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Deriving Meaning: A Conceptual Analysis

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This article serves as a conceptual analysis to explore and interrogate the definition of meaning through the framework of collective trauma and uncertainty. The author uses the COVID19 pandemic as a reference point to illustrate models of behavior sustained by the onset of collective trauma. Unpredictability and adversity are amongst the factors identified as key underpinnings preluding the search for meaning, while the implication of resilience, identification of self, and group dynamics are examined. Previous research is integrated to understand the foundational constructs of meaning, while semantic interpretations challenge the objectivity of identified constructs. The relationship between self-satisfaction and meaning is explored, with gratitude being recognized as a mediator factor. Concluding remarks advocate for continued exploration to facilitate self-fulfillment and satisfaction while flexibility, patience, and the accommodation of protective factors are cited as adaptive resources to facilitate collective healing.
KEYWORDS: meaning, collective trauma, covid19, purpose, adversity.

Defining Meaning amid Collective Trauma

Following the onset of the COVID19 pandemic, lives were disrupted, routine was replaced by uncertainty, and we watched as the world adapted to a new sense of normalcy. An increased sense of community became transparent as we found new ways of connecting. Our accessibility to diverse digital resources enabled us to reach out to others in new and innovative ways. Through the application of these resources, we witnessed the celebration of frontline workers, unique suggested activities promoted to keep spirits high, and the creation and learning of new movements and dance. This increased sense of community and connection is expected following the aftermath of shared trauma, permitting individuals to construct a social script used to facilitate processing and grieving (Gortner & Pennebraker, 2003). Collectively, a sense of hope and resilience was felt across the world amid depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and grief. It became clear that people were holding tightly to anything that would enable them to keep their heads above water throughout this disruption.

The role and search for meaning was first theorized by Victor Frankl, who used his own experience as a prisoner in a Nazi Concentration camp to examine the relationship between meaning and adversity (Frankl, 1963). Frankl observed that the prisoners who were able to derive meaning through their experiences were the same ones likely to survive horrific conditions (Updegraff et al., 2008). In addition to adversity, Theorists and researchers alike contend that people most often seek meaning and explanation from unanticipated or unexpected events (Olson et al., 1996). The footprint left by the COVID19 pandemic has challenged previously held narratives for many, leading people to question their greater purpose and search for meaning.

Internal and External Influences

Social Psychology research Muldoon et al. (2020) suggests that while the capacity for trauma can destructively restructure a person's self-concept, it is not without noting that many people report renewed meaning, connection, and an enhanced sense of self following trauma or

adversity (Muldoon et al., 2020). Additionally, meaning-making, connection, and an enhanced sense of self are more likely to occur when group membership serves as a mediating force for social belonging and defining oneself in terms of a larger collective (Muldoon et al., 2020).

However, what happens when we change social groups based on the effects sustained from collective trauma? The systemic changes that have occurred following the onset of COVID19 have created a dissonance between self-concept and group status. An individual who once integrated their self-concept and group status as an employed worker may now belong to an entirely different group composed of individuals receiving unemployment benefits following a lay-off due to the pandemic. Research suggests that the group the individual strongly associates with the most is the one with the attributes that the individual most aligns with (Roth et al., 2018). However, are these attributes based on qualities identified as worthy by self or representative of expectations deemed worthy by external factors and influence? Can we ever really separate internal motivations and expectations from external, societal, and other macro- level expectations representative of group memberships, or are the two so deeply intertwined that we are unable to distinguish ourselves from others? This begs the question, if meaning can be fostered by defining oneself as part of a larger collective, can we ever obtain it internally, or is meaning entirely connected to systemic influence?

If one is intrinsically motivated by external means based on lived experience and societal expectations, one can argue that the exploration of meaning is inherently subjective. Despite advancements in research exploring contributing factors to obtain meaning using multidimensional models, the ambiguity remains the same and neglects the complexity of meaning as a construct. Psychological literature has sought to deconstruct this construct, with the greatest consensus being centered on three facets: significance, purpose, and coherence (Heintzelman & King, 2014; Steger, 2012). Authors Martela and Steger (2016) argue that exploring these three facets is merely one part of the exploration towards meaning and encourages separating metaphysic interpretations of meaning from psychological to decrease ambiguity (Martela & Steger, 2016). Through a psychological framework, meaning aims to look at subjective experiences from human beings through verbal report (2016); however, defining interpretations of the three facets used to categorize meaning may demonstrate significant variability despite steps to unify these terms as illustrated through the work of Martela and Stegler (2016).

Semantic Relationships

Because there is so much variability within subjective experiences, it may be helpful to understand semantics better to elicit more concrete interpretations. Meaning is defined as "the thing one intends to convey" (Miriam-Webster, n.d), which can be understood as a resolution or an understanding of a previously undefined concept. Research (Olson et al., 1996) identifies unexpected and unexplained events as contributing factors that often lead towards one's search for meaning, suggesting that if we lack an understanding of something, we must find a way to make sense of it. To make sense of uncertainty is to seek comfort and decrease distress. If cannot derive an explanation that serves to mediate our distress, we may look for guidance in other areas.

It is common for individuals to seek guidance in other areas in life, such as through faith – a sense of connectedness to something larger than themselves. To have faith means to trust, while trust can be defined as a firm belief in reliability (Miriam-Webster, n.d). Essentially, to trust is to be ok with not having enough information to securely approach a situation, yet, having the courage to sit with that uncertainty in hopes of something working positively or predictably, if not, being able to accept potential adversity. In examining the relationship between trust and meaning, they

appear to contradict one another. To trust is to accept uncertainty, while meaning seeks to find the answer to uncertainty. If meaning is derived through seeking information and further exploration, can trust and meaning co-exist, or does trust merely exist within this context to alleviate distress and suffering?

Disrupting the Unknown

Could we then conclude that there needs to be uncertainty for meaning to exist? To be uncertain is to have no information to foster understanding, and several factors prelude this concept including inaccessibility to resources. If we lack the means to explore the world, could traveling to new territories better increase our understanding and facilitate an evaluation of its merit? If we lacked financial means, could we derive meaning out of wealth derived by successful careers? Through education, learning, and exploration, we expand our knowledge and fill the gap where uncertainty lives. Once adequate information has been obtained, we are likely to feel less anxious, more comfortable, and secure because the uncertainty has been mediated by understanding and through a position where we are in control of facilitating this change.

Gratitude

When a point of understanding has been reached, is it possible to foster this newfound sense of meaning? Numerous studies (Park et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2008) have sought to investigate the relationship between life satisfaction and meaning, with research supporting a positive association when meaning is already present and or to be further pursued (Steger et al., 2008). Additionally, when satisfaction of life increases, it is to be expected that gratitude increases accordingly (Unanue et al., 2019), which suggests that gratitude can serve as a mediating force to foster the positive attributes and life satisfaction that arise out of meaning exploration. Further research is necessary to explore how developed meaning can be sustained; however, through critical analysis and in correlation with current research, it can be reasonably assumed that continued exploration may serve as the primary factor involved.

Moving Forward During Times of Heightened Uncertainty

As we witness the reopening of society following the restrictions set in place in response to the COVID19 pandemic, the days of holding tightly to small accomplishments and a celebrated sense of community begin to diminish in favor of re-integrating back into our previously established routines. However, reintegration into previously identified normalcy dismisses the warranted need for caution and flexibility following the experience of collective trauma.

The adversity we endured and continue to endure from the COVID19 pandemic has induced feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, enabling us to challenge previously held narratives and the world around us. For many, it was the first time a search for meaning included a reflective review of one's internal process outside of external influence and expectations, which likely has led to heightened levels of confusion and cognitive dissonances. It is necessary to move forward with any tragedy, trauma, or adversity; however, the move forward should be accompanied by patience, flexibility, and the integration of protective factors to promote collective healing.

Closing Remarks

Meaning cannot be quantified objectively as each one of us is comprised of a multitude of experiences that shape who we are; while it is possible to share defining terms of meaning based on similarities in experience, our understanding, and interpretation of experience will always remain subjective Many of us will seek further exploration to derive meaning when uncertainty arises to decrease anxiety and distress in correlation with current research. It is important to note that through this framework, the search for meaning has no finality. Through shifting our internal dialogue and narratives to accept this conceptualization, we are more likely to reap the benefits of this exploration, including increased levels of life satisfaction. When we can present as the best versions of ourselves, we can more readily practice incorporating gratitude to support internal healing and foster collective growth.

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