

Meaning in life: understanding this challenging field of study

Grazielli Padilha Vieira* 
Ana Cristina Garcia Dias 

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul. Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil

Abstract: Meaning in life has been considered a key variable to the understanding of human well-being in the last decades. However, the study of this concept is much older and has received contributions from Philosophy, Logotherapy and, recently, Positive Psychology and psychometric studies, thus becoming measurable. This article explores the paths of meaning in life as a construct over time and discusses the contributions of some psychology theories to the concept, including the tripartite view of meaning in life. Finally, we discuss the challenges faced by researchers and clinical psychologists to work with this construct.

Keywords: meaning in life, positive psychology, logotherapy, psychometric measures.

Introduction

Meaning in life (MIL) has been considered the core and key to understanding well-being and motivation and a human need (Frankl, 1946/2012; Heintzelman & King, 2019, 2014; Hill, 2018). According to Seligman (2019), one of the founders of the positive psychology movement, MIL should be incorporated into research and practices in psychology so that they are able to provide people with a more meaningful, pleasurable, happy and, therefore, worthwhile life. Thus, this concept, directly based on philosophy and widely discussed within psychology by Viktor E. Frankl (1946/2012), has received more and more space and recognition within research in psychology. The MIL concept has acquired greater theoretical and methodological complexity over time, being studied from the most empirical to the most existential-philosophical perspectives (Thir & Batthyány, 2016).

There is a lack of theoretical studies addressing the paths of the MIL concept in the Brazilian scenario. As it is a complex concept, it is necessary for researchers and clinical psychologists to know it better in order to use it in their daily lives. The aim of this article is thus to present the different theoretical conceptions and empirical proposals about MIL. In addition, the traditional and multidimensional models that theorize about MIL are described, presenting the Tripartite View of Meaning in Life (TVMIL) (George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016), which has enabled interesting advances in empirical research in MIL, such as the construction of scales for the assessment of MIL as a variable indicative of well-being. Finally,

the challenges of working with MIL as a measurable theoretical construct are analyzed, considering the important contributions of the positive psychology movement to such challenges.

From philosophy to multidimensional MIL models

Human beings seek to find meaning in their existence since ancient times. Philosophy, art, literature, mathematics, religion, among other branches of knowledge, were dedicated to understanding the meaning of human existence. These areas address the meaning of this existence in a broad and philosophical way, placing a value on life as a whole, on the experience of being alive. To better understand how MIL emerges as a theme of modern psychology, it is necessary to return to Greek philosophical thought, which exerts an enormous influence on Western thought in this area.

In ancient Greece, Aristotle extensively discussed the meaning of life from a perspective of understanding everyday life, especially in his work *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 300 BC/2016). The author explores two types of ethics/conducts of life: hedonic and eudemonic, the former as the one which seeks pleasure and fullness, in a more individualistic logic, and the latter as the one which seeks a life worth living, endowed with a transcendent value. This would be the happy life, which can only be experienced in community, in the subject's connection with the polis and culture (Aristotle, 300 BC/2016).

Eudemonic life adds the need for individuals to be connected with their communities, linked to issues that go beyond individual pleasures. It thereby links

*Corresponding address: graziellipadilhavieira@gmail.com



transcendence to participation in the construction of the common good, making it more concrete (Aristotle, 300 BC/2016). This is, therefore, the concrete life, which can be lived by anyone, regardless of their social class or status, their place in the world or philosophical knowledge. Aristotle proposes, then, that man's concrete and everyday life is endowed with meaning, something that generated a new perspective for thinking about the real man, contributing to making meaningful life philosophically accessible to anyone.

These ideas remained restricted to the field of philosophy until the early 20th century, when humanity experiences the unprecedented episodes of the First and Second World Wars and the meaning of such events in each person's life began to be questioned. Thus, discussions about the constitution of the human being were resumed, especially by Maslow and Sartre. For Maslow (1962/2011), the human being is endowed with an internal nature, a biologically grounded essence, which can be scientifically studied, with the meaning of life being defined a priori, by the human condition itself. Sartre (1946/2014), in turn, argues that existence is able to precede essence; therefore, man is free and does not have a human nature that defines him a priori. The meaning of life then needs to be built throughout human existence.

However, with the studies of Viktor E. Frankl, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, psychology becomes truly interested in MIL. Frankl (1905-1997) was a Viennese psychiatrist and psychologist who during his experience in the fields sought to reflect on the experience of being and keeping alive. In 1945, after his release, he wrote *Man's search for meaning* (1946), a book in which he theorized about MIL in a concrete way. The author treats MIL as the experience of an individual sense based on the uniqueness of each human experience (Frankl, 2012/1946).

From his observations in the concentration camps, the author describes the differences between prisoners who were unable to fight for their lives, those who went ahead in search of a future and those who even managed to subvert the logic of their experiences in the concentration camps. Frankl observes that prisoners able to move forward despite their experience in concentration camps were able to find a future orientation for themselves and place a significant value on affective relationships outside the concentration camp (children, friends, spouses, etc.). Thus, those who managed to find some purpose in their present and future existence strove hard to survive.

For Frankl (1946/2012), MIL can be found in several ways, especially through three concrete experiences: (1) creative values: finding a job or activity that plays a significant role in the world; (2) experiential values: experiencing something that enables self-transcendence (example: kindness, compassion, love, etc.); or (3) attitudinal values: choosing attitudes in the

face of inevitable suffering and, if necessary, modifying personal aspects to face the moment. Therefore, MIL can vary throughout life, connecting to different objects, goals or experiences at different times in life, being a central element in the constitution of individuals' physical and mental health.

Frankl was not only dedicated to the operationalization of the MIL concept, but also its use as a therapeutic tool in logotherapy. Initially, MIL operationalization studies were developed that understood the construct as one-dimensional (Adler, 1940; Maddi, 1970), but without satisfactory results. Thus, multidimensional MIL models emerged as an alternative that aimed to account for the complexity of the concept and ensure its dynamic character (Greenberg & Arndt, 2012; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Reker & Wong, 1988). However, this extensive literature around MIL has made the definition of the concept itself ambiguous. Each theoretical proposal defined MIL in a way that matches its expectations and favors the measurement of the construct (Leontiev, 2013b; Steger, 2012). In the following section we present some of these definitions.

Theories in meaning of life

The literature suggests that multidimensional models are more appropriate for understanding more dynamic constructs such as MIL (Leontiev, 2013a). These models make it possible to evaluate MIL as a *state* that can change over time. MIL could not be measured as a personality *trait*, as this presupposes something more stable over time and whose variation tends to be minimal (George & Park, 2017; Leontiev, 2013a, 2013b; Martela & Steger, 2016). From the 1980s and 1990s onwards, researches seeking to understand the relationship between MIL and other variables emerged, culminating in other models of understanding about MIL, such as the meaning making model (Park & Folkman, 1997; Park, 2013), the meaning maintenance model (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Proulx, 2013), the search or presence for meaning (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), the terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 1986; Greenberg & Arndt, 2012), and the tripartite view of MIL (George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016). These models will be better presented below.

Meaning making model

The meaning making model (Park & Folkman, 1997; Park, 2010, 2013) deals with the tools that people use to build/structure MIL in the face of stressful situations capable of causing the breakdown of coherence and meaning in their lives, not proposing a new definition for the concept.

The model is composed of two broad dimensions: global meaning and situational meaning. The first

dimension involves global beliefs, global goals and a subjective sense of meaning. That is, global meaning is composed of an individual's general sense of orientation in the world. The situational meaning dimension, on the other hand, deals with MIL in a concrete situation in the environment, considering the individual's interpretation of it, and starts from a stressful or discrepant situation (Park, 2010, 2013).

This theoretical model does not make clear the definition of what would be a stressor, depending on each individual's subjective assessment for a situation to be classified as stressful or not. From this assessment, the meaning making process for a new experience begins, as a way of dealing with the discrepancies of the environment in relation to the individual's beliefs (Park, 2010).

This process can be done through various resources, both automatic and cognitive and emotional. Processes of assimilation and search for understanding the stressor can be developed, with the construction of new meanings (meanings made) being the result of this psychic work. Some products of this process may be the idea that life has meaning, acceptance, causal understanding, perception of growth and/or positive life changes, changes in global beliefs and goals, restoration and/or change in MIL, among others (Park, 2010).

This model has helped researchers to understand the processes of meaning making and reconfiguration in the face of uncontrollable traumatic situations, such as coping with serious illnesses.

Meaning maintenance model

The meaning maintenance model proposed by Heine et al. (2006) assumes that people build the meaning of their existence from their expectations and learning about the relationships established with the environment, that is, the world makes sense insofar as it meets the expectations/beliefs that the individual has about it (Heine et al., 2006; Proulx, 2013; Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012). In this model, for example, a person who strongly believes that the world is a fair place, when faced with a possible injustice, needs to review both his expectations and his learning about the world, and therefore also needs to review his MIL.

Therefore, it is necessary to understand how individuals deal with the violation of expectations, whether positive or negative. The theory postulates that there are five cognitive ways to deal with expectations breaches: assimilation, accommodation, affirmation, abstraction and assembly of a novel MIL. These strategies require cognitive and affective effort from individuals. Breaches in expectations can occur through traumatic events or subtle changes, as empirical studies have shown (Dechesne & Kruglanski, 2004; Proulx & Heine, 2008; Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012).

From this model arises the possibility of considering people's interpretation of the world and their relationships as a fundamental component for the construction of MIL. Therefore, the sense of coherence and the understanding that people have about the world become relevant (George & Park, 2016).

Terror management theory

Terror management theory is not a theory of MIL itself, although it addresses the way people deal with the constant and imminent awareness of their own death, contributing to the understanding of MIL (Greenberg et al., 1986). The mere awareness of death would generate a constant state of terror that would need to be managed over time. To deal with this, individuals must create the feeling of belonging to a family, community or culture that makes it possible to balance the terror generated by the expectation of finitude, developing a value associated with being alive, in contact with a meaningful world, in search of a meaning for existence (Greenberg et al., 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991).

The idea that life is endowed with value allows the building of self-esteem, defined as individuals' perception about their ability to contribute to meaning making (Greenberg & Arndt, 2012). People thereby act in the world aiming to avoid their own death, in an attempt to ensure immortality, symbolically or concretely. Transcendence allows individuals to achieve a certain symbolic immortality through the active role they play in the world, in building the meaning of existence (Greenberg et al., 1986; Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008; Solomon et al., 1991). That is, individuals need to experience the feeling that their lives and choices resonate beyond themselves, as a way to stay connected and alive through the creation of the world and society that surrounds them, ensuring their immortality through culture and the sense of belonging (George & Park, 2016, 2017; Greenberg & Arndt, 2012).

Presence and search for meaning

This model evaluates MIL from a more relativistic approach to the resources that individuals use to build MIL. Two dimensions are proposed for understanding MIL: the search for MIL and the presence of MIL. The former deals with the motivation or direction that individuals develop to obtain MIL. The latter is about understanding and identifying whether individuals have a clear and defined MIL (Steger et al., 2006). Based on this conception, a Likert scale was developed, consisting of ten items, five relating to the search for MIL dimension and five to the MIL presence dimension (Steger et al., 2006). Thus, an individual who scores high for search for meaning would theoretically tend to

score low for presence, and an individual who scores high for presence would tend to score low for search for meaning (Steger et al., 2006).

The items that make up the scale, created by a team of researchers from a previous definition of what MIL would be, used the initial criterion of apparent validity. After that, they were tested on a sample and a confirmatory data analysis was performed to decide which items were more appropriate and would make up the final scale. The scale thus gained prominence for its purpose to assess MIL as a quantitatively measurable construct. It has been translated, adapted and used in several countries, obtaining satisfactory indicators of psychometric quality (Aquino et al., 2015; Damásio & Koller, 2015; Steger et al., 2006).

However, by using a more relativistic theoretical basis, without necessarily addressing the psychic, cognitive, cultural or motivational mechanisms involved in the search and presence of meaning processes, this theoretical model found some difficulty in explaining possible cultural variations in MIL. For example, in the study by Steger, Kawabata, Shimai and Otake (2008), North American and Japanese young adults were evaluated in relation to search and presence of MIL. The study found that, for Americans, when the presence of meaning had a high score, the search for meaning had a low score, following the authors' predictions. However, Japanese youth who scored high on search also scored high on presence of meaning, contrary to the theory's expectations. This result suggests that search and presence are not opposite concepts in terms of MIL, as proposed by the theory, but could be complementary dimensions in some cultures. The authors conclude that the search for meaning is influenced by culture and is also capable of moderating cultural influence in the presence of meaning (Steger et al., 2008).

Thus, the model has difficulty in offering further explanations about the cultural difference found between North American and Japanese people, only indicating that such difference exists. There is a lack of theoretical and even technical resources capable of offering a clear and concise explanation about which aspects of meaning making or even the search for meaning are different in these cultures. The importance of the model is highlighted, despite its limitations, as it was through it that the topic of MIL was taken up in the field of measurement. Today, Steger himself (Martela & Steger, 2016) has addressed the meaning in life from the multidimensional model, proposing that the concept be defined and operationalized through resources that people use to make their MIL.

Tripartite view of meaning in life

Recently, Steger (2012) sought to build a definition of MIL that would synthesize aspects present in previous theoretical models, seeking to

overcome the ambiguity of the definitions proposed for MIL. For the author,

Meaning is the web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our experience and formulate plans directing our energies to the achievement of our desired future. Meaning provides us with the sense that our lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are more than the sum of our seconds, days, and years. (p. 65)

George and Park (2016) also proposed a definition of multidimensional MIL. For the authors "MIL is the extent to which one's life is experienced as making sense, as being directed and motivated by valued goals, and as mattering in the world" (p. 206). The tripartite view of MIL proposal favors greater theoretical integration which, in turn, facilitates the operationalization of the concept and the development of instruments for measuring MIL, such as the Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale (George & Park, 2017) and the Multidimensional Meaning in Life Scale (Costin & Vignoles, 2019). This is because the models gather evidence both from theories focused on MIL structures – for example: meaning making model, meaning maintenance model – and from theories around the MIL experience – for example: theory by Reker and Wong (1988).

The tripartite view of MIL (TVMIL) models, proposed by Martela and Steger (2016) and George and Park (2016, 2017), have the same three dimensions for MIL. They are, respectively: comprehension/coherence, purpose and significance/mattering. TVMIL was formulated both from the conceptual framework present in the main theoretical perspectives of MIL, which we saw earlier, and from empirical research on the subject (Frankl 1946/2012; George & Park, 2016; Heine et al., 2006; Martela & Steger, 2016; Park & Folkman, 1997; Reker & Wong, 1988; Steger et al., 2006).

The comprehension/coherence dimension of the TVMIL refers to the feeling that existence is coherent and understandable, allowing the connection between past and present experiences and the construction of a notion of the future, providing certain linearity to individuals' life story. It refers, in a way, to the understanding of the paths and directions that life takes, requiring the search for consistency and congruence between what is expected of life and the reality experienced by individuals (George & Park, 2016; Heine et al., 2006).

This dimension encompasses the more cognitive aspects of the model by Reker and Wong (1988) and is similar to the MIL maintenance model developed by Heine et al. (2006) and Proulx & Inzlicht (2012). In healthy individuals, it helps to minimize feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, as it enables the adoption of more functional strategies in ambiguous/unexpected

situations and better guidance in life paths (George & Park, 2016).

In the study conducted by Costin and Vignoles (2019) for the construction of the MIL scale, comprehension was the dimension that presented results most inconsistent with theoretical expectations. The authors propose that the sense of comprehension can be an effect of the perception of meaning in existence rather than a formative component of the MIL notion. This raises the need for further studies on this TVMIL component, which enable its better theoretical development and operationalization.

The purpose dimension represents the most motivational aspects of the model, referring to the objectives and direction that the individual has in life and how much he is committed to these goals (Hill, 2018; Reker and Wong, 1988; Shin & Steger, 2014). This is a classic construct and the one closest to the original theory proposed by Viktor Frankl (1946/2012), which suggests that MIL is linked to the identification of a person's life goals, to the identification of their mission (Battista & Almond, 1973; George & Park, 2016; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Rabin, 1979). Purpose is not just about doing things, but also the human capacity to set short, medium and long-term goals, articulating behaviors and situations to achieve them. These goals, endowed with meaning in the building of the life narrative, provide connections between past, present and future, through the establishment of a hierarchy between goals (George & Park, 2016; Leontiev, 2013a, 2013b).

The third component of the TVMIL is called mattering/significance and deals with placing an inherent value to life itself (George & Park, 2016, 2014; Martela & Steger, 2016). It is the perception that existence is linked to something greater than the individual, such as a community, culture or epoch, and necessarily implies the notion of transcendence. The affective components of the Reker and Wong theory (1988) and of terror management theory (Greenberg & Arndt, 2012; Greenberg et al., 1986) are incorporated into the TVMIL.

The search for mattering/significance therefore involves the task of avoiding death, transcending, and dealing with existential anxiety, as well as building meaningful interpersonal relationships (Greenberg & Arndt, 2012; Reker & Wong, 1988). The notion of transcendence significantly contributes to building the value of oneself, connecting the individual with the society and culture around him, including the possibility of collaborating for building both (George & Park, 2016; Greenberg et al., 1986). Mattering/significance has been little studied as an isolated construct (George & Park, 2014), and it is possible to think that it also acts as an independent measure of well-being, going beyond the role of a MIL component (Damásio, Hauck-filho, & Koller, 2014). Therefore, it is important to carry out

more studies in this TVMIL dimension, aiming to improve the understanding of the relationship with MIL, operationalization of the concept and evaluation, especially with the Brazilian population.

These dimensions that make up the TVMIL must be thought of as strongly interrelated, influencing each other continuously and in a correlated factorial model (George & Park, 2017; Martela & Steger, 2016). From the TVMIL, the Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale (MEMS) (George & Park, 2017) is proposed, which seeks to measure the three dimensions of the model, providing scores for each of them. The scale items were built from the theoretical definition of dimensions. Initially, 43 items were developed, evaluated by eight expert judges in MIL or psychological assessment.

In the final version, consisting of fifteen items, only those considered statistically adequate remained, and suggestions for new items proposed by the evaluators were incorporated. The scale showed good internal consistency and the ability to individually access each dimension, providing data to verify each of them and the possible articulations between dimensions (George & Park, 2017). MEMS showed positive correlations with variables such as subjective well-being, life satisfaction, spirituality/religiousness (George & Park, 2017a), positive affect; and negative correlations, such as negative affect, depression, anxiety and stress (George & Park, 2017).

Challenges to be considered when evaluating meaning in life

Leontiev (2013a), George and Park (2016) and Martela and Steger (2016) describe the limitations that researchers encounter when approaching MIL as a measurable psychological construct. The first is the fact that it is difficult to make an integrated reading of the vast empirical and theoretical literature on MIL (George & Park, 2016; Leontiev, 2013a): MIL has been divided into several areas (meaning structures, MIL experiences, interventions in MIL, theoretical studies in MIL) and each researcher uses a definition, which implies different methods of assessment of the same construct and the use of measures, sometimes incongruent between one study and another, which makes comparisons across cultures and between studies difficult (George & Park, 2016).

It is also necessary to deal with the operational difficulties in defining MIL, which have proved to be a challenge for the integration of literature on the subject. Some studies assess MIL from the psychic resources that individuals use to structure it (meaning framework), while others deal with judgments that individuals make about the perception of meaning in their existence (meaning in life judgments). Recently, even some more behavioral areas have ventured to explore the idea of

MIL (Kanter, Busch, & Rusch 2009), building other possible definitions of the concept.

Another difficulty is the tendency to consider the concept in a one-dimensional way. This view limits the understanding of MIL as a complex phenomenon, which deals with human experience, linked to different changing aspects of life. Therefore, a one-dimensional understanding draws a limit to what can be understood as a meaningful existence. Some authors consider that the adoption of a multidimensional perspective makes it impossible for MIL to act as a variable that enables individuals to transcend their limits, reaching new possibilities for their existence (George & Park, 2016; Leontiev, 2013a, 2013b; Martela & Steger, 2016), making MIL a simple equation of cause and effect.

It is also necessary to consider the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the definition of MIL. For Leontiev (2013a) it is necessary to consider that “Meaning is, therefore, a hypothetical construction, something not directly observable, but conceived. It is necessary to explain observable phenomena, but it cannot be reduced to them” (p. 463). That is, Leontiev proposes a more existentialist view of the concept. For the author, MIL is an experience, a cognitive and emotional way of interpreting the world, a phenomenon that crosses the human experience, being associated with motivation, understanding one’s own life story and consideration of oneself to the world in a transcendent perspective.

MIL is also correlated with other variables, such as positive affect, negative affect, happiness, anxiety and depression, which are strongly linked to everyday experiences of being in the world and, at times, it can be confused with them by research participants. The author suggests that, because of this confusion, it is possible that, when evaluating MIL without the necessary concern to make oneself understood by the participants, there is a risk that we are actually evaluating other constructs (Leontiev, 2013a, 2013b).

For these more existentialist authors, MIL cannot be reduced to a measure/variable (Hill, 2018; Leontiev, 2013b). Thus, MIL as an experience can never be fully understood or fully measured, which is a fundamental aspect of the concept itself (Frankl, 1946/2012; Leontiev, 2013b). This suggests that living a meaningful life involves a range of feelings and behaviors that permeate the everyday of meaningful life. These behaviors and feelings can be evaluated, showing MIL indicators and cognitive, affective and cultural resources present in this experience (Hill, 2018; Leontiev, 2013b). Thus, it is possible to assess only some projections of MIL present in subjects’ behavior, cognition, culture and interaction with the world around them and infer from this a “measurement/quantification” of MIL. However, it is necessary to recognize the complexity of the concept and that the facets being measured may not correspond to its totality.

There is also the semantic issue. The word “meaning” presents different possible senses in colloquial language, which directly imply research participants’ understanding on MIL and the theoretical development of studies (Leontiev, 2013a). One of these possibilities is the idea of the direction in which a given object is going. The purpose dimension of the TVMIL brings the idea of the direction that the individual’s existence is taking as part of this motivational aspect. Another possible definition of meaning in colloquial language implies the notion of connections, chaining between people, objects or ideas. This idea is close to the dimension of mattering, in which such connections are fundamental for placing value to existence itself (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012).

Meaning, as sense, also carries the notion of perception or understanding of one’s own history and the paths traced to life. In this way, it also approaches the dimension of comprehension proposed in the tripartite view of MIL. Thus, to perceive meaning in life, it is necessary to consider what can be understood, narrated and told about this life. The unspeakable, that which is of the order of the incoherent and the inexplicable, tends to reduce individuals’ perception of MIL (Hill, 2018; George & Park, 2016). The notion of meaning as a point of view, a way of considering, an aspect or face of something, on the other hand, refers to the issue of diversity and cultural aspects involved in studying MIL and opens space to reflect on how MIL can be a different experience in each part of the world, in every culture. It is worth considering culture in its definition of a network for sharing meanings and expectations, produced, distributed and modified by a group of interconnected individuals as a great source of MIL (Chiu & Hong, 2007).

Still on culture, it is necessary to consider its ability to connect people with the transcendent, as it links individuals to something greater than themselves, such as traditions, habits and historical aspects of the constitution of a people. Culture is also a resource for building self-worth. It is thereby able to offer hope by giving people the possibility of conceiving the world and existence as something transcendent and lasting (Chao & Kesebir, 2013).

Therefore, MIL is a variable with a strong influence of cultural aspects, and cultural variations directly affect the understanding and operationalization of MIL dimensions. As we saw earlier, the study conducted by Steger et al. (2008) compared search and presence of MIL rates among North American and Japanese students to assess the cultural aspects involved in the construct. This study demonstrates how a culture is able to disseminate a way of relating to the world and to life, directly modifying subjects’ scores in measures such as MIL. It also illustrates the need for care to be taken in adapting or developing instruments on a given construct, since culture presents concepts and practices

that need to be taken into account (Chao & Kesebir, 2013; Steger et al., 2008).

We highlight that individuals are not always familiar with the issue of the meaning of their lives and this makes their understanding of MIL vary widely (Leontiev, 2013a). In general, most people are not clear about what is being asked when they come across a survey on MIL, unlike what happens with other more studied psychological variables. This can cause confusion with other psychological variables. Thus, when trying to evaluate MIL we may actually be evaluating one of its many construct-related projections and not MIL itself (Chao & Kesebir, 2013; Leontiev, 2013a). MIL is about a global perception of life experience, becoming something very complex and less palpable for study participants, since it does not only concern a single moment of existence, as people tend to understand other variables (Leontiev, 2013a).

Final considerations

The complexities involved in understanding MIL as a concept and variable, as well as its long history in philosophy and, recently, in psychology, make the concept quite distant from the reality of study participants and researchers' daily lives. In the case of the latter, there are few Brazilian studies that account for the complexity of MIL as a construct or even include it among their investigated variables or that are dedicated to the conceptual, theoretical and practical development of MIL.

MIL is a highly relevant construct for the mental health of the most varied populations and cultures. Even so, the study and measurement of MIL as a

psychological construct are still challenging to the researcher. It is necessary to consider cultural, semantic and even conceptual clarity issues of the construct to ensure quality research. Still, MIL is a relevant construct to psychology as its fundamental role for the healthy development of individuals becomes more clearly perceived, especially through its connections with other better-known variables.

The recent tripartite view of MIL brings a more robust multidimensional proposal for understanding MIL; however, it is necessary to deepen empirical and theoretical research on its dimensions, especially the dimensions of mattering/significance and comprehension. Even given the proper functioning of the scales that follow the tripartite view of MIL in the international scenario, the model and the instruments developed from it still lack evidence of validity for the Brazilian context.

Finally, future research on the subject should pay attention to cultural differences and the theoretical depth necessary for a good use of the concept and construct, as well as to the construction of measurement instruments. It is worth highlighting the need for studies involving intervention programs and protocols aimed at the building of MIL, which do not currently exist in the Brazilian scenario. Outside the country there are some very interesting proposals, aimed directly at building and increasing the MIL experience (Shin & Steger, 2014). There is also a need for further studies in the Brazilian scenario considering the various recent changes that the construct has undergone, especially in the last ten years. It is necessary to understand which cultural and social influences permeate the construction of the MIL idea for Brazilians in a deeper way.

Sentido de vida: compreendendo este desafiador campo de estudo

Resumo: Sentido de vida é uma variável que tem sido considerada central para compreensão do bem-estar humano nas últimas décadas. Entretanto, o estudo desse conceito é muito mais antigo e ele já recebeu contribuições da filosofia, da psicologia humanista, da logoterapia e, recentemente, da psicologia positiva e da psicometria, o que possibilitou que tal construto fosse mensurado. Este artigo explora os caminhos de sentido de vida enquanto construto ao longo do tempo, discutindo as contribuições que o conceito recebeu de diversas teorias psicológicas, incluindo o recente modelo tripartite de sentido de vida. Por fim, são discutidos os desafios enfrentados por pesquisadores e clínicos que buscam trabalhar com essa variável.

Palavras-chave: sentido de vida, psicologia positiva, logoterapia, psicometria.

Sens de la vie : comprendre ce domaine d'étude difficile

Résumé : Le sens de la vie est une variable qui a été considérée comme essentielle pour comprendre le bien-être humain au cours des dernières décennies. Cependant, son étude est beaucoup plus ancienne, en ayant reçu des contributions de la philosophie, de la psychologie humaniste, de la logothérapie et récemment, de la psychologie positive et de la psychométrie, rendant ce concept mesurable. Cet article discute les voies de sens de la vie en tant que concept construit au fil du temps, en examinant les contributions qu'il a reçues de diverses théories psychologiques, y compris le récent modèle tripartite de sens de la vie. Enfin, on discute les défis auxquels sont confrontés les chercheurs et les cliniciens qui cherchent à travailler avec cette variable.

Mots-clés : sens de la vie, psychologie positive, logothérapie, psychométrie.

Sentido de la vida: comprender este desafiante campo de estudio

Resumen: El sentido de la vida es una variable que se ha considerado fundamental para comprender el bienestar humano en las últimas décadas. Sin embargo, el estudio de este concepto es mucho más antiguo y ya ha recibido aportes de la filosofía, la psicología humanística, la logoterapia y, recientemente, de la psicología positiva y la psicometría, haciéndolo medible. Este artículo explora las trayectorias del sentido de la vida como un constructo a lo largo del tiempo, discutiendo las contribuciones que el concepto ha recibido de varias teorías psicológicas, incluido el reciente modelo tripartito de sentido de la vida. Finalmente, se discuten los desafíos que enfrentan los investigadores y clínicos que buscan trabajar con esta variable.

Palabras clave: sentido de la vida, psicología positiva, logoterapia, psicometría.

References

- Adler, A. (1940). *A ciência de viver*. Rio de Janeiro, RJ: José Olympio.
- Aquino, T. A. A., Veloso, V. G., Aguiar, A. A., Serafim, T. D. B., Pontes, A. M., Pereira, G. A., & Fernandes, A. S. (2015). Questionário de sentido de vida: Evidências de sua validade fatorial e consistência interna. *Psicologia: Ciência e Profissão*, 35(1), 4-19. doi: 10.1590/1982-3703001332012
- Aristóteles. (2016). *Ética a Nicômaco* (L. F. de Souza, trad.). São Paulo, SP: Martin Claret. (Original work published in 300 a.C.).
- Battista, J., & Almond, R. (1973). The Development of Meaning in Life. *Psychiatry*, 36, 409-427. doi: 10.1080/00332747.1973.11023774
- Baumeister, R. F., & Vohs, K. D. (2002). The pursuit of meaningfulness in life. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 608-618). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chao, M. M., & Kesebir, P. (2013). Culture: The grand web of meaning. In J. A. Hicks, & C. Routledge (Orgs.), *The experience of meaning in life: Classical perspectives, emerging themes, and controversies* (pp. 317-331). Dordrecht: Springer. doi: 10.1007/978-94-007-6527-6_24
- Chiu, C., & Hong, Y. (2007). Cultural processes: Basic principles. In A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles* (pp. 785-804). New York: Guilford Press.
- Costin, V., & Vignoles, V. L. (2019). Meaning is about mattering: Evaluating coherence, purpose, and existential mattering as precursors of meaning in life judgments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 118(4), 864-884. doi: 10.1037/pspp0000225
- Damáso, B. F., Hauck-Filho, N., & Koller, S. H. (2016). Measuring meaning in life: An empirical comparison of two well-known measures. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 17(1), 431-445. doi: 10.1007/s10902-014-9602-8
- Damáso, B., & Koller, S. (2015). Meaning in Life Questionnaire: Adaptation process and psychometric properties of the Brazilian version. *Revista Latinoamericana de Psicología*, 47(3), 185-195. doi: 10.1016/j.rlp.2015.06.004
- Dechesne, M., & Kruglanski, A. W. (2004). Terror's epistemic consequences: Existential threat and the quest for certainty and closure. In J. Greenberg, S. L. Koole, & T. Pyszczynski (Eds.), *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology* (pp. 247-262). New York: Guilford Press.
- Frankl, V. (2012). *O homem em busca de um sentido* (F. J. Gonçalves, trad.). Alfragide: Lua de Papel. (Original work published in 1946).
- George, L. S., & Park, C. L. (2014). Existential mattering: Bringing attention to a neglected but central aspect of meaning? In A. Batthyany & P. Russo-Netzer (Eds.), *Meaning in positive and existential psychology* (pp. 39-51). New York: Springer. doi: 10.1007/978-1-4939-0308-5_3
- George, L. S., & Park, C. L. (2016). Meaning in life as comprehension, purpose, and mattering: Toward integration and new research questions. *Review of General Psychology*, 20(3), 205-220. doi: 10.1037/gpr0000077
- George, L. S., & Park, C. L. (2017). The Multidimensional existential meaning scale: A tripartite approach to measuring meaning in life. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(6), 613-627. doi: 10.1080/17439760.2016.1209546
- Greenberg, J., & Arndt, J. (2012). Terror management theory. In P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of social psychology* (pp. 398-415). Thousand Oaks: Sage. doi: 10.4135/9781446249215.n20
- Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., & Solomon, S. (1986). The causes and consequences of a need for self-esteem: A terror management theory. In R. F. Baumeister (Org.), *Public self and private self* (pp. 189-212). New York: Springer. doi: 10.1007/978-1-4613-9564-5_10
- Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., & Arndt, J. (2008). A basic but uniquely human motivation: Terror management. In J. Y. Shah, & W. L. Gardner (Eds.), *Handbook of motivation science* (pp. 114-134). New York: Guilford Press.
- Heine, S. J., Proulx, T., & Vohs, K. D. (2006). The meaning maintenance model: On the coherence of social motivations. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 10(2), 88-110. doi: 10.1207/s15327957pspr1002_1
- Heintzelman, S. J., & King, L. A. (2014). Life is pretty meaningful. *American Psychologist*, 69(6), 561-574. doi: 10.1037/a0035049
- Heintzelman, S. J., & King, L. A. (2019). Routines and meaning in life. *Personality and social psychology bulletin*, 45(5), 688-699. doi: 10.1177/0146167218795133

- Hill, C. E. (2018). *Meaning in life: A therapist's guide*. Washington: American Psychological Association. doi: 10.1037/0000083-000
- Kanter, J., Busch, A., & Rusch, L. (2009). *Behavioral activation*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Leontiev, D. A. (2013a). Personal meaning: A challenge for psychology. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 8*(6), 459-470. doi: 10.1080/17439760.2013.830767
- Leontiev, D. A. (2013b). Positive psychology in search for meaning: An introduction. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 8*(6), 457-458. doi: 10.1080/17439760.2013.830766
- Maddi, S. R. (1970). The search for meaning. In M. Page (Ed.), *The Nebraska Symposium on motivation* (pp. 134-183). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Martela, F., & Steger, M. F. (2016). The three meanings of meaning in life: Distinguishing coherence, purpose, and significance. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 11*(5), 531-545. doi: 10.1080/17439760.2015.1137623
- Maslow, A. H. (2011). *Introdução à psicologia do ser*. São Paulo, SP: Martins Fontes. (Original work published in 1962).
- Mcknight, P., & Kashdan, T. (2009). Purpose in life as a system that creates and sustains health and well-being: An integrative, testable theory. *Review of General Psychology, 13*(3), 242-251. doi: 10.1037/a0017152
- Park, C. L. (2010). Making sense of the meaning literature: An integrative review of meaning making and its effects on adjustment to stressful life events. *Psychological Bulletin, 136*(2), 257-301. doi: 10.1037/a0018301
- Park, C. L. (2013). The meaning making model: A framework for understanding meaning, spirituality, and stress-related growth in health psychology. *European Health Psychologist, 15*(2), 40-47. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3eIWis6>
- Park, C., & Folkman, S. (1997). Meaning in the context of stress and coping. *Review of General Psychology, 1*(2), 115-144. doi: 10.1037/1089-2680.1.2.115
- Proulx, T. (2013). Meaning maintenance model: Introducing soren to existential social psychology. In J. A. Hicks, & C. Routledge (Orgs.), *The experience of meaning in life: Classical perspectives, emerging themes, and controversies* (pp. 47-59). Dordrecht: Springer. doi: 10.1007/978-94-007-6527-6_4
- Proulx, T., & Heine, S. J. (2008). The case of the transmogrifying experimenter: Affirmation of a moral schema following implicit change detection. *Psychological Science, 19*(12), 1294-1300. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02238.x
- Proulx, T., & Inzlicht, M. (2012). The five "A"s of meaning maintenance: Finding meaning in the theories of sense-making. *Psychological Inquiry, 23*(4), 317-335. doi: 10.1080/1047840X.2012.702372
- Rabin, A. I. (1979). Meaning and Void—Inner Experience and Incentives in People's Lives (Book). *Journal of Personality Assessment, 43*(2), 191. doi: 10.1207/s15327752jpa4302_20
- Reker, G. T., & Wong, P. T. P. (1988). Aging as an individual process: Toward a theory of personal meaning. In *Emergent theories of aging* (pp. 214-246). Springer.
- Sartre, J.-P. (2014). *O existencialismo é um humanismo*. Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes. (Original work published in 1946).
- Seligman, M. E. (2019). *Florescer: Uma nova compreensão da felicidade e do bem-estar*. Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Objetiva.
- Shin, J. Y., & Steger, M. F. (2014). Promoting meaning and purpose in life. In A. C. Parks, & S. M. Schueller (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell handbook of positive psychological interventions* (pp. 90-110). Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell. doi: 10.1002/9781118315927.ch5
- Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (1991). A terror management theory of social behavior: The psychological functions of self-esteem and cultural worldviews. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 24*, 93-159. doi: 10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60328-7
- Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M. (2006). The meaning in life questionnaire: Assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 53*(1), 80-93. doi: 10.1037/0022-0167.53.1.80
- Steger, M. F., Kawabata, Y., Shimai, S., & Otake, K. (2008). The meaningful life in Japan and the United States: Levels and correlates of meaning in life. *Journal of Research in Personality, 42*(3), 660-678. doi: 10.1016/j.jrp.2007.09.003
- Steger, M. F. (2012). Making Meaning in Life. *Psychological Inquiry, 23*(4), 381-385. doi: 10.1080/1047840X.2012.720832
- Thir, M., & Batthyány, A. (2016). The state of empirical research on Logotherapy and existential analysis. In A. Batthyány (Ed.), *Logotherapy and existential analysis* (pp. 53-74). Cham: Springer.

Received: 09/04/2020

Reviewed: 04/21/2021

Approved: 05/04/2021