



Meaning in Life, Psychological Flexibility, and Valued Living: Birds of a Feather?

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Abstract

Background: The current study investigates the relationship between psychological flexibility and both the presence of meaning and the search for meaning in relation to a new validated measure of valued living, the Valuing Questionnaire (VQ).

Methods: Questionnaires were administered to undergraduate college students, including the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire – II (AAQ-II), the VQ and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ).

Results: Results suggest that psychological flexibility was a statistically significant predictor of both the presence of, and search for, meaning in life even after adding valued living to the model. When controlling for psychological flexibility, progress in valued living was found to be a statistically significant predictor of the presence of meaning, while obstruction of valued living had no significant effect. When controlling for psychological flexibility, only obstruction of valued living was found to be a statistically significant predictor of search for meaning.

Discussion: Findings suggest psychological flexibility and valued living lead to an increase in perceived meaning in life. However, search for meaning appears to be strongly related to both psychological inflexibility and obstruction of valued living, but not related to the enactment of values. Furthermore, the significant added effect of the VQ obstruction to the AAQ-II suggests that there are differences in these constructs in relation to search for meaning.

Introduction

- ❖ One conceptualization of meaning in life suggests that it is comprised of two facets: presence of meaning and search for meaning (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2008).
- ❖ Presence consistently indicates higher psychosocial functioning and correlates with adaptive coping mechanisms (see DeZutter et al., 2014).
- ❖ While there is more evidence supporting the search for meaning being related to negative outcomes, findings also suggest that it can be both adaptive and maladaptive depending on the motivations of the search (DeZutter et al., 2014; Steger et al., 2008).
- ❖ Values reflect what people find meaningful in their lives; they are freely chosen, verbally constructed and intrinsically reinforced (Hayes et al., 1999).
- ❖ Psychological flexibility is a concept closely related to values work and is the ability to achieve one's goals and values in the face of aversive psychological events (Hayes et al., 1999).
- ❖ The current study investigates the relationships between these constructs in relation to a new validated measure of valued living, the Valuing Questionnaire (Smout, Davies, Burns, & Christie, 2014).
- ❖ Our hypotheses include: 1) increased psychological inflexibility will predict decreases in the presence of meaning in life but an increase in the search for meaning in life, 2) when controlling for psychological flexibility, increased valued living will predict an increase in the presence of meaning in life but a decrease in search for meaning in life, 3) the VQ scales will improve on the AAQ-II in the prediction of the MLQ scales.

Table 2. Hierarchical Multiple Regressions: Incremental analyses prediction of meaning in life from AAQ-II and VQ scales.

Predictor	Meaning in Life Scales					Meaning in Life Scales				
	ΔR^2	Est.	SE	<i>t</i>	95% CI	ΔR^2	Est.	SE	<i>t</i>	95% CI
Step 1	0.17***					0.06***				
AAQ-II		-0.25***	0.03	-9.22	-0.300, -0.195		0.17***	0.03	5.17	0.105, 0.235
Step 2	0.24***					0.02**				
VQ Progress		0.59***	0.05	12.59	0.494, 0.677		0.06	0.07	0.87	-0.072, 0.189
VQ Obstruction		-0.03	0.05	-0.67	-0.133, 0.065		0.23**	0.07	3.18	0.088, 0.372
Total R^2	0.41***					0.08***				

Note. Est. = point estimate; SE = standard errors; AAQ-II = Acceptance and Action Questionnaire; VQ = Valuing Questionnaire.

All CIs are bootstrap intervals based on 10,000 samples.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; $n = 413$ for all tests.

Method

- ❖ Undergraduate students from a university in the southern United States were recruited through the SONA system over the course of the 2015 spring and fall semesters.
- ❖ Participants completed a battery of several questionnaires in a computer laboratory under the supervision of an undergraduate research assistant.
- ❖ Each session sat eight participants and lasted one hour. The consent form and all questionnaires were presented electronically via Qualtrics.
- ❖ The measures used in the current study were a subset of the full battery and included:
 - *The Meaning in Life Questionnaire* a measure of perceived presence and search for meaning (Steger et al., 2006). Higher scores are indicative of greater presence of meaning and higher search for meaning, respectively.
 - *The Valuing Questionnaire* a self-report questionnaire designed to assess valued action during the past week (Smout et al., 2014). Higher scores for each subscale indicates higher progress and higher obstruction, respectively.
 - *The Acceptance and Action Questionnaire – II* a scale designed to measure psychological flexibility in individuals (Bond et al., 2011). Higher scores indicate greater psychological inflexibility.
- ❖ After data collection, statistical analyses were performed using *R* (R Development Core Team, 2008).

Table 1. Correlation analyses for all study variables

	Bivariate Correlations					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Psychological Flexibility	21.09	9.99	–			
2. VQ Progress	24.68	5.34	-.33*	–		
3. VQ Obstruction	18.14	5.41	.55*	-.25*	–	
4. MLQ Presence	26.66	5.98	-.39*	.61*	-.26*	–
5. MLQ Search	24.68	6.84	.25*	-.04	.27*	-.15

Note. VQ = Valuing Questionnaire; MLQ = Meaning in Life Questionnaire; * $p < .001$

Results

Participant Characteristics

- ❖ Of the 416 participants who provided valid answers to the questionnaires, there were 309 women (74.3%) and 107 men (25.7%), ranging from 18 to 53 years old ($M = 19.25$, $SD = 2.57$). One participant did not disclose their age.
- ❖ The sample was comprised primarily of White or Caucasian (71.4%) respondents, followed by Black or African American (17.8%), and 45 (10.8%) were from other ethnic minority groups.

Preliminary Analyses

- ❖ Mahalanobis' distance, Cook's distance, and leverage were used to evaluate the data for outliers for each analysis. Participants were excluded from analyses if they did not meet the cutoffs for all three tests.
- ❖ Prior to the analyses, multicollinearity statistics were also computed and results indicated that multicollinearity between the independent variables was not a concern (Psychological Flexibility, $VIF = 1.53$; VQ Progress, $VIF = 1.17$; VQ Obstruction, $VIF = 1.44$).
- ❖ Two hierarchical regression analyses were conducted for each of the meaning in life subscales (i.e., presence and search were the dependent variables) entering the AAQ-II in step one and both VQ subscales simultaneously in step two (see Table 2 for results).
 - Presence of perceived meaning in life:
 - Over psychological flexibility, valued living accounted for an additional 23.6% of the variance of perceived meaning in life, a statistically significant change.
 - Psychological flexibility was a statistically significant predictor of the presence of meaning in life ($\beta = -0.12$, 95% CI [-0.179, -0.069]) even after adding valued living to the model.
 - Search for perceived meaning in life:
 - Over psychological flexibility, valued living accounted for only 2.3% of additional variance in the search for meaning, a statistically significant change.
 - Psychological flexibility was also found to be a statistically significant predictor of the search for meaning ($\beta = 0.11$, 95% CI [0.034, 0.192]) even after adding valued living to the model.

Discussion

- ❖ As expected, the more psychologically inflexible participants were, the less they perceived their lives as meaningful and the more they reported searching for meaning.
- ❖ When accounting for varying levels of psychological flexibility:
 - Participants who reported more progress in valued living reported perceiving their lives as more meaningful, partially confirming our hypothesis.
 - No relationship between progress in valued living and search for meaning was found.
- ❖ The VQ scales improved on the AAQ-II in the prediction of both MLQ scales, but differed in *how* the prediction was improved.
 - For MLQ Presence, the VQ Progress scale added to the AAQ-II, while VQ Obstruction had no added effect.
 - In contrast, for MLQ Search, the VQ Progress scale had no added effect, while VQ Obstruction did.
- ❖ Despite one's degree of psychological inflexibility, making progress toward valued living appears to increase perceived meaning in life.
- ❖ Searching for meaning is related to experiences that get in the way of valued living; however, overall, measures of valued living accounted for a small percentage of the variation in search for meaning scores.
- ❖ Limitations
 - The sample was primarily White, female undergraduate students.
 - The study was cross-sectional; therefore, we cannot explicitly infer causation.
- ❖ Future Research
 - Explore negative outcomes in relation to psychological inflexibility and search for meaning specifically.
 - Conduct longitudinal analyses to examine the temporal relationship between search for meaning and relevant variables.

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