

Remember that time in the airplane when the flight attendant threw the food packages at the passengers? You would remember such an experience, and might tell people a story about it: “You know what happened on my flight?” Stories are descriptions of script violations of an interesting sort. But, suppose that this happened twice, or five times; suppose it happened every time you flew a particular airline. Then, you would match one script violation with another, to realize that it wasn’t a script violation at all, just a different script you hadn’t known about. Learning depends on being able to remember when and how a script failed, marking that failure with a memory or story about the failure event, and then being able to recognize a similar incident and make a new script.

Scripts fail all the time. This is why people have trouble understanding each other. Their scripts are not identical. What one person assumes about a situation—the script he or she has built because of the experiences he or she has had—may not match another’s because that person has had different experiences. Children get upset when their scripts fail. They cry because what they assumed would happen didn’t happen. Their world model is naive and faulty. But they recover day by day, growing scripts that are just like the ones that adults have. They do this by expecting, failing, explaining their failure (maybe they ask someone for help), and making a new expectation, which will probably fail too someday. This cycle of understanding is a means by which people can learn every day from every experience.

Some people stop learning. They expect all scripts to be followed the way they always were. They get angry when a fork is on the wrong side of a plate because that’s the way it has always been and has to be. All people have such rigidity in their scripts. They have scripts that others wouldn’t consider violating because they want to live in an orderly world. People confuse other people when they fail to follow culturally agreed upon scripts. People depend on other people to follow the rules. And, their understanding of the behavior of others depends on everyone agreeing to behave in restaurants the way people behave in restaurants. It is so much easier to communicate that way.

Scripts dominate people’s thinking lives. They organize people’s memories, they drive people’s comprehension, and they cause learning to happen when they fail.

Roger C. Schank

See also Expectations; Memory; Schemas

Further Readings

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SEARCH FOR MEANING IN LIFE

Definition

The search for meaning in life refers to the idea that individuals are strongly motivated to find meaning in their lives, that is, to be able to understand the nature of their personal existence, and feel it is significant and purposeful. Life feels meaningful to people when they can satisfactorily answer the big questions about their lives, such as who am I, why am I here, what is truly important to me, what am I supposed to do with my life. That finding meaning in life is considered a fundamental motivation by some means that human beings must perceive a sufficient amount of meaning in their lives. In other words, feeling that one’s life is significant, comprehensible, or purposeful may be necessary for human psychological functioning.

Background and History

For millennia, attempting to understand what makes life meaningful had been the task of artists, theologians, and philosophers. Following World War I, some influential philosophers asserted that life is inherently meaningless. They believed that there was no higher purpose to the universe, and therefore people were all alone in trying to figure out what their individual lives were all about. However, people will go to great lengths to defend their ideas of what life is really all about. In other words, they firmly hold onto their life meanings. For example, many people strive to defend specific religious, moral, or scientific beliefs in the face of contradictory opinions or beliefs. From this

observation, several psychologists proposed that people must be motivated to find meaning in their lives.

Alfred Adler said that people innately strive to accomplish the purpose of their lives, particularly through participation in social activities. Erik Erikson proposed the need for self-integration in later life. In this approach, searching for meaning focuses on struggling to understand one's life experiences and what it all has meant in the Big Picture. Eric Fromm stressed the importance of meaning in human life and suggested that feeling alienated from others and mindlessly feeling, thinking, and acting during daily and work activities reduces our ability to find life meaningful. Abraham Maslow thought meaning would arise from self-actualization, or achieving one's full potential.

Fromm's ideas about alienation and automatization in modern life echo work by Viktor Frankl, the person who is most closely associated with psychological work on meaning in life. Frankl's experiences as a survivor of Germany's World War II concentration camps convinced him of the importance of finding a purpose for living. He felt that the biggest difference between those who did and did not survive the horrific camps was not how much they were forced to work, how little they had to eat, or how exposed to the elements they were (everyone had to work to exhaustion, no one had enough to eat, and all were greatly exposed to adverse weather). Instead, Frankl believed that Friedrich Nietzsche's maxim—by having “our own *why* of life we shall get along with almost any *how*”—made the critical difference. Frankl believed that all people must find their own, unique *why*—in other words, their purpose in life. He wrote that those who found some meaning or purpose were more likely to survive the concentration camps, and those who had lost their purpose were almost certainly doomed. Following Frankl's writings, and his founding of logotherapy (literally, meaning-healing), psychological work on the importance of searching for meaning accelerated dramatically. Roy Baumeister's argument that meaning in life is rooted largely in people's strivings for feelings of purpose, value in what they do, control and capability, and self-worth ushered in the modern era of social psychological research into the search for meaning.

Two important distinctions must be made between the search for meaning in life and related psychological processes. First, although Frankl wrote that the will to meaning drove each person to find the unique meaning of his or her own life, others distinguished between searching for meaning and having meaning. A common assumption is that only people without

meaning in life would search for it. Essentially, the assumption was that searching for and feeling the presence of meaning in life were opposite ends of the same continuum.

Several lines of research, however, demonstrate that searching for meaning is different from having meaning. Psychological measures of how much people are searching for meaning and how much meaning people feel in their lives have very little overlap. Also, the assumption that searching for and having meaning are opposite versions of the same thing may be culturally bound. That is to say, among European Americans (who often think in terms of individuality and dichotomies), there is a small, inverse relation between the two (the less you have, the more you search, and vice versa), whereas some evidence suggests that among people from cultures that are more traditionally collectivistic or holistic (who often think in terms of relationships or harmony, e.g., Japan), the two variables may be positively related (the more you search, the more you feel you have, and vice versa). Those whose cultural influences are somewhere in between (e.g., Spaniards) appear to report no relation between them. Finally, some evidence also indicates that searching for meaning and having meaning fluctuate in their relation to each other depending on age and stages in life. For example, the relation may be less strong in youth and stronger in older adulthood. A younger person might be searching for more meaning and also feel life is meaningful, whereas an older adult is more likely to search for meaning in life if he or she feels that life is somewhat meaningless.

The second important distinction to make is between searching for meaning in life and searching for some sort of meaning in a traumatic or aversive event. Those who have experienced traumatic events, such as being assaulted, losing a loved one, or having a miscarriage, often struggle with the question, why did this happen. Frequently, attempts to answer such questions are referred to as a search for meaning. It is probably more accurate to refer to them as efforts to find situational meaning or attributions. The search for meaning in life refers to attempts to understand what one's life as a whole means, rather than more circumscribed efforts to understand a particular event.

Importance

If the search for meaning in life is an important psychological motivation, it should be important to human welfare. We know with certainty that the

presence of meaning in life is related to more well-being in relationships, work, and life in general, as well as to less psychological distress. However, we cannot assume that people who are searching for meaning in life are simply less happy and more distressed. The search for meaning in life might motivate people to immerse themselves in religion, volunteering, wilderness adventures, or philosophy just as much as it might drive them to despair. Even people who already feel that their lives are full of meaning might be searching for a deeper understanding of that meaning, or be trying to adjust to a big life change such as having children, or they might be looking for new sources of meaning. For example, a successful athlete might derive meaning from athletic competition. A career-ending injury might take away that source of meaning, and the athlete might look to family, friends, religion, or social service as potential new sources of meaning.

Those highest in the search for meaning appear somewhat less happy, more anxious, and more depressed, but they also appear more open-minded and thoughtful in some ways, reflecting on their past experiences and asking questions about the nature of their religious beliefs. How much people are searching for meaning also varies from day to day. On days when people are searching for meaning in life, they are actually happier. So, even though people who are usually searching for meaning are less happy, people who momentarily search for meaning enjoy the process in the short term. In some ways this supports the theory that the search for meaning is an important psychological motivation: Those who are able to meet temporarily strong needs for meaning over a day or two are happy with their success, whereas those who must search for longer periods, or who are almost always trying to meet this need, are unhappy.

Individual Differences

People differ in the strength and intensity of their search for meaning in life. Psychologists have developed questionnaires in recent years to measure these differences. Recent efforts to develop psychometrically sound measures of the search for meaning in life appear promising, although more research and theory development are needed. People who score high on search for meaning measures are usually looking for more meaning and purpose in their lives. People who score low are rarely looking for meaning and purpose. Scores on this scale are stable, even over 1 year,

meaning that people who are usually searching for meaning in life now will probably still be searching next year.

Michael F. Steger
Todd B. Kashdan

See also Happiness; Phenomenal Self; Self-Awareness

Further Readings

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SELF

Definition

In psychology, the notion of the self refers to a person's experience as a single, unitary, autonomous being that is separate from others, experienced with continuity through time and place. The experience of the self includes consciousness of one's physicality as well as one's inner character and emotional life.

People experience their selves in two senses. The first is as an active agent who acts on the world as well as being influenced by that world. This type of self is usually referred to as the *I*, and focuses on how people experience themselves as doers. The second is as an object of reflection and evaluation. In this type of self, people turn their attention to their physical and psychological attributes to contemplate the constellation of skills, traits, attitudes, opinions, and feelings that they may have. This type of self is referred to as the *me*, and focuses on how people observe themselves from the outside looking in, much like people monitor and contemplate the competence and character of other people.

History and Development

Everyone has an experience of self. That self, however, can be quite different from the one experienced