]. That is why I speak of a "will to meaning" in contrast to the pleasure principle (or as we could also term it the "will to pleasure") on which Freudian psychoanalysis is centered, as well as in contrast to the "will to power" stressed by Adlerian psychology (Frankl, 1963, p. 154).

When this will to meaning is frustrated, a person's world view or *weltanschauung* is broken down, and the result is existential vacuum with typical feelings of emptiness,

boredom, valuelessness and meaninglessness.

In similar vein, Maddi (1967) uses the term "existential neurosis", a state of alienation from self and from society, with the cognitive characteristic of meaninglessness, which is the "chronic inability to believe in the truth, importance, usefulness, or interest value of any of the things one is engaged in or can imagine doing" (p. 313).

Research supports the importance of meaning in people's lives. Sharpe and Viney (1973) found that people who experienced lack of meaning and world views that were more negative than positive, lacked purpose and lacked transcendent goals. Lack of meaning leads to psychopathology (Yalom, 1980), lack of well-being (Reker, Peacock & Wong, 1987; Zika & Chamberlain, 1989) depression (Craumbaugh, 1968; Dyck, 1987), and to mental and physical decline, specifically depression, anxiety and somatization (Fisk, 1980). Particular groups of people have been found to experience less meaning than people in general: psychiatric outpatients (Sheffield & Pearson, 1974), inpatients (Pearson & Sheffield, 1975), and prison inmates (Reker, 1977). Personal meaning has also been found to moderate the effects of negative stress on the health of the elderly (Butler, 1988).

These studies indicate that meaninglessness is a significant human dilemma that is present in society, and as Ruffin (1984) argued, should be of central concern to counselling professionals. We need to find out what meaning is, and how it is experienced, so that people can increase their well-being, sense of self-responsibility and enjoyment of life.

There are two quite different theoretical approaches to considering meaning. The first approach is that meaning is ultimate or cosmic (Yalom, 1980), that it exists apart from one's perception of it, and that it can be discovered. The second approach is that meaning is terrestrial (Yalom, 1980), that it is relative, and that it is internally constructed by the individual.

Frankl (1963), who held the first view, said that it can be discovered by self-transcendence; that is, by moving beyond concern for the self and focussing on other people and social and spiritual values. He held that direct focussing on pleasure and happiness tends to lead to existential vacuum, while self transcendence leads to fulfilment.

Ultimate meaning was described by Adler (1964), Frankl's teacher, as social interest, or *gemeingefühl*, and by Fromm (1949) as love of humankind. Maslow claimed that his concept of self actualisation (1964), involves transcending the self and being

devoted to a calling or cause beyond the self; that it is indeed a synonym for self-transcendence or the discovery of meaning (1966).

For Fabry (1988) ultimate meaning is an unattainable goal, and many different paths lead towards it:

"When you seek ultimate meaning, you are aware — even when you face confusion — that there is order in the universe and you are part of that order. If you are religious, you will see this order as divine. If you are a humanist, you may see it in terms of laws of nature and ethics. If you are a scientist, you will see order in the laws of physics, chemistry, astronomy, evolution. If you are an artist, you may see it in harmony. If you are ecology minded, you may see it in the balance of the ecosystem. Ultimate meaning — THE meaning of life — is inaccessible to you. It is like the horizon — you can strive toward it but you will never reach it....Ultimate meaning is a matter of faith, of assumption, of personal experience. You can live as if life has meaning and you are part of the web of life; or you can live as if life is chaotic and you are a victim of its whims." (Page 2).

The second approach to considering meaning is based on a relative view of reality and rejects the belief in an external source of meaning. Tillich (1952) perceived the loss of an ultimate concern (God) in the modern world as "the decisive event underlying the search for meaning and the despair of it" (p. 142). Instead we must rely on our own courage, which does not remove the anxiety of meaninglessness, but does help us to use our creativity to exercise choices and to take responsibility in spite of apparent meaninglessness.

In this terrestrial view (Yalom, 1980), there is no 'true' or 'ultimate' meaning of life and it is the process of discovering meaning which is important (Battista & Almond, 1973). The issue is not the meaning *of* life, but rather "What is the nature of an individual's experience of their life as meaningful?" and "What are the conditions under which individuals will experience their lives as meaningful?" This relativistic perspective is phenomenological, about the immediacy of experiences, and focuses on people's perceptions of their reality within their frame of reference.

Reker and Wong's (1988) view is that a proper view of personal meaning requires both perspectives. Meaning can be either ultimate or terrestrial; in their words holistic, "top-down", or elemental, "bottom-up". This study is also concerned with how meaning is experienced, regardless of whether the experiencer perceives it to be ultimate or terrestrial. What people believe about meaning will differ according to their belief systems; how people experience meaning is likely to be similar. We can expect that the psychological processes underlying experiences of meaningfulness are common to all people.

I. ii. Dimensions of Meaning

quisnam igitur liber? sapiens sibi qui imperiosus,
quem neque pauperies neque mors neque uincula terrent,
responsare cupidinibus, contemnere honores
fortis, et in se ipse totus teres atque rotundus,
externi ne quid ualeat per leue morari,
in quem manca ruit semper fortuna.

Who then are free? Wise persons who are in charge of their own lives, and do not fear poverty, death or imprisonment. They can control their appetites, and are not impressed with positions of power. These people are complete in themselves, polished and round like a globe. No external influence can put them off the goals they have decided to pursue and bad luck has no effect on them.

Horace, Satires, 2.7.83-88.

Maddi (1967) observed that meaning is a multi-dimensional construct. Whether people believe that meaning exists outside themselves and can be discovered, or rather that it is up to individuals to construct their own meanings, their experiences will have similar dimensions. Understanding the dimensions of meaning is therefore central to understanding the process of meaning.

We develop meanings from self-reflection and reflecting on our interpretations of life. We have experiences and ideas about the environment, and then use symbols to represent our interpretation of the environment. That internal representation becomes our internal reality. Our internal reality is the effective reality, even if as a map it would not represent the territory reliably for others. What we construct in our minds may not exist in any objective sense, but the perception does (Reker & Wong, 1988).

In the process of formulating our perceptions of meaning we think about our lives and we make valuations about what we perceive to be important. These valuations form a network (Hermans, 1988), a set of cognitions about meaning which impacts our values and goals, and brings us experiences of pleasure and fulfilment .

Maddi (1967) observed that important dimensions of meaning are its cognitive, actional and affective components. Battista and Almond (1973) put it differently: people who experience life as meaningful have a conscious articulated structure, and are committed to a concept of meaning of life which provides a framework or goal to view life from. They perceive their own lives as related to or fulfilling this concept, and experience this fulfilment as feelings of integration, relatedness or significance.

Reker and Wong (1988) described the components of meaning as threefold; cognitive, motivational and affective. In the cognitive component, people interpret their own experiences in life, and develop understanding and beliefs. This awareness may be cosmic or terrestrial, holistic or elemental (Yalom, 1980). The motivational component has a slightly different emphasis from Maddi's (1967) actional component, including values and goals as well as behaviours. People's value systems dictate which goals to choose; they pursue the chosen goals and attain them, leading to a sense of purpose, and worthwhile ends. The affective component is the feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment they get from the experiences themselves, or from the achievement of their goals. Experiences of meaning have these three components, one leading to the next, as depicted in Figure 1. This process is general to all people's experience of meanings in their lives.

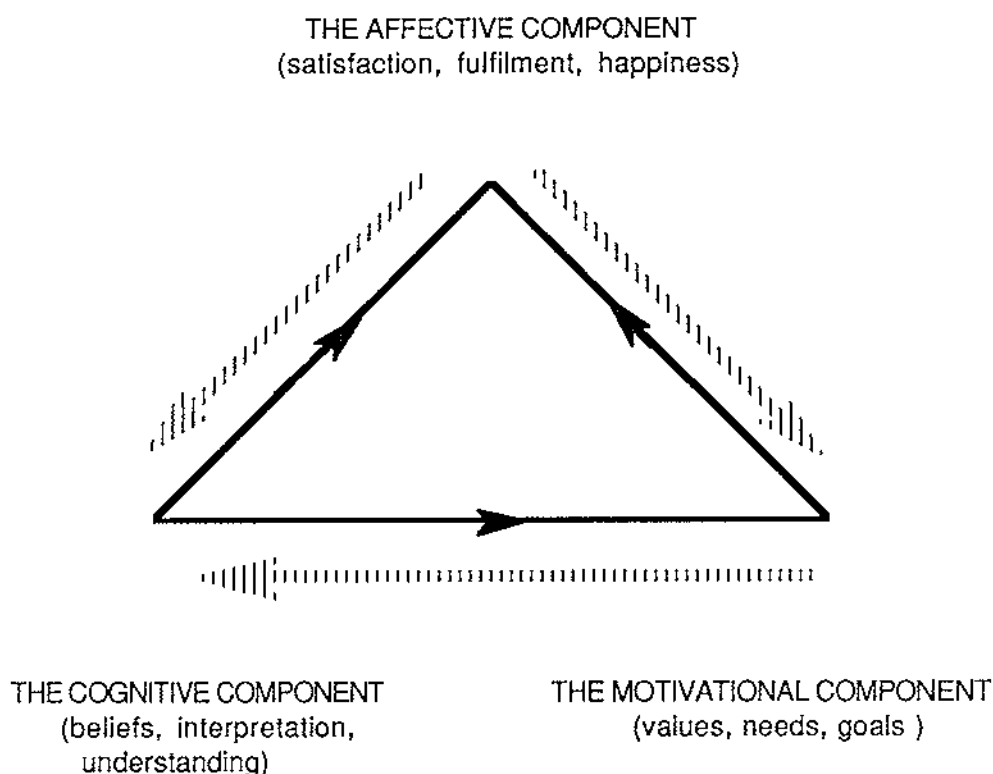


Figure 1. The structure of personal meaning. Solid arrows represent the direction of influence; dashed arrows represent feedback. (Reker & Wong, 1988. p. 222).

This structural model is an important contribution to the theoretical understanding of the psychological processes underlying meaning in life. The present study explores the implications of this approach for research. The following terminology will be used throughout:

Components of meaning are depicted in Figure 1; the cognitive, motivational and affective components of the structure of personal meaning.

Sources of meaning are the areas of a person's life in which meaning is experienced.

Categories of sources are proposed; groupings broad enough to summarise all sources into six major themes.

Breadth refers to the diversification of sources in any one person's experience of meaning.

Depth refers to the degree of self-transcendence involved in any one person's experience of meaning.

Dimensions of meaning are the aspects being studied which are components, sources and categories of sources, breadth and depth.

Each of these definitions is explored fully in its own context.

Previous studies have been of two kinds. The first approach has been to use measures of meaning to examine the importance of meaning in life in relation to another psychological construct, for example well-being. The other approach has focussed on the sources of meaning, that is the areas of life people report to be meaningful for them. Both of these approaches are deficient in terms of the structural model in Figure 1.

There have been several attempts to develop measures of meaning. These measures, however, have not been constructed with deliberate consideration of the cognitive, motivational and affective components of meaning, and therefore access these dimensions unevenly.

The Purpose in Life Test (PIL, Craumbaugh & Maholick, 1964) is "designed to evoke responses believed related to the degree to which the individual experienced purpose in life." (p. 201). This is the most commonly used measure of meaning in life, and it focuses almost exclusively on cognitions (Dyck, 1987). Ebersole, Levinson and Svensson (1987) argue that Part B and C of the PIL, which contain a sentence completion exercise and the writing of a paragraph about the respondent's aims, ambitions and goals in life should be used more often to explore wider aspects of meaning than beliefs.

The Seeking of Noetic Goals Test (SONG, Crumbaugh, 1977) which complements the PIL, measures the strength of motivation to find meaning (Reker & Cousins, 1979; Dyck, 1987).

The Life Attitude Profile (LAP, Reker & Peacock, 1981) measures both the degree of meaning experienced and the strength of motivation to find meaning. The motivation to find

meaning is quite different from the motivational component in Reker and Wong's (1988) model, which refers to the value system constructed by each individual and the pursuit of goals consistent with those values.

The Life Regard Index (LRI, Battista & Almond, 1973) has regard for the multi-dimensional nature of meaning (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988a; Debats 1990), but has been used infrequently in studies of meaning in life. It consists of two equal sub-scales, framework (Fr) and fulfilment (Fu). LRI-Fr relates to both the cognitive component, having a framework or perspective of meaning and the motivational component, having life goals. LRI-Fu assesses the degree to which the framework or life goals are being fulfilled which is leading into, but not exploring, the affective domain.

If Reker and Wong's component approach is appropriate to describe the process of experiencing meaning, we will need measures that explore equally the cognitive, motivational and affective dimensions. The current measures fail to do this adequately; they concentrate on one or two components, as the PIL does, or unevenly on all three, as is the case with the LRI.

Research on people's experiences of meaning has up until now focussed not on the components, but rather on the sources of meaning. Sources define the content of meaning; what is going on in life when significance is experienced. The cognitive, motivational and affective components of meaning identify the process of meaning; how significance affects what happens. Researching the process (components) may be more fruitful than research of the content (sources) has been. To find out whether this is so, the first step is to clarify the distinction between sources and components. The second step is to examine the sources of meaning reported previously in relevant studies, to identify those which are common to all. The third step is to test these against the three components to see if there is any confusion between the sources and the components. Finally, once any overlap has been identified, sources that remain in their own right without becoming components can be explored.

Sources of meaning are the areas of a person's life from which meaning is derived. These vary between individuals and between groups of individuals, for example between young adolescents and later life couples (De Vogler & Ebersole, 1983; Ebersole & DePaola, 1987). Cultural and ethnic background affects people's interpretations of reality and world view, and probably influences the sources of meaning in their lives. As Yalom, (1980) observed, "It is extraordinarily difficult to comprehend it free of the biases inherent in a particular culture." (p. 466). Research on meaning in life has yet to explore the effect of culture. While sources of meaning are likely to vary between cultures, all people interpret

their worlds by cognitive, motivational and affective interactions with their environments. The components approach to studying meaning is therefore more likely to generalise across cultures.

Each source of meaning a person experiences may have all three components; cognitive, motivational and affective. For example, relationship with people may be a source of meaning which is experienced in all three components; in the cognitive component as belief in the interdependence of humans, in the motivational component as altruism, and in the affective component as pleasure.

Table 1 summarises the sources found in relevant studies. McCarthy (1983) used the six most reported of De Vogler and Ebersole's (1981) categories of sources, and has therefore not been included. Since Baum (1988) and Baum and Stewart (1990) asked people to review their life experiences and the responses described life events and themes rather than sources of meaning, their findings have not been included either.

When we view the lists of sources in Table 1 with Reker and Wong's (1988) model in mind, we can see that many areas of life reported as "sources" are in effect components rather than sources. Understanding is an aspect of the cognitive component of any source. Tradition and Culture may act as cognitive or motivational components. Service and Altruism are motivational components of, for example, Relationship with People. Life Work, Enduring Values, Obtaining and Meeting Basic Needs are also motivational components. Pleasure, Satisfaction and Achievement are affective components which can be associated with any source of meaning. Material that has been regarded as a source in previous studies is therefore frequently redefined in this study as a component.

When the component perspective is used as a filter, and sources found in past research are fed through, only five sources remain as sources in their own right and do not become components. These are:

1. Relationship with people
2. Social and political
3. Religious and spiritual
4. Creativity
5. Personal Development

Table 1: A comparison of sources of meaning as reported in relevant studies.

COMPARISON OF SOURCES OF MEANING ACROSS STUDIES				
De Vogler & Ebersole (1980) COLLEGE STUDENTS	Ebersole & De Vogler (1981) ADULTS	De Vogler & Ebersole (1983) ADOLESCENTS	Ebersole & DePaola (1987) ELDERLY COUPLES	Reker & Guppy (1988) ADULTS
Relationships	Relationships	Relationships	Relationships	Personal Relationships
Service	Service	Activities	Service	Altruism
Belief	Belief		Belief	Religious Activities
Expression	Life Work	School	Life Work	Creative Activities
Growth	Growth	Growth	Growth	Personal Growth
Obtaining	Obtaining	Obtaining	Obtaining	Meeting Basic Needs
Existential/Hedonistic	Pleasure	Appearance	Pleasure	Pleasurable or Leisure Activities
Understanding	Health	Health	Health	Personal Achievement
		(Belief, Service and Pleasure not reported)		Legacy
				Enduring Values or Ideals
				Traditions and Culture
				Social and Political Causes

Note. The order of sources has been changed to facilitate comparison.

Relationship with People is consistently reported as a source of meaning in all studies. Relationships with others was the most frequently reported source of meaning for adults (De Vogler & Ebersole 1981); for people over seventy (McCarthy, 1983); and for the elderly (Baum, 1988). It was first for women, and second (after work) for men of all ages (Baum & Stewart, 1990). That this category should be most frequently reported is consistent with Frankl's (1963) view of the importance of interpersonal encounters and Yalom's (1980) discussion of the importance of altruism and contribution to the lives of others.

Religious and Spiritual and **Social and Political** belief and activities appear in some form in all studies. Belief is one category for Ebersole and his colleagues (De Vogler & Ebersole, 1980, 1981, 1983; De Vogler & DePaola, 1987). Yalom (1980) used the term "dedication to a cause" and includes all causes, religious and social in this concept. Belief was the second most chosen category in three studies; by adults (De Vogler & Ebersole 1981), by people over seventy (McCarthy, 1983), and by elderly couples (De Vogler & DePaola, 1987). Reker and Guppy (1988) preferred two separate categories for Social and Political Causes and Religious Activities, and found that these two sources were low in the rankings their subjects made of their 12 categories. Religious Activities was ranked as 11th by young people, 9th by the middle aged and 8th by elderly subjects. Social and Political Causes was ranked 12th by all three groups. While in general this study has simplified lists of sources into fewer categories, it was decided to keep the distinction between religion on the one hand and social and political causes on the other.

This is partly because the relationship between meaning and religious beliefs have been explored in a number of studies. It has been found that positive life meaning relates to strong religious beliefs (Soderstrom & Wright, 1975), and that meaning acts as a moderating variable between religiosity and well-being (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988b). While Yalom (1980) gave "dedication to a cause" as one source, he included many kinds of causes, religious and secular, that contribute to self-transcendence. The other reason for distinguishing between religion and social or political activity is to maintain the distinctions between the *umwelt* and the *mitwelt*. The relationship between these categories of sources might well be of interest in future research.

Taking a components approach also affected the names given to categories in this study. The term "religion" has the connotation of a particular denomination or creed. In anticipation of subjects' describing meaningful spiritual experiences, but not being active in any church, this category was called Religious and Spiritual to include these broader views. The word "belief" focuses on the cognitive, "cause" and "activity" on the motivational.

Religious and Spiritual and **Social and Political** were therefore chosen as names for these two categories to ensure that all three components were included.

Creativity as a source of meaning has strong theoretical foundations. Frankl (1963) stated that accomplishments and creations in work, art, and scholarship are important sources of meaning. Yalom (1980) distinguished between the significance of the created object for its own sake (the creation justifies itself), and the creative act as a contribution to society. De Vogler and Ebersole (1980) first had a separate category Expression reported by only 4% and later included it in the category they called Life Work (1981, 1983). In the 1980 study, however, subjects were asked to write about only three sources of meaning, which imposed limits on the possible range of responses. Reker and Wong (1988) included Creativity in their review of sources of meaning, and Reker and Guppy (1988) found that this source was related to perceived physical well-being. In the present study, creativity remains as a category because of its strong theoretical base and because it does not overlap with any other source.

Personal Development or growth is a source of meaning common to all studies. People are ultimately self-determining. They determine not only their fate but also their own selves, for they are not only forming and shaping the course of their lives, but also their very selves (Frankl, 1967). Yalom, (1980) referred to Maslow's (1962) concept of self-actualization as a pursuit of meaning. Reker and Guppy (1988) found personal growth a potent source of meaning related to perceived psychological well-being. De Vogler and Ebersole (1980) found that 13% of college students reported growth as a source of meaning, but fewer subjects in other studies: 6% of adults (De Vogler & Ebersole, 1981); 2% of young adolescents (De Vogler & Ebersole, 1983); and no later life couples (Ebersole & DePaola, 1987). It should be noted, however, that respondents were limited in the number of sources they could report. College students (De Vogler and Ebersole, 1980) were asked for three sources, as were adults (De Vogler & Ebersole, 1981). Later life couples (Ebersole & DePaola, 1987) were asked to describe only one source of meaning in their lives. When respondents are able to report on the full range of their sources of meaning, different patterns of choice may well emerge. In this study, it was decided to encourage participants to talk freely and fully about the role of meaning in their lives.

Sources in previous studies, then, can be simplified into five categories, as depicted in Figure 2.

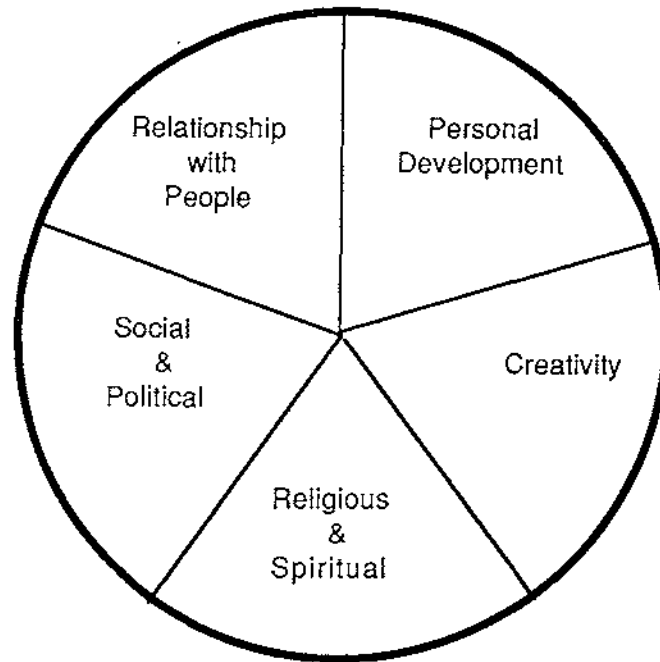


Figure 2. Five categories of sources in previous studies.

The rest of the sources listed in Table 1 have been subsumed into these five categories. This is because of the effect of applying a components perspective to the sources approach. Many sources reported in previous research, are viewed in this study as cognitive, motivational or affective components rather than sources.

I. iii. Relationship with Nature

quamquam me quidem non fructuos modo, sed etiam ipsius
terrae vis ac natura delectat.

It is not only fruitfulness that delights me, but the very
natural creative power of the earth itself.

Cicero, *De Senectute*, XV. 51. 5-7

Relationship with Nature is not given as a source of meaning in any of the studies reviewed. If it had been reported by subjects, it was not stated which category of meaning it was allocated to. The researcher, following the principle of self-reflection, was unable to categorise her relationship with nature, an important source of meaning in her life. This source could not be placed in the categories in the Ebersole studies nor the categories listed in Reker and Wong's (1988) review. In informal discussions of the model to be tested in this study, she found that the people she talked to spoke with enthusiasm about finding meaning in their relationship with the natural environment, in issues of conservation and humankind's connections with the whole universe.

Awareness of natural phenomenon has become increasingly meaningful for people in recent years, as the survival of the planet is threatened and political protest has accelerated against nuclear weapons and pollution of the environment. There is a revived interest in cosmology in modern theology. Matthew Fox (1988) provides the following definition:

By the term "cosmology" I mean three things: a scientific story about the origins of our universe; mysticism that is a psychic response to our being in the universe; and art, which translates science and mysticism into images that awaken body, soul and society. A cosmology needs all three elements to come alive: it is our joyful response (mysticism) to the awesome fact of our being in the universe (science) and our expression of that response by the art of our lives and citizenship (art). (Fox, 1988, p. 1, footnote).

This definition parallels the three components of meaning: mysticism (affective) science (cognitive) and art (motivational). The "joyful response" brings to mind what Yalom (1980) referred to as the hedonistic solution, a sense of astonishment at the miracle of life. Hedonism is the belief that pleasure is the aim, the "summum bonum" of human existence. This does not mean only sensual enjoyment, but includes social concern and cosmic awareness. As Epicurus, the founder of Epicureanism, the ancient Greek school of philosophy wrote:

It is not possible to live happily without living wisely, nobly, justly, nor to live wisely, nobly, justly, without living happily.
(Epicurus, *Doctrine* 5).

Aotearoa (New Zealand) is a small group of islands in the South Pacific, a country rich in natural resources and small in population. We are close to the hole in the ozone layer, with a nuclear free policy, many endangered species, and a predominantly agricultural economy which has its own polluting practices. Recreation for many people in this country takes place in the natural environment; many city dwellers had rural childhoods.

Yalom (1980) discussed the impact of culture on world views and therefore on their interpretations of meaning. Perhaps our world view is influenced by the Maori, the indigenous people, whose belief system about humankind in relation to nature is exemplified in this proverb:

"He kura tangata, e kore e rokohanga; he kura whenua, ka rokohanga." People die, are slain, migrate, disappear; not so the land, which ever remains" (Best, Maori, i, 40. 1924/1974).

Traditional Maori belief holds that every natural object or aggregate of objects possesses a spiritual essence, the *mauri*. This was translated by Best (1924/1974) as "life principle", and by Marsden (1975) as "life force" or "ethos". To this is due the vitality, even the very existence, of all living things. A forest, for instance, depends on the preservation of the *mauri* intact and unharmed for the fertility of the trees, the abundance of birds and rats, and the vigorous growth of the forest as a whole (Firth, 1929/1972).

The creation myths of the Maori people (Te Rangi Hiroa, 1949/1977) tell the story of the brotherhood of human beings and other living things that underlies the mutual relationship of people and other life forms. This world view is compatible with the concept of *umwelt*, being-in-the-biological world.

It is difficult to imagine that at least some participants in research in North America did not report their relationship with nature as a source of meaning. Such sources do not seem to belong for example in the categories of religion, or social and political belief, although connections between these can be imagined in individual cases. For these reasons, and especially because trial subjects saw this source as distinct from others, it was decided to create a separate category, Relationship with Nature.

With the new category Relationship with Nature added in, a model of six categories of sources was constructed. Two sources, Relationship with Nature and Religious and Spiritual relate to the meaning derived from living in the *umwelt*, the biological (possibly created) world. Relationships with People and Social and Political Belief relate to the

mitwelt, the social world of living in relation to other humans. Creativity and Personal Development are sources within the eigenwelt, the mode of relationship with oneself.

Figure 3 displays the six categories of sources of meaning, and, across all categories, the three components, Cognitive, Motivational, and Affective.

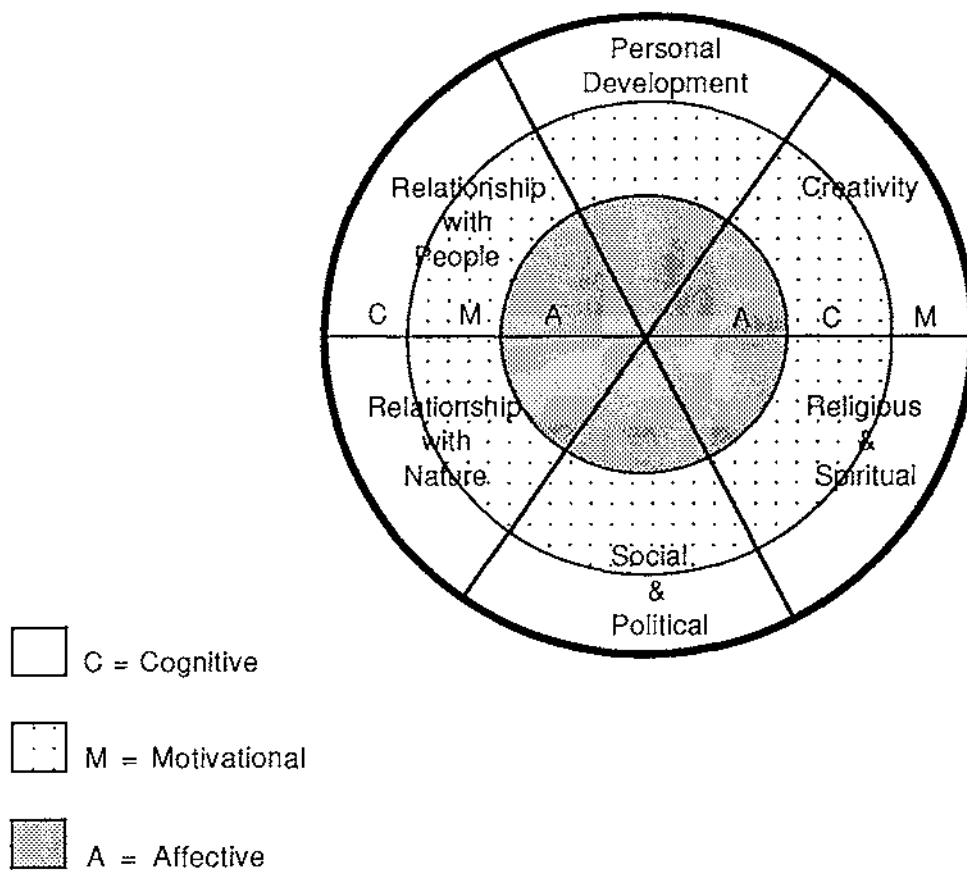


Figure 3. Two dimensions of meaning: sources and components

I. iv. Breadth and Depth of Meaning

nec uero dubitat agricola, quamuis sit senex, quaerenti cui serat respondere: "dis immortalibus, qui me non accipere modo haec a maioribus, qui me non accipere modo haec a maioribus uoluerunt, sed etiam posteris prodero."

A farmer, however elderly, when asked whom he is planting for, will reply without hesitation: "For the immortal gods, who will not only that I should receive these blessings from those who have gone before me, but also that I should pass them on to those who come after me."

Cicero, *De Senectute*, vii. 25.

Breadth

Breadth is defined as the variety of sources a person finds meaningful. The concept of breadth is indicated therefore by not only the number, but also the range of sources of meaning. To measure breadth, it is necessary to measure the variety of different sources of meaning a person reports. Reker and Wong (1988) proposed a breadth postulate: that the degree of meaning will increase in direct proportion to the diversification of the sources of meaning. It is of interest, therefore, to examine how many different categories of sources subjects report.

The proposed model illustrated in Figure 4 has six categories of sources of meaning. It is not expected that people find meaning in sources within all six or only one of these categories. Breadth then is indicated by the number of these six categories reported by each participant in the study. When De Vogler-Ebersole and Ebersole (1985) asked subjects to record how many areas of their lives they found meaningful, they found that an average of 6.29 sources per subject were reported which were allocated to an average of 4.26 of their 8 categories. The breadth score will count each category only once and range from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 6 regardless of the number of sources any one person reports. The resulting score is an indication of the diversification of sources, which dimension Reker and Wong (1988) postulate will parallel the degree of meaning experienced.

Depth

Depth of meaning has been researched by Ebersole and associates. Ebersole and Sacco (1983) described a process of validating subjective ratings of depth of meaning, De Vogler-Ebersole and Ebersole (1985) the establishment of rating criteria. Ebersole and DePaola (1989) compared depth ratings of elderly and young people. The criteria trialled in the 1985 study established a five point rating scale from "little or no depth" to "highest depth". Subjects in these studies were asked to write a one page essay (Meaning Essay Document, MED) on the one most important source of meaning in their lives, and to describe a specific

example. The resulting essays were rated for depth in five categories ranging from "little or no depth" to "highest depth" using the following criteria (De Vogler-Ebersole & Ebersole, 1985, p. 305):

1. Rate the meaning more deeply the more the central meaning is discussed with complexity and the writer conveys a sense of the individuality of the meaning.

2. Rate the meaning more deeply the more the meaning and the example are specific, believable, concrete and down to earth. Also, be sure the example is significant, not trivial.

3. Rate the meaning less deeply the more the meaning is new and therefore relatively untried and shallow. Also rate it as less deep if the meaning has been held for a while and it is evident that it has not undergone development.

4. Judge on your own whether the person has high or low meaning; do not automatically accept his (sic) judgement of his own depth of meaning.

5. If you are confused and uncertain, tend to put the essay into the middle category. Also if no example is given or if the one produced is insignificant, the rater should tend not to rate the essay any higher than the middle category.

"Deep" therefore is specified as complex, specific, tried, developing, and exemplified. Measurement relies upon the subjective judgements of the raters. Ebersole and Kobayakawa (1989) found that rating depth by this method has the disadvantage of judges' tending to rate as deeper responses congruent with their own values. Some objective criteria for depth would be preferable.

Reker and Wong (1988) suggested measuring depth as degrees of self-transcendence. There is support in the meaning in life literature for using self-transcendence in relation to depth. It has a theoretical basis; Frankl (1967) stated that direct focusing on pleasure and happiness tends to lead to existential vacuum, while self-transcendence leads to fulfilment. Research also supports this approach. Bolt (1975) found that intrinsic religious orientation (that is, a world view with transcendent meaning) correlated with relatively high scores on the PIL, and Crandall and Rasmussen (1975) found that pleasure, excitement, and comfort as defined by Rokeach's Values Survey (1973) correlated with low PIL scores.

Reker and Wong (1988 p. 226) referred to Rokeach's (1973) description of the hierarchical nature of values as a basis for proposing four levels of depth of meaning. These are, in effect, four degrees of self-transcendence:

1. Self-preoccupation with hedonistic pleasure and comfort.
2. Devotion of time and energy to the realisation of their potential, for example personal growth, creativity and self-actualisation.

3. From self-interest to service to others and commitment to a larger societal or political cause.
4. Entertaining values that transcend individuals and encompass cosmic meaning and ultimate purpose.

In this view, "deep" is defined as the degree of selflessness and abstraction. Each level is signposted by its content, which has more objectivity than the rating method in the Ebersole studies.

It was decided for the present study to trial Reker and Wong's (1988) four levels of depth of meaning, using the De Vogler-Ebersole and Ebersole (1985) criteria in determining doubtful cases. If a source were reported as having cognitive, motivational or affective components it would meet the third criterion, because it would be in action, tried and developing. If, however, the content were general and no examples available, the depth would be rated at the next lowest level where specific examples of current meaning were expressed. Reker and Wong (1988) proposed a depth postulate: that the degree of meaning will increase in direct proportion to commitment to higher levels of meaning. To test this, a reliable measure of depth is needed.

It is also necessary to calculate a score of depth for each individual. In measuring depth, De Vogler-Ebersole and Ebersole (1985) and Ebersole and DePaola (1989) asked participants to write about one important source of meaning in their lives. The score derived for each individual was therefore the score for one source only. It is likely that people experience different sources of meaning at different levels. There is a dilemma here in whether an overall score would best reflect what is happening by describing the average depth of all scores, or by averaging the deepest in each category. This dilemma was resolved by considering that a person may not repeat information at greatest depth in similar sources, but may do so in a quite different area of their lives. It was therefore decided that an individual's score would average the deepest scores within each category of sources.

Reker and Wong (1988) linked their theory of meaning to studies of self-complexity. They stated that a highly differentiated and integrated personal meaning system promotes optimal adaptation and helps people to be flexible, to think divergently, and to adapt their thinking and behaviour to cope effectively with life's ongoing stresses and challenges. Linville (1987) found that greater self-complexity moderates the adverse impact of stressful events on physical and mental health. The relationship between self-complexity and meaning has yet to be established. Reker and Wong (1988) suggested that complexity would

be influenced by both the range and quality of experiences encountered, that is, by breadth and depth of meaning. The implication is that there is a positive relationship between breadth and depth, at least for people with higher self-complexity. The relationship between breadth and depth is therefore worthy of investigation.

De Vogler-Ebersole and Ebersole (1985), in trialling their depth criteria, at the same time asked subjects how many areas of their lives they found meaningful and allocated each of the reported sources to one of their eight categories. Although they had the data both for depth and what this study calls breadth, they did not report any measurement of the relationship between the two dimensions. Presumably this was because they had measured only one source for depth. In the same report they suggested, without any reference to the data, that pursuing a number of sources might result in shallow experiences of meaning; in other words that breadth inhibits depth.

This study takes a contrary view, and proposes that breadth will correlate positively with depth, as implied in Reker and Wong's idea of personal meaning system complexity concept. Since meaning is a process with dynamic movement between components, it might well be that people who experience meaning are able to increase the variety and depth of those experiences.

The Model

The full model proposed in this study is three dimensional, as depicted in Figure 4. The surface of the figure displays the six categories of sources, Relationships with People, Relationship with Nature, Religious and Spiritual Belief, Social and Political Belief, Creativity and Personal Development. Breadth is the variety of sources, therefore the number of these six experienced. Also on the surface of the figure, cutting through the categories of sources, are three concentric circles which represent the three components of meaning, cognitive, motivational and affective. Depth is represented by the third dimension in four successive levels.

These are the dimensions of meaning that were tested in this study: Sources, components, breadth and depth. It was expected that all people would experience all these dimensions of meaning, and would be able to describe their experiences.

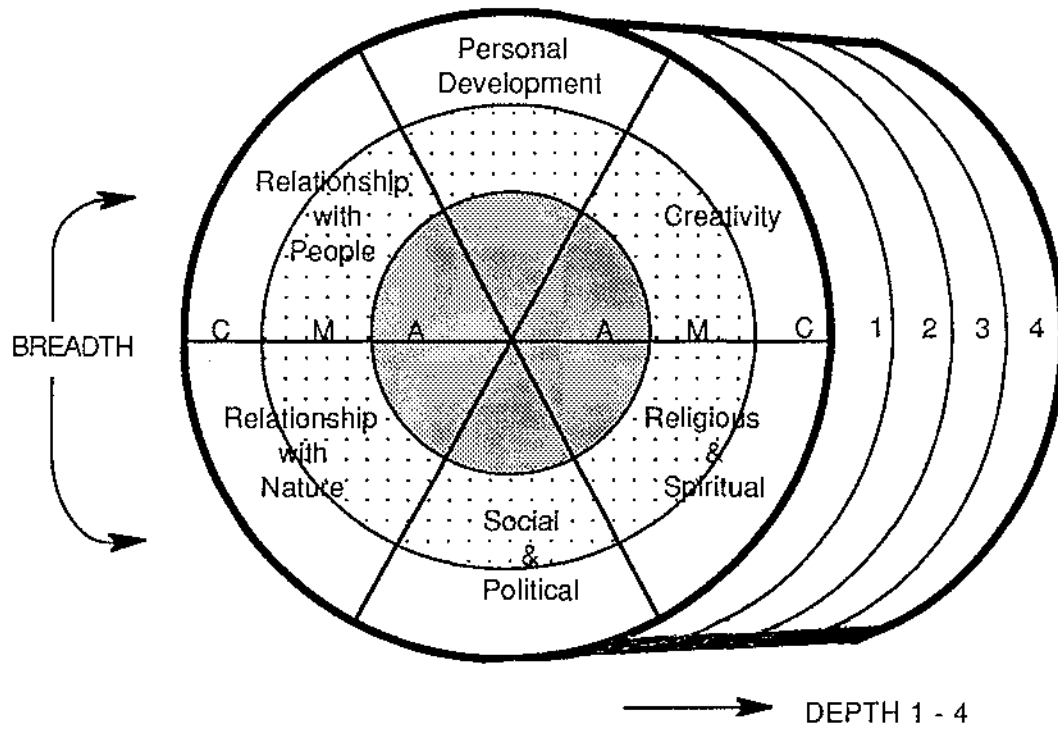


Figure 4. The Dimensions of Meaning: Categories of sources, Components, Breadth and Depth.

I. v. Midlife

Non uiribus aut uelocitate aut celeritate corporum res
magnae geruntur, sed consilio, auctoritate, sententia; quibus
non modo non orbari, sed etiam augeri senectus solet.

Great accomplishments are not achieved by strength, speed
or swiftness, but by forethought, influence and expression of
opinion. These are qualities that not do not diminish, but in
fact increase with age.

Cicero, *De Senectute*, VI, 17, 24-28.

Awareness of meaning in life has been associated with midlife since Jung (1931/1954) brought attention to the characteristics of this stage of development which he called "the midday of life". He observed that in the first half of life, people focus on preparation for living, and after that, meaning is derived through examination of the "inner" part of life, by self-reflection and re-evaluation. "The wine has fermented and begins to settle and clear" (p. 193).

Buhler (1968) also noted the movement towards interiority in midlife. She described the first half of life as spent outwardly focussed and making commitments, and the second half inwardly focussed, and building on those commitments.

Erikson's (1960) developmental perspective identified the developmental task of the forties and fifties as generativity versus stagnation. Meaning is to be found in self-transcendent activities and a sense of having contributed to the future by productivity, creativity, and establishing and guiding the next generation and society as a whole. These ideas were extended by Peck (1968) who described the tasks of generativity as valuing wisdom versus valuing physical powers; socialising versus sexualising in relationships; cathectic flexibility (the capacity for shifting emotional investments from one person to another and from one activity to another) versus cathectic impoverishment; and mental flexibility versus mental rigidity.

Research on the processes of midlife confirms these theories. Neugarten (1968) found that a conspicuous feature of middle age is a re-orientation to time. Life is viewed in terms of time-left-to-live rather than time-since-birth, and it is time to take stock of any disparities between expectations and achievements in careers (especially for men), and in using latent talents and capacities in new directions (especially for women). Typical of middle-aged people are the processes of stock-taking, heightened introspection, and the structuring and restructuring of experience - the processing of new information in the light of experience.

Levinson described life span development in terms of transitions (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee 1978; Levinson, 1986). The task of a transition is to end a period in one's life. To do this, one has to accept the losses involved and to review the past, to decide which aspects of the past to keep and which to reject, and then to look towards new hopes and goals in the future. The midlife transition begins some time between forty and forty-five, and is the time to examine inner experiences, feelings, fantasies, conflicts, values and attitudes. The task of the transition is completed when old and new concepts are integrated in the personality and in interpersonal relationships.

Levinson et al. (1978) described this as a two stage process, destructuring and restructuring. Cytrynbaum, Blum, Patrick, Stein, Wadner and Wilk (1980) analysed the process in detail and formulated three phases: destructuring, re-assessment, then reintegration and restructuring, which results in behavioural and role change.

Recent research summarised by Rosenfeld and Stark (1987) has examined the effects on aging of changing social conditions and expectations, and the creation of new "social clocks" to measure our lives by (Neugarten & Neugarten, 1987). Midlife is becoming more and more a time of greater flexibility, increasing the opportunities for evaluation and restructuring of values and goals.

Meaning can be derived from reviewing the past and reminiscing. Frankl (1963) emphasised the importance of the past in transcending the horrors of the present in the concentration camp. Meaning can also be derived from looking forward to the future, by anticipating events and looking forward to achieving life goals. Meaning in the present is related to commitment, and involvement in activities, and pursuits. Hermans (1988) asked for past, present and future significant experiences. Baum (1988) asked elderly people and Baum and Stewart (1990) people from adolescence to old age about meaningful events in their lives. Older subjects typically did not report any meaningful events after 40. However, they were encouraged to use retrospection, and to review their lives, not to report what was happening for them in the present. The resulting material from people over 40 was accounts of the events of early life seen from a later perspective. In contrast, Meier and Edwards (1974) found that degree of meaning increased with age, and Hardcastle's (1985) subjects consistently reported that life had improved up to the present and that they expected it to get better in the future. Of these studies, only one (Hardcastle, 1985) focussed on people in midlife and her subjects were asked about life themes, not meaning.

It is to be expected that the experience of living for 40+ years will increase people's skills and awareness of the issues of life (Helson and Moane, 1987). The midlife processes of

destructuring, re-evaluating and reintegrating meanings and increased interiority suggest that people of this age would be ideal subjects for studying meaning in life. Whether these processes are intrinsic to the middle years or influenced by social expectations, people at this stage in life are likely to be conscious of issues of meaning in their lives, and to be able to articulate their experiences. For these reasons, it was decided to test the model with subjects between 40 and 50.

The focus of this study is to discover how people experience meaning as it is happening, rather than their perceptions of the past or the future. It was decided therefore that participants would be asked to focus on their current experiences. This follows the example of Sharpe and Viney (1973) who asked participants to describe their pictures of reality, including their beliefs, doubts and life purpose. Since an existential construct is being explored, it is fitting to focus on the here and now.