Meaning in life judgments during stressful times, including Election Day 2016

Samantha Dorazio, Nicholas Liddick, Irene Howard, Ximena Leon, Genesis Alvarez, Alane Schmelkin, Corie Levine, Aryssa Walters, and Leigh Ann Vaughn

(499 words in the body of the abstract)

Introduction
People can base their judgments of meaning in life on many kinds of information (e.g., Trent & King, 2010), such as support of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (basic needs proposed by self-determination theory; e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2008), and their current mood. Judgments of meaning in life are also flexible and resilient: research suggest people are biased toward arriving at positive assessments of their meaning in life (e.g., Hicks, Schlegel, & King, 2010).

In stressful circumstances, basing judgments of meaning in life on non-mood information could support meaning in life. A negative event could be long-term, such as the burnout and stress of approaching exams that occurs in the last three weeks of spring semester at college. It could also be short-term, such as the shock that students at our college experienced when Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election.

We predicted that mood would be more variable than either meaning in life or need support in both of these events. Additionally, we predicted that when controlling for the relationship between need support and mood, meaning in life would relate more strongly to need support than to mood in both of these events.

Method
Participants were 153 Ithaca College students. The spring 2016 subsample contained 89 participants, whereas the election 2016 subsample contained 64 participants. The questionnaire contained numerous individual-differences measures. The ones of interest for the current study were the measures of need support, mood, and meaning in life.

Results
We conducted one-way ANOVAs to examine the variability of need-support, mood, and meaning in life scores. For these analyses, we created a time-of-participation variable representing each of the last three weeks in the 2016 spring semester and each four-hour segment of time between 4:30pm election night and 9:00pm the day after the election. The ANOVA on mood revealed significant variation according to time of participation, $F(7, 145) = 3.51$, $p = .002$, with more negative mood in spring semester as the weeks progressed, and with more negative mood as the election results came in and through the next day. In contrast, the ANOVA on need support revealed no significant variation according to time of participation, $F(7, 145) = 1.81$, $p = .09$. Additionally, the ANOVA on meaning in life revealed no significant variation according to time of participation, $F(7, 145) = 0.50$, $p = .83$.

A multiple-regression analysis showed that need support was a significant and strong predictor of meaning in life ($\beta = .57$, $t = 7.82$, $p < .001$), and mood was a much weaker predictor ($\beta = .15$, $t = 2.10$, $p = .038$).

Discussion
Our results showed that mood varied significantly within the stressful time periods we assessed, but need support and meaning in life did not. Additionally, meaning in life was a much stronger predictor of meaning in life than mood was. These results suggest that in stressful experiences, basing judgments of meaning in life more on need support than on mood could help maintain a consistent sense of meaning in life.

References:
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