

Public Abstract

First Name:Samantha

Middle Name:Jo

Last Name:Heintzelman

Adviser's First Name:Laura

Adviser's Last Name:King

Co-Adviser's First Name:

Co-Adviser's Last Name:

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Title:The Motivational Primacy of Environmental Coherence: Self-derogation and the Experience of Meaning in Life

Although the human tendency to make self-serving attributions is well-documented, not all behaviors and cognitions are primarily self-serving. Victims blame themselves for uncontrollable circumstances and individuals derogate themselves to maintain a sense that the world is just. Callan and colleagues (2014) found that random negative outcomes result in lowered self-esteem, increased perceptions that one deserves bad outcomes, and spurred self-detrimental behaviors. How might these self-defeating processes be explained? I examined whether such processes might serve to maintain a broader sense of coherence that allows the experience of life as meaningful. Participants (N = 1199) wrote about past bad or good breaks, or daily activities, and then rated self-esteem, deservingness of bad outcomes, and meaning in life and coherence. I found no support for the prediction that self-esteem would negatively relate (or deservingness of bad outcome beliefs would positively relate) to meaning in life following reminders of bad breaks. Some evidence emerged suggesting that self-esteem was less strongly related to coherence in the good breaks condition compared to controls. Exploratory analyses examined the role of depression in processes involved in the experience of life as meaningful. The manipulation had stronger effects on meaning in life in participants experiencing depressive symptoms compared to those who were not. Furthermore, self-esteem was more strongly related to meaning in life in individuals experiencing some depression compared to the non-depressed participants, especially in the bad breaks condition. Implications for this work regarding the study of meaning in life and future directions regarding this research question are discussed.