

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The power of sharing meaningful moments: A Buberian analysis of a counseling intervention

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Abstract

“All real living is meeting”. This study presents an empirical study of the way a sense of meaning-as-connectedness is brought about in a group counseling intervention in which meaningful moments are shared. Results from a thematic analysis exemplify and at one point extend Buber’s philosophy of meeting.

KEYWORDS

connectedness, group intervention, Martin Buber, meaning counseling, meaningful moments

INTRODUCTION

Meaningful moments are specific events in life that hold value and significance. They are acknowledged for their potential to enhance a sense of meaning in life: to transform our perspective on life and inspire purposeful action (Wong, 2012). Meaning being a central theme in humanistic counseling, this study investigates a group counseling intervention in which people share and reflect on meaningful moments.

Meaningful moments may vary in many ways. They may have positive as well as negative valence; they may be intentionally created or encountered unintentionally; they may be unique, atypical, and disruptive but also incorporated in the familiar routines of ordinary life (Van de Goor et al., 2017). Various studies provide insight into the way different types of meaningful moments may affect our lives. They show how meaningful moments may lead to new insights, guide the pursuit of long-term goals, increase a sense of life’s significance, and contribute to a self-transcendent orientation toward life as a whole (e.g., Anbeek et al., 2018; E. Hoffman et al., 2012; McDonald, 2008; Pillemer, 2001). Meaningful moments are often intentionally recalled, and they can provide persistent affirmation and guidance long after their original occurrence (Blagov & Singer, 2004; Pillemer, 2001). Retrospective reflection on meaningful moments was found to deepen insight into the meaning that is

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embedded in the moment and into the discovery of important sources of meaning in life (Van de Goor et al., 2020).

In sum, there is no doubt about the potential of (recollecting) these moments to enhance a sense of meaning in life. However, until now, research has solely focused on meaningful moments from a *personal* perspective: on the way one's own meaningful moments may enhance a sense of meaning in life. An *interactional* perspective has yet to be taken. What happens when people *share* stories of meaningful moments? How can a sense of meaning in life be enhanced not just by reflecting on one's own meaningful moments but by sharing these moments with others in a collective process?

To the humanistic counselor, this question is of interest, as it focuses on the *relational process*, a key factor in the humanistic counseling approach. The interaction between counselor and client, as well as between clients in a group, is acknowledged to be of vital importance for personal growth and healing (Scholl et al., 2013; Yalom, 2005). To gain deeper insight into this relational process, this study presents a qualitative case study of a meaningful moment group intervention. It explores the way participants experience the emergence of meaning in the process of sharing: choosing, telling, and listening to and reflecting on memories of meaningful moments with others.

Meaning is a multifaceted concept, and while the individual, separate self is prominent in many theories on meaning, this study takes a relational perspective to address the concept of meaning. For as humans we are not a closed system, Frankl (1966) points out, "being human profoundly means to be open to the world, a world, that is, which is replete with other beings to encounter and with meanings to fulfill" (p. 97). In recent articles, humanistic scholars point out that our well-being is inherently related to the larger relational processes we are part of and that we grow through and toward connection throughout our lives (Gergen, 2015; Jordan, 2017). Delle Fave and Soosai-Nathan's (2014) study supports this perception, noting how connectedness is the thread that runs through a variety of classifications of sources of meaning found in the literature. Their findings reflect Martin Buber's (2003) notion of man as a relational being; this relation is threefold: to other people, to the world and things, and to a larger whole.

Acknowledging connection as the heart of meaning, we have chosen Buber's (1958) philosophy of meaning-as-connectedness as a framework to study the emergence of meaning in the presented case study. According to Buber (1958, p. 11), "all real living is meeting": we experience meaning when we transcend the individual and experience an I-Thou connection. I-Thou is a relationship of openness, mutuality, and presence, an encounter in which we experience a deep connection with the other that breaches the barriers of individual being. I-Thou connections contrast I-It connections, in which the subject and object are separate and there is merely a functional relation. Buber's philosophy is particularly of value to this study, as it introduces several concepts to describe the *process* through which the I-Thou connection emerges, a process he calls "the dialogical" (Buber, 1957). In this article, we address this process through the works of Friedman, which provide elaboration and concretization of Buber's thoughts on dialog. Friedman's (2005, 2008) approach to counseling and therapy underscores the value of healing through meeting and honoring the individual's true nature, thereby clearly expressing key principles of humanistic counseling.

In Buber's philosophy, the process of meeting occurs in the *interhuman*: in the sphere that reaches out beyond the sphere of each individual, where we experience the absolute and unlimited (Buber, 1957; Friedman, 1999). This solely occurs when we enter the relation with our whole *being*, authentically and open, not keeping anything back or being concerned with our own image (Friedman, 2005). We encounter the other by what Buber calls *imagining the real*: by swinging over to the side of the other and experiencing vividly what the other is thinking, feeling, and willing, without losing our own ground or mixing in our own emotions or judgments (Buber, 1957; Friedman, 1996, 2005). Imagining the real leads to *confirmation*, to being seen in our whole being, in our uniqueness and in what we are called to become (Friedman, 2005). What follows from confirmation is *responsibility*, for as we are confirmed by the other, we are called to respond by becoming our highest selves (Buber, 2003; Friedman, 1996, 2005). Finally, Buber mentions that while I-Thou encounters are temporary, they may have a lasting impact, transforming the I and contributing to a different mode of

being in the world, seeing the new and unique in every situation (W. J. Morgan & Guilherme, 2012; Friedman, 2005).

Buber's philosophy also relates to this study in other ways. The I-Thou framework seamlessly applies to the material that is being shared in the intervention: the memories of meaningful moments. Meaningful moments have been found to show characteristics of self-transcendence (Van de Goor et al., 2020) and may therefore be seen as moments in or through which an I-Thou connection is experienced. It is of interest to see how this material influences the process of meaning emergence, that is, the way sharing memories of I-Thou experiences from the past influences the emergence of I-Thou connectedness in the here and now. The I-Thou framework also applies to this study on a meta-level, as it helps to indicate the relevance of this study. For Buber's (1958) distinction between I-Thou and I-It, first published almost 100 years ago, is still topical: in our increasingly accelerating society, a sense of meaning easily gets lost, and depression has become a major problem (Lépine & Briley, 2011; Rosa, 2013, 2016). Therefore, it is of value to explore how I-Thou connectedness may be facilitated.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the way this meaning-as-connectedness is brought about in a group counseling intervention. The research question is as follows: how does a sense of meaning emerge in the process of sharing meaningful moments in a group? Buber's (1957) philosophy of the emergence of meaning through the dialogical is used as a lens to study this process.

METHOD

In this section, we first introduce the meaningful moment group intervention that was deployed in the case study. After this, we present the design of the case study, describing the participants, the role of the counselor, the focus group that was held to collect data, and the way Buber's philosophy was grasped in six sensitizing concepts to be employed in the data collection and analysis.

Wonderful life: A meaningful moment group intervention

The Wonderful Life intervention is a group intervention in which people share and reflect on memories of meaningful moments, with the purpose of discovering and connecting to personal sources of meaning in life. The intervention is used both in the context of personal life and in work-related settings and has been developed and fine-tuned over the course of many years by the first author of this study in her work as a counselor. In the intervention, participants choose one single meaningful moment in answer to the following question: What if there is an afterlife? There, all your memories will be erased, except for one. Which memory do you choose to take with you to eternity? This question, derived from the Japanese movie *After Life* (Hirokazu, 1998), has proven to be a powerful way to elicit meaningful moments that stick out in the evaluation of a whole life, without directing to specific types of experiences (Van de Goor et al., 2017). After choosing a memory, a counselor guides the participants, typically a group of eight to 12 people, through a series of steps to elicit the meaning enclosed in this memory, as described in Table 1.

Case study design

Case study as a research method is an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary real-life phenomenon through detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships (Zainal, 2007). In this qualitative case study, the group intervention as a whole was taken as the unit of analysis. Two researchers also working as counselors performed the study, facilitating the intervention, moderating the focus groups in which participants elaborated on their

TABLE 1 The Wonderful Life intervention

Intervention step	Description
Welcome and “landing”	The counselor creates an open, appreciative, and relaxing atmosphere.
Choosing a memory to take	The counselor introduces the Wonderful Life Question and invites participants to choose one memory. Participants are given time, in silence, to make their choice.
Sharing memories in the group	One by one, participants share their memory. They are asked to tell it vividly, like a film fragment, without an explanation of their choice. Others listen in silence. After each story is told, participants are asked to reflect on what moved them in the story. They write these reactions on note-paper and give these to the storyteller, who receives them in silence. When all reflections are handed over, the next person takes his or her turn to share the chosen memory.
Reflection on the essence of the moment	Working on their own, participants reflect on the meaning of their own memory with help of several questions. The reactions received from the other participants serve as an inspiration.
Writing a letter for the future	Participants are asked to “let the memory speak” and write a letter to themselves in which they translate the insights from their memory into an advice for their future, that is, “what their memory calls them to do.”
Sharing the letters in the group	Participants are invited to read their letters to the others, who listen in silence.
Closure	Space for sharing reflections on the experience

experience, and analyzing the data. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Twente Ethics Committee, BCE 18706.

Participants and researchers/counselors

For this case study, the participants in the intervention were Dutch, white professionals in the domain of mental healthcare; the subject of meaning being of relevance to them personally, as a professional, and in their work with clients. To rule out issues of team dynamics, participants were selected who did not have a direct working relation. One of the participants hosted the intervention and invited the other participants. Apart from the host, the other participants were unknown to each other. To acquire rich data on the process of meaning-as-connectedness, participants were selected based on their interest in the subject and their capacities to reflect on their experience. A total of eight participants took part, four of whom were women and four were men, varying in age from 30 to 63. Further data on, for example, nationality, ethnicity, and work experience, were not collected, as the choice was made to focus solely on the process of meeting and not on the influence of the different individual backgrounds of the participants on this process.

The intervention, with a duration of 2.5 h, was facilitated by one of the researchers/counselors, while the other was also present. The facilitating researcher/counselor was trained in the Wonderful Life intervention by the developer of the intervention. The latter has been in the profession of training and counseling for more than 20 years. Having struggled with a sense of meaning in her own life and seeing others in the same process, she committed herself to helping people to enhance their sense of meaning in life and work. To gain a deeper understanding of the topic of meaning and its emergence, she did a PhD on meaning in life, focusing on humanistic, existential, and narrative psychology. The other researcher/counselor, who facilitated the intervention in this study, specializes in leadership development and team coaching. She combines systemic and appreciative approaches in

her practice and focuses on holding the space for coworkers and teams to dive into deeper levels of co-understanding.

During the intervention and the focus groups, both researchers/counselors carefully attended to create an open, empathic and nonjudgmental atmosphere that facilitates genuine interaction (Buber, 1958; Farber, 2007; Rogers, 1957). Valuing the importance of relating on an equal basis (Scholl et al., 2013), they actively participated in the first three steps of the intervention.

Data collection

This case study is part of a larger study on the Wonderful Life intervention in which not only qualitative but also quantitative data were collected to monitor the change in the participants' sense of connectedness directly before and after the intervention. This study solely focuses on qualitative data, as it aims to develop a deeper understanding of the *process* of meaning and the mechanisms that contribute to its emergence. The qualitative data were collected by conducting a focus group. A focus group is a form of group interviewing in which specifically the interaction within the group is of value to gain insight into a variety of perspectives on a certain topic (D. L. Morgan, 1997). The focus group was held directly after the intervention to catch participants in their real-time experience, thoughts, and feelings. To give full attention to each participant's voice, the focus group was performed in two separate subgroups of four participants. Each researcher/counselor moderated a separate subgroup, thereby reducing the possible impact of moderator bias on the overall outcomes. Within each subgroup, the *single* focus group method was employed (D. L. Morgan, 1997) in which all participants took part in the discussion as one group in one place, directly reacting to what others brought in to the conversation.

In the focus groups, the moderators started with two general questions on the participants' overall experience of the intervention: (1) what happened between you, and (2) to what did you connect? Next, they walked through the main steps of the intervention and specifically asked for the participants' experience with respect to the emergence of meaning and connectedness in each step. For this purpose, Buber's philosophy of dialog was operationalized into a set of five sensitizing concepts and related questions to address these concepts, as presented in Table 2. Buber's philosophy being quite abstract, specifically the works of Friedman (1996, 1999, 2005) were found to be helpful in this process. The interviewers were alert to these concepts being spontaneously mentioned by the participants in the focus groups, only actively bringing them into the conversation when this was not the case. Each interview was audio and video recorded and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were used to address each of the participants' contributions in the discussion and guarantee anonymity.

Data analysis

Following the method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), a thematic analysis was performed on the focus group transcripts by the two researchers/counselors involved in the data collection. First, the researchers put effort into familiarizing themselves with the discussions that took place in each of the focus groups, reading both of the transcripts several times. After this, the transcripts were taken together to be analyzed as a whole; the researchers focused on the participants' comments on the emergence of meaning throughout the intervention. The researchers individually coded the transcripts, taking both a deductive and inductive approach. Deductively, the data were coded using the Buberian sensitizing concepts as predefined categories, selecting phrases that exemplify these concepts and illustrate their relation to specific aspects of the intervention. To ensure reliability and align with the humanistic principle of honoring the subjective experience of participants (Scholl et al., 2013), the researchers took a narrative approach, which entails doing justice to the texts by staying close to the words and phrases used by participants. Inductively, the researchers coded phrases concerning other

TABLE 2 Sensitizing concepts from Buber's philosophy and questions used in the focus group

Concept and operationalization	Questions for focus group
Being: Entering spontaneously with one's whole being. <i>Is not</i> : Holding back, entering only rationally or emotionally, or being concerned with the own image.	How real and authentic did you show yourself/see the others? How did this happen?
Imagining the real: Seeing the other's uniqueness and wholeness. Intensely "swinging over" to the other's side, experiencing the other's perspective without giving up one's own reality. <i>Is not</i> generalization, objective understanding, one's own truth, imagination, or judgment.	How did you experience what the others shared? How did you see the other in what was shared? How did this happen?
Confirmation: Being seen in your whole being and uniqueness, as the person you are called to become: with the capacity to actualize your own potential. <i>Is not</i> solely social, nor does it involve being seen only in appearance.	How were you seen by others in what you shared? How did this happen?
Responsibility: Being called to answer and become your highest self. Implies being free to respond to your own vocation. <i>Is not</i> being unfree, <i>nor</i> being free to choose what you want to be. <i>Is</i> opened up through confirmation.	What is the appeal from your own memory/letter? What is the appeal from the memories/letters of others?
Meeting: The I-Thou encounter that is the essence of meaning: Overcoming separateness, transcending individual limitations, and experiencing relatedness to other human beings, to nature and/or to "the mystery of being." Meeting transforms the I and ideally will have a long-term impact on life.	Did you experience a change in connection when sharing your memory/letter? And when listening to others? What was the change and how did this happen?

factors that contribute to the emergence of meaning, being specifically attentive to factors that extend the Buberian sensitizing concepts or contradict them (i.e., the black swans, Taleb, 2007). After this round of coding, the researchers compared and discussed their results, bringing the codes together to develop an overview of *concepts* in the process of meeting and related *aspects of the intervention*. This overview was discussed with the other two authors of this study (who were not part of the data collection procedure) until intersubjective agreement was reached. These coauthors functioned as critical readers, who questioned overly favorable analysis in support of finding an I-Thou relationship. They also explicitly asked for counterevidence to avoid cherry picking. Using the input from the coauthors, the researchers performed a final round of coding to ensure that the developed overview accurately represented the data.

RESULTS

How is a sense of meaning-as-connectedness brought about throughout the meaningful moment intervention? In this section, we present the results of the analysis of the focus group sessions. Overall, the results across the two focus groups were surprisingly similar, with only minor disagreements between participants, as will be shown. The results mainly relate to comments made by multiple participants, although sometimes only a single participant was found to refer to a specific aspect of the emergence of meaning. In the data, all of the Buberian concepts were found to appear; the data exemplify and sometimes extend these concepts without contradictions. One additional concept was found: *swinging back*. The following paragraphs illustrate these concepts and the way the different aspects of the

TABLE 3 (Buberian) concepts in the process of meeting and related aspects of the intervention

Concept and empirical findings	Related aspects of the intervention
Being: Genuine; open and spontaneous; respectful; without façade, trepidation, or hesitance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choosing, sharing, and listening to memories in answer to the Wonderful Life Question • Listening in silence • Reciprocity of telling and listening • Writing a letter as a response to the universal values underlying the chosen memory
Imagining the real: Envisioning the other’s story; bodily feeling the story; arousal of emotions; seeing the wholeness of the other: seeing the other in his or her authenticity and values, in a more complete way.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening to memories that are vividly told • Seeing the other in their written reactions • Witnessing the way others transform the values underlying their memory from the past into a letter for the future
Confirmation: Being seen in a warm and affirmative way; lack of criticism; disclosure of personal values; widening perspective of the self; transforming.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written reactions of others—but not <i>all</i> of the reactions • Silence, lack of immediate reaction
Responsibility: Granting the self something for the future; value-related; mild and self-compassionate though not without obligation; follows from confirmation; vulnerable; genuine responding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing a letter in response to the values and longings in the chosen memory, connecting past and future • Reading the letter out loud to others • Listening to and resonating with the message in letters of others (→ <i>swinging back</i>)
Swinging back (new): Finding or searching for similarities to the other; taking back to the own side from what was encountered on the side of the other.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening to and resonating with the memories of others • Listening to and resonating with the letters of others (→ <i>responsibility</i>)
Meeting: Occurring in the interhuman; physically felt, not rational; connecting to others, to humanity, to shared human values, to a larger reality; transforming impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing the own memory as a (vulnerable) means of self-expression (→ <i>being</i>) • Sharing the own letter as a (vulnerable) means of self-expression (→ <i>being</i>) • Listening to and being moved by the memories of others (→ <i>imagining the real</i>) • Witnessing others in their (vulnerable) process of transforming the memory into a letter (→ <i>imagining the real</i>) • Seeing the others in their written reactions (→ <i>imagining the real</i>) • Listening to and resonating with the memories of others (→ <i>swinging back</i>)

meaningful moment intervention relate to their appearance. Table 3 gives an overview of these findings. All names of participants are pseudonyms; to distinguish between the two focus groups, names starting with A relate to focus group 1, and names starting with B relate to focus group 2.

Being

In Buber’s philosophy, meeting requires entering the relation with the whole being (Friedman, 2005). Participants shared how the *Wonderful Life Question* contributed to this way of being present, leading them to choose a moment that is genuinely meaningful. “We could have asked a different question, but what did this particular question do?” the moderator asked the group. “You get to the essence very quickly,” Amelia answered, “it is not just any question you are asking.” Anne commented that she did not need to think, as “it was immediately that picture that emerged.” However, the question initially also led to several other reactions. Amelia was irritated by the question at first, as it felt like depriving people and aspects of her life that were not in the chosen memory. Others started philosophizing about

the afterlife, mentioning that to participate in the intervention, “it is necessary to join the thought experiment.” The Wonderful Life Question was also mentioned to have an impact on a *being* mode of listening. “You know everybody is going to tell something that is of great value,” Anne explained about this attitude, which “immediately leads to an attitude of respectful listening,” according to Barbara. Alex described this as “careful and tender listening to what the other is saying. Because this is really a very important question.”

Listening in *silence* throughout the intervention relates to being in a similar way. Although the silence was slightly uncomfortable at first to some, the lack of interference leaves the story intact: “So it’s mainly in just letting the story be, be what it is,” Amelia said, “you tell your story, it is yours.” It is a different mode of listening, she remarked, “often, people listen to accomplish something with that listening. So I listen to you and then next, I want to ask a question in return, and then blablabla. [] But now we were only asked to listen.” “And what does that do?” the moderator asked her, to which she answered “that I really listen to what you are telling.” In this comment, we see how Amelia contrasts her open and unaffected listening experience in the intervention to an I-It mode of listening, in which her focus is on herself and her own concern.

Participants also mentioned that the *reciprocity* of telling and listening in the intervention contributes to being. Although several participants noted that there was some hesitance at first, they were surprised how quickly they shared their very personal memories and letters without holding back. “I don’t know you at all, and you still immediately start sharing,” Britt remarked, which is “definitely not self-evident,” Benjamin said. The reciprocity in the intervention clearly relates to this; in Amelia’s words, “that you listen, but that you subsequently realize that when you or when I tell my story, that you will also be listened to. Because that is the agreement.” Or as Bert noted, “the giving and receiving and the, the attentive attitude of the others and, yes, that reinforces each other.”

Finally, Buber’s being is found in comments from several participants on writing their letter. Specifically, they note how *writing the letter in answer to the universal values underlying their chosen memory* encouraged them to write freely, without trepidation. “It’s just about values; values that actually apply to everyone,” as Benjamin noted. Anthony opposed the letter to the façade that is often put up when writing a curriculum vitae, “often you have to sell yourself in that way, because others expect that of you,” he said. However, he remarked that underneath this letter “is a completely different essence. Here, there are human values underlying it; values that actually may be manifested more.” These values helped him to overcome any hesitation in writing his letter.

Imagining the real

How did the participants see the others during the intervention? In their comments on various aspects of the intervention, many references were found to imagining the real. First, the *vivid way participants described their chosen memories*, as instructed, was found to contribute to imagining the real. “A real image appears,” Britt, noted, “you *see* that film.” And then “you get more carried away,” Benjamin added. Many participants noticed the sensory qualities of the memories that were shared: the tangible description of the surroundings, smells and atmosphere, and how storytellers were moved when telling their story. They reported how this, in turn, moved them as a listener, leading to real, physically felt emotions. To Bert it was “moving, sometimes ... [] also just because of the energy that such a memory contains.” An energy that Benjamin felt in his body: “A kind of energy of, here, struck in my stomach, yes, whoa.” Which did not happen once, but kept happening, with every story he heard, he said: “every time again, well now I can’t be touched again but yes, I can, again.” To Bert, this vivid living through the other’s story happened even when it reflected an experience he could never have in his own life. Commenting on Britt’s memory of giving birth, he said, “I really felt, I think, also the relief and I think the ease of that delivery! Yes, wow! [] Yes, so overwhelming!” In these comments on the way participants experienced the stories of the others, we find a reference to “swinging over to the side of the other” as an aspect of imagining the real.

Apart from seeing the other in the memory that was shared, Amelia specifically mentioned that she also saw the others in their *written reaction to the memory* that she herself shared in the group. “And what I found to be really beautiful is that, in the reaction, you again see the other,” she explained—a comment which may also be related to imagining the real.

Finally, several participants’ reports on witnessing the process of others *transforming their chosen memory into a letter for the future* give color to Buber’s notion of “seeing the wholeness of the other” in imagining the real. Their comments highlight different aspects of this wholeness. “That connection, between what we started with and what we finally finished with, that was wonderful to see,” Amelia said. She refers to wholeness in terms of opening up to a deeper, more *authentic* knowing of the other. In Anthony’s comments, we find a relation between wholeness and *values*: “listening to the way someone gives value to, to a tree, to things, the way they connect their values to them. [] They lead me to see things I usually do not see,” he explained. Being the only participant who knew all of the others, he noted how this led him to see the others in a more *complete* way. “That’s a different level, right, that is the depth you’re looking for. [] But I don’t see a different person! I see the same one!” he explained.

Confirmation

In the dialogical process, imagining the real contributes to confirmation, to being seen in an affirmative way (Friedman, 2005). Several participants noted that listening to the memories *in silence, with solely a written reaction after the story is told*, contributed to their sense of being confirmed. “What caused you to be seen?” the moderator asked. “Not immediately reacting, you know, that causes, that you notice that people really resonate on the story, that they really listen,” Bert answered. Alex articulated that he experienced “genuine interest, there were no improvements.” Participants used words as “warm” and “affirmative” to express this experience of being seen in the intervention. “Sometimes you see words that you recognize, so that is a confirmation that you are seen, and sometimes you think: well, I hadn’t seen it that way yet,” Benjamin commented on the reactions. This comment reflects what was mentioned by almost all of the participants: that the written reactions led to a widened perspective on their own life and their personal values, expanding the self. To Barbara, the words of others helped to make the implicit more explicit: “that you ... do have that feeling but haven’t found the words for it yet. However, that it’s, that it’s right, to say so,” she explained. “Those notes, they showed me something, they made visible to me what I don’t see myself,” Anthony said. To Alex, the comments on paper helped him to understand the value of his memory and specifically the meaning of specific elements in his memory: how a water pool in his chosen memory stands for trust and freedom. These comments reflect not only the supportive aspect of confirmation but also the broadening aspect of being seen in your potential, who you can become, but have not yet opened our eyes to. They show how confirmation involves not only affirmation of the known and familiar but may also include a change in self-perception, that is, a transformation.

However, specifically Benjamin and Amelia mentioned that they did not find confirmation in *all* of the written reactions; Benjamin referring to this in terms of the “mirror of the other.” “Sometimes I thought: ooh!” Amelia said. “And what does ooh mean?” the moderator asked her. “Those are the things I didn’t recognize. [] The other reflects from his or her side. And some of those things do appeal to me, and other things don’t.”

Responsibility

According to Buber, responsibility follows from confirmation (Buber, 2003; Friedman, 1996, 2005). Our data support this premise, which was specifically found in the phase of writing a letter for the

future. Participants noted how the fact that the *letter is written in response to their chosen memory* contributes to this. “You take your memory to the future and from that experience you derive your strengths, and then you employ them,” Britt explained. “What does that memory grant you, what do you want to grant to *yourself*, actually,” as Benjamin said. Participants recognized the letters as a call to respond to the values and longings in their chosen memory, using words such as “mildness” and “self-compassion” to express their feelings about their letters. “You look at the future, so you grant yourself that happiness...” as Britt said. Here, we see how the responsibility expressed in the letters is mild in nature, although not without obligation. “It is connected to a deeper value in yourself, so the chance that you will really put it to practice only increases,” as Benjamin said. Participants commented that the confirmation they experienced through the written reactions contributed to their sense of responsibility and gave them the courage to express this responsibility. “Because of those notes, now I dare to give words to it more easily. I think, well, why wouldn’t I say it, the others also say it about me!” as Anthony exclaimed.

To several participants, *reading the letter out loud* also led to a deeper sense of responsibility. “When you share your letter, you commit yourself even more to it. Then it becomes *real!*” as Anne said. “By sharing it, I feel more, a stronger connection to, to yourself. Because you hear yourself saying what you wrote,” Benjamin said. “Then you have to do it,” Barbara commented on him. “Well, sort of,” he replied, “because it becomes more your own. That helps me.” In sharing the letter in the group, Bert mentioned that it felt vulnerable to do this, specifically because the other participants had also heard his chosen memory and therefore could relate these two and judge his sincerity. “Are you honest to yourself, or something. Yes, they can see that too.” In this comment, we see how reading the letter out loud triggers what Buber (2003) calls “genuine responding.”

Finally, several participants commented on the way they also responded to letters of the others: how the letters of others also speak to them personally. “Of some of the advices that came by I thought ‘well, that’s also a good advice for me,’” as Bert said. Amelia explained that this is caused by the fact that the letters clearly expressed the values underlying the memories that she listened to: “and then I thought to myself, o yes, great, I should go and play!” This finding sheds a different light on Buber’s notion of responsibility: how participants also “swing back” from the letter of the other and take up its message as a call to personal action.

Swinging back

This last comment on responsibility reveals the additional concept found to relate to the emergence of meaning in the intervention: swinging back. Swinging back may be seen as the counterpart of imagining the real: it relates to moving back to the reality of one’s own personal life, after swinging over to the reality of the other. This was described by several participants when *listening to the letters of others and taking a personal message* from it and also in the first phase of the intervention in listening to the memories of others. They tell of *finding or actively searching for similar memories in their own life*. It “evokes images in my own life,” as Anne said, or in Britt’s words: “o yes, o yes! Those ‘o yes’ moments.” To Anthony, moving back from these memories to his own life was an enriching experience. “When someone tells about being in that bubble, I think: we all, we all have a bubble so I start thinking about my own bubble,” he explained. “And then I think, well that is another way of dealing with a bubble!” To Bert, however, it triggered other feelings. He said that the story of giving birth really moved him, after which the moderator asked him: “and what was that? To what did you connect?” “To me that is in missing out,” he answered. “You project it on yourself,” Britt replied. “Yes. Kids, that’s something I would have liked to experience,” Bert answered. This swinging back from the memories to one’s own life was also found to manifest itself in the written reactions, as described earlier: participants did not feel confirmed by all of the reactions, noting how these also revealed the reality of the other.

Meeting

According to Buber (1958, p.11), the essence of meaning is in meeting. Overall, participants made several comments on the nature of meeting in the intervention. "Together, you experience something unique," Amelia summarized, "and that is not just your own experience, it really happens in connection with the others." This comment reflects Buber's (1957) notion of meeting occurring in the interhuman. Several participants mentioned that they experienced this meeting in a very vivid and *physical* way. "A physical undercurrent connection, [] which wasn't visible, but I did feel it," as Benjamin explained. "You *know* it's actually there, but now you also really see it!" Anthony exclaimed. "And what then is 'it'?" the moderator asked. "That connection between people without being attached by an umbilical cord," he answered.

Looking at what participants said about the emergence of meaning, we find the concepts of *being*, *imagining* the real and *swinging* back to contribute to meeting. Concerning *being*, participants noted how expressing their true selves by sharing their memory and letter with others contributed to meeting. "You get more connected as a group. Because again, you express something," as Benjamin noted about sharing his letter. Several participants emphasized the vulnerability of this sharing; Bert said that "stepping over this trepidation and just doing it" led him to feel a deeper connection to the others. Concerning *imagining the real*, participants said that they experienced meeting in listening to the memories and to the letters of others, as well as in seeing the other in his or her written reactions. Listening to the memories was addressed by Anne in terms of wonder: "wonder about the story of the others. And the way they experienced that and how that, in turn, moves me." She explained that "you get a different kind of connection because it touches your feelings, and you let go of your head, your thinking." In being a witness to the other's vulnerable process from memory to letter, participants also experienced a deeper connection to the other. "Beautiful that everyone dared to show so much vulnerability. [] Just honest and open and sincere," as Barbara declared. Finally, specifically Amelia mentioned how seeing the other in his or her written reactions contributed to meeting this person: "You tell your story, it is yours. And from it, I take something for myself. And that can be, I can, I can take out something completely different than you. And still, somewhere we have that connection." Finally, *swinging back* was found to contribute to meeting as well. Finding similarities in your own life leads to a sense of connection to the other, several participants said. "Because a memory, something that someone shares, that you can picture it yourself, a picture that is close to something that you experienced yourself," Anne explained. "And that almost instantly connects to the other," Amelia added.

What or whom did the participants meet? Most comments, as shown above, relate to *meeting other participants* in the intervention to "feeling a deeper connection to each other", as Benjamin expressed. However, participants also referred to a kind of meeting that transcended the group. Several remarks were made about *feeling a connection to humanity* and *to shared human values*, to what is common to us all. As Barbara commented, "the realization, or the confirmation, that everybody is actually just the same, and experiences things, and that things stay with them from those experiences, and that that has an impact. The similarities in that. Everybody ... everybody is different but also the same, to say..." Anthony specifically connected to the nature of humanity and to our inherent goodness. While talking about listening to the letters of others, the moderator asked him: "So you see how someone clarifies, the words and the values, and, how does that affect you?" "It makes me feel good to see that people are actually just good," he answered. "So ... And I know, in the future, whoever I will meet, that there is always this value somewhere beneath, and sometimes people have been so grind down that you don't get their stories into the open in this way." Anthony also elaborated on another aspect of meeting. In his comments, he shows how he not only met the others in the memories they shared but also a *larger reality of life*:

When they were telling ... I was still on the beach with Alex, looking at the mountains with Amelia, and I saw you with the curls of your daughter ... I was in all those stories.

[] In fact, you are still connected to the other's story, and you just move on in the story. []
Actually, it is one big story. In which people show different scenes. That's what I mean
with appearing, that I think: wow!

This comment shows how this meeting led to a *transformation* of Anthony's perspective. The appearance of "one big story" seems to have opened him up to the wholeness of life by seeing how the different stories are all pieces of this whole. Meeting this self-transcendent larger reality led him to "start thinking differently," he said, and it changed his perspective on his own life: "it helps me to broaden my own bitterness, the narrowness in which I got stuck." Finally, several participants mentioned that they experienced a stronger *connection to themselves*. "It connects between the others and then also more to myself," as Anne explained.

DISCUSSION

The presented case study of a meaningful moment group intervention is a rich account of the emergence of meaning-as-connectedness, giving insight into various aspects of the relational process, which is a crucial factor in humanistic counseling (Cooper, 2005; Scholl et al., 2013; Yalom, 2005). Martin Buber's (1957, 1958, 2003) philosophy of meeting was chosen as a framework to study this process. In this investigation, Friedman's (1996, 1999, 2005, 2008) works specifically on Buber were found to be of value, as his operationalization of Buber's philosophy in the context of psychology and therapy sharpened the lens for an in-depth analysis of the process of meeting throughout the counseling intervention.

Within the relational process, building a respectful, open and equal relationship is a key priority (Farber, 2007; Scholl et al., 2013; Vanhooren, 2019a). Findings show that the Wonderful Life Question, the silence and the reciprocity of telling and listening in the intervention facilitate this authentic and nonjudgmental way of entering the relation (i.e., Buber's *being*). They reflect the core conditions of relational depth as mentioned by Rogers (1989): unconditional positive regard, genuineness, and empathy. Findings on Buber's *imagining the real* and the additional concept of *swinging back* specifically exemplify the process of empathizing: they show how listening to the vividly told memories and vulnerable letters of others contributes to seeing the other in a more complete way. These findings resonate with the holistic, whole-person approach (Hansen, 2012), illustrating a subjective empathy stance (Clark & Simpson, 2013). In addition, listening to the memories and letters of others leads to the search for similarities in one's own life. Although related to "not losing one's own ground" as the counterpart of "swinging over to the side of the other" in Buber's *imagining the real* (Buber, 1957; Friedman, 1996, 2005), Buber does not address the value of what seems to be a temporal flow of swinging back and forth, taking back to one's own side from what was encountered on the other side. Findings show how this facilitates a sense of *meeting* in the sense of connecting to other participants as well to humanity, thereby contributing to the group therapeutic factors of cohesiveness and universality (Yalom, 2005). Alongside this, a connection to human values and to a larger reality of life may be experienced, which has a transformative impact, that is, an instillation of hope (Yalom, 2005). The study supports Gendlin's notion that the emergence of meaning involves a felt physical shift (Gendlin, 1996) and relates to studies that elaborate on the relation between meaning and the specific emotional states of wonder, being moved and elevation (Cova & Deonna, 2014; Haidt, 2000; Schneider, 2009; Vasalou, 2015).

Findings on the Buberian concepts of *confirmation* and *responsibility* reveal the impact of this process of meeting on the participant and relate to the counseling purposes of personal growth, increasing self-directedness and healing (Rogers, 1989; Scholl et al., 2013; Yalom, 2005). They show how silent, written reactions to the chosen memories aid confirmation and may broaden self-perception, while a self-compassionate sense of responsibility is expressed through the letters that connect the past and future.

Contemplating on the study, the perspective of meaning-as-connectedness counters the typically Western approach to meaning and (humanistic) counseling that places value on the individual rather than on the relational (Bullock, 1985; Gergen, 2006). Findings express the human longing for connection and underscore the necessity of the other and his or her story to experience ourselves not as solitary, autonomous beings but as part of a larger, meaningful whole. We hope the findings may contribute to an approach to meaning counseling that is holistic in the sense of regarding the client not solely as a whole *individual* but as a *relational* being (Davidson, 2000; Gergen, 2009), thereby decentering the Western paradigm.

Implications for counseling practice

The empirical findings lead to suggestions that may directly be put to practice in humanistic counseling. In this paragraph, we elaborate on two aspects of this practice: on facilitating the relational process between participants in a group, and on working with meaningful moments. First, focusing not on the *dyadic* relation between counselor and client but on the interactional process *between participants* in a group, the study illustrates the way counselors may contribute to equality, empathy, and respect between participants. The appreciative use of silence, the vivid manner of personal storytelling, the lack of immediate reaction, and the reciprocity of telling and listening helps to create an atmosphere of appreciation for each participant as a whole being. The findings align with the counselor factors of tuning in, stillness and genuine connection (Tangen & Cahswell, 2016), showing how these may be operationalized in a group setting, thereby contributing to cohesiveness and universality (Yalom, 2005). In addition, the study highlights that meeting is a physical experience. The awareness of these bodily sensations is acknowledged to be of great value in the therapeutic process (Leijssen, 2007; Vanhooren, 2019b), and we believe there is a great opportunity to address these physical and emotional aspects of meaning more prominently in both the Wonderful Life intervention and other meaning-enhancing interventions.

Next, we elaborate on the value of working with meaningful moments in the counseling process that appear to function as gateways to *being* and facilitate the self-transcendent experience of connecting not only to other participants but also to humanity and the larger whole of life. By sharing meaningful moments, “one big story” appears, which has a transforming impact. It is of value to further investigate the way this quality of sharing meaningful moments may be employed in meaning-enhancing interventions. In addition, participants pointed to the appreciative way the intervention builds on both the past (one memory) and future orientation (the afterlife) of the Wonderful Life Question used to elicit meaningful moments, translating the values underlying the chosen memory in a letter with a call to action. The Wonderful Life intervention thereby exemplifies Bohart’s notion of counseling as a process of creation rather than repairing damage (Bohart, 2003). It relates to meaning-eliciting interventions that make use of the power of reminiscence (Westerhof, 2019; Westerhof et al., 2010), as well as to interventions in the field of narrative futuring (Sools & Mooren, 2012; Sools et al., 2015).

Within themselves, people have vast resources for self-understanding to change their self-concept, attitudes, and behavior (Rogers, 1989). Meaningful moments chosen in answer to the Wonderful Life Question appear to be one of these resources and a specifically compact and powerful one. However, the question also entails a risk, as the idea of an afterlife and the restriction of choosing only one memory may distract participants and lead to unwanted effects.

Limitations and future research

To obtain a rich account of the process of meaning-as-connectedness, the case study was carried out in circumstances as ideal as possible for this purpose. We worked with highly motivated health-care professionals with the skills to reflect on their experience, with a facilitator who is familiar with

creating a safe and appreciative setting, and we split the focus group into two smaller subgroups to collect detailed, nuanced, and multilayered data. Reflecting on these choices in the research design, each of these factors appears to have positively contributed to the outcomes.

However, concerning the participants, entering with their whole being and respectful listening may also be part of their professional attitude. Therefore, one may question the degree to which the findings may be attributed to the intervention. While over the years of working with the intervention, similar effects have been observed in other groups, further research is necessary to assess the degree to which the results may be generalized. It is recommended to investigate the impact of less ideal conditions on the outcomes, for example, working with participants who are (professionally) more acquainted with the I-It mode of being or applying the intervention in situations when conflicts or safety issues threaten I-Thou relations.

Although the findings were similar across both subgroups, reliability may be enhanced by separating the roles of the counselors and researchers in the analysis as well as in the focus groups. Additionally, the fact that the focus groups were held directly after the intervention demanded participants to immediately change from the confirming I-Thou mode of being to a more reflective and critical I-It related attitude, with the counselor now in a different role. Although not observed by the moderators, this bold switch may have influenced their contributions to the discussion.

Finally, it is of importance to note that the humanistic, Buberian approach employed in this case study does not address cultural or racial differences (L. Hoffman et al., 2014), and differences in the background of each of the participants were not taken into account. In light of the increased polarization in society, this may be seen as a shortcoming but also as an opportunity. Findings reveal the way the Wonderful Life intervention facilitates empathy and touches people at a deeper level, the level of what it means to be human: “everybody is different but also the same.” Therefore, it is promising to investigate the way the intervention may be employed as a strategy to transform the dominant, mainly Western and white paradigms in society and connect people to the deeper values that we all share.

CONCLUSION

This study is an empirical account of the way a sense of meaning-as-connectedness unfolds in the process of sharing meaningful moments in a group intervention. Building on Martin Buber’s (1957, 1958, 2003) philosophy of meeting as the essence of meaning, it gives insight into the way sharing meaningful moments may lead to a stronger connection with the self, with other participants in the group, and to a self-transcendent sense of connection to humanity and the larger whole of life. On a practical level, the study shows what humanistic counselors can do to facilitate the process of meeting when working with groups. It articulates the role of silence and postponed reacting, the use of vividly told narratives, the value of participants witnessing each other in their process of meaning discovery, and the importance of reciprocity in giving and receiving throughout the group process. More specifically, the study offers insight into the Wonderful Life intervention as a means to elicit meaningful moments and facilitate confirmation and responsibility in the process of meeting others. For as Buber (1958, p. 11) says, “all real living is meeting,” or in the words of one of the participants: “it is the other who gives meaning.”

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How to cite this article: van de Goor, J., Sools, A. M., Smits, M. M., & Westerhof, G. J. (2022). The power of sharing meaningful moments: A Buberian analysis of a counseling intervention. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1002/johc.12194>