

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

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Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal Current Directions in Psychological Science. Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.

A Science of Meaning in Life

by David G. Myers

[**King, L. A., Heintzelman, S. J., & Ward, S. J. \(2016\). Beyond the search for meaning: A contemporary science of the experience of meaning in life. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 25, 211–216.**](#)

Psychological scientists have gleaned insights into seemingly ineffable yet vital aspects of human experience, such as love, altruism, and joy. So why not also explore the roots and fruits of meaning in life?

In their crisp and lucid essay, APS Fellow Laura A. King, Samantha J. Heintzelman, and Sarah J. Ward (2016) do just that by describing how they and fellow researchers define, measure, and explore meaning:

Defining meaning in life. People sense meaning when they experience their life as having

- purpose (goals and direction),
- significance (value and importance), and
- coherence (predictability that makes sense).

Measuring meaning in life. Some surveys addressing this question have asked single, straightforward questions. The Gallup Organization, for example, asked 141,738 people in 132 nations, “Do you feel your life has an important purpose or meaning?” “Yes,” answered 91% (Oishi & Diener, 2014).

Instructors also could pose that simple question to their students while acknowledging that some 3% of people currently are coping with severe depression (Pratt & Brody, 2014). Or, to engage

them more deeply, they could distribute the 10-item “Meaning in Life Questionnaire” (MLQ) developed by Michael F. Steger, Patricia A. Frazier, APS Fellow Shigehiro Oishi, and Matthew E. Kaler (2015, with the questionnaire available at tinyurl.com/MeaningQ). On the 10 to 70 score range, the researchers’ samples of university students, including introductory psychology students, averaged approximately 46.

Outcomes of meaning. King, Heintzelman, and Ward emphasize that meaning matters. People’s sense of life meaning, as self-reported on instruments such as the MLQ, predicts positive psychological outcomes (such as quality of life and absence of psychological disorders) and positive physical outcomes (such as lowered risk of heart attack, stroke, and even Alzheimer’s disease). The traffic between mind and body runs both ways.

Predictors of meaning. King and her colleagues winnow five predictors of a strong sense of meaning in life:

1. Social connections that satisfy the human need to belong.
2. A religious faith that provides coherence, facilitates coping, and fosters goals.
3. A good mood. Show the King team someone whose day is marked by positive affect and they will show you a person whose day feels meaningful.
4. An orderly world, including an environment that makes predictable sense.
5. Socioeconomic status. When comparing individuals, abundant means predict ample meaning.

If rich people lead more meaning-filled lives, does this imply that a meaningful life is a first-world luxury? Is meaning something people can experience only when their lower-level needs (à la Abraham H. Maslow) are met? Actually, reported Oishi and APS William James Fellow Edward F. Diener, using the Gallup World Poll data, people in poor countries find “more meaning in life than those of wealthy nations” (p. 422). They attribute this paradoxical finding to the greater religiosity and lesser individualism (and social supports) of less-wealthy countries.

Bringing meaning into the classroom. In addition to asking students about their own sense of meaning in life (perhaps by using the Gallup question or the MLQ), instructors might invite discussion: What activities or purposes give your life meaning? King, Heintzelman, and Ward report that meaning often flows from ordinary, daily activities and responsibilities. Is that true for your students? Or do they only derive meaning from major life events?

As a class demonstration, you could also put some of the King et al.’s conclusions to the test in real time. Go to the General Social Survey [database](#). To see if religiosity indeed predicts meaning in a national sample of Americans, enter “doubts4” as the row variable. Enter “attend” as the column variable. Then click “run table.” Your students will see that, indeed, a “feeling that life really has no meaning” is rare among those who frequently attend religious services.

Or, to explore but one form of social connection, replace “attend” with “marital” and see that the sense of no meaning is more frequent among those separated or never married.

My Hope College colleague (and meaning researcher) Daryl Van Tongeren teaches a whole course on “Psychology of Meaning.” He notes that in the first class period, students

write about (a) what a meaningful life looks like; (b) if they are living a meaningful life, and why; and (c) how they live meaningfully. I have them seal these in a signed envelope, which I keep in my office for the whole term. On the last day of class, they complete these prompts again,

and then they compare these to their first-day responses. It's pretty exciting to see how students have experienced growth during the semester.

During other class sessions, he explains,

I assign students a virtue assignment, where they have to do something virtuous or prosocial. We then discuss how it made them feel and the degree to which it may have boosted their meaning (in part by improving relationships with others).

We also do an "obituary assignment" that helps students reflect on their significance. They write about how they'd like to be remembered one day. This also helps them orient toward a sense of purpose, so they can arrange their goals in life.

Finally, we spend a bit of time distinguishing between a meaningful life and a happy one. I think this is an important distinction.

In conclusion, King, Heintzelman, and Ward note that having too meaningful a life is not a problem. Having a sense that existence has no purpose or that one's life does not matter is a problem, as is evident in so many suicides, mass shootings, and terrorist bombings. Ergo, the study and teaching of meaning is meaningful.

APS Past President Elizabeth A. Phelps and APS Fellow Shigehiro Oishi will speak at the 2017 APS Annual Convention, May 25–28, 2017, in Boston, Massachusetts.

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