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Meaning in/of Life: Discovery, Invention or Both?

Yaşamda Anlam: Keşif, İcat Ya Da Her İkisi?

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Abstract:

Recently, endless questions about the meaning in/of life have become a growing theoretical research topic especially within the contribution of positive psychology. Research findings suggest that experiencing meaning in life contributes significantly to psychological resilience, well-being, and health. While some people do not hesitate to look for more, even if there is meaning in their lives, some people do not even bother to bring this question to mind. In this paper, our aim is to discuss whether meaningful life can be achieved through a discovery or an invention with two leading perspectives-Frankl and Baumeister- and with recent empirical findings especially on traumatic events. First, Frankl believed that in any case, an individual should try to protect his honor and should discover a deeper meaning under the suffering. On the other hand, Baumeister suggested that there is no hidden or broad meaning in life independent from the person. Meaning can only be constructed by the individual by the satisfaction of four criteria that culture presents. Nevertheless, recent empirical research especially on resilience and trauma literature has revealed that a meaningful life can be achieved through the interplay of these two systems/processes-discovery and invention- especially in dealing with trauma. In conclusion, meaning of life can be characterized by a “degree” matter rather than “all-or-none” and the construction or discovery of life are complementary processes.

Keywords: Meaning Of Life, Meaning In Life, Meaning, Logotherapy, Existential Psychology

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Özet:

Son zamanlarda, yaşamın anlamı ya da yaşamda anlam hakkında sonsuz sorular, özellikle pozitif psikolojinin katkısı içinde, giderek artan bir teorik araştırma konusu haline gelmiştir. Araştırma bulguları, yaşamdaki anlamın deneyimlenmesinin psikolojik sağlık, iyi oluş ve sağlığa önemli ölçüde katkıda bulunduğunu göstermektedir. Bazı insanlar, yaşamlarında bir anlam olsa bile, daha fazlasını aramakta tereddüt etmezken, bazı insanlar ise bu soruyu akıllarına bile getirmezler. Bu makalede, amacımız anlamlı yaşamın bir keşif veya bir buluş yoluyla, önde gelen iki perspektif (Frankl ve Baumeister) ve yakın zamanda yapılan ampirik bulgularla elde edilip edilemeyeceğini tartışmaktır. İlk olarak, Frankl her halükarda, bireyin onurunu korumaya çalışması ve acı çekerken bile daha derin bir anlam keşfetmesi gerektiğine inanıyordu. Öte yandan Baumeister, kişiden bağımsız olarak hayatta gizli veya geniş bir anlam olmadığını ileri sürmüştür. Anlam, sadece birey tarafından kültürün sunduğu dört kriterin karşılanmasıyla inşa edilebilir. Bununla birlikte, son ampirik araştırmalar, özellikle travma ile psikolojik sağlık ile ilgili olarak hem keşif hem de buluş süreçlerini içeren bu sistemlerin etkileşimi yoluyla anlamlı bir yaşama ulaşılabileceğini ortaya koymuştur. Sonuç olarak, yaşamın anlamı “ya hep ya hiç” ile karakterize değil, onu yerine bir “derece” meselesidir ve Yaşamın inşası ya da keşfi birbirini tamamlayan süreçlerdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yaşamda Anlam, Yaşamın Anlamı, Anlam, Logoterapi, Varoluşçu Psikoloji

Introduction

Meaningful life is a vital element and a source of growth, psychological resilience and flourishing for human beings. Many research findings suggest that when people have a direction and mission in their lives and make sense out of it, they are physically as well as psychologically healthier, less vulnerable and more resilient (Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2011; Lightsey Jr., 2006; Steger & Frazier, 2005; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008; Steger, 2010; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Particularly when individuals face with uncertainty, loss or a significant difficulty, they tend to perceive life devoid of meaning, even frightening, chaotic or ambiguous. The quest for meaning and hopefully finding it after facing with challenges in life encourages people to deal with even more challenges and finally regain the control over their lives (Skaggs & Barron, 2006). Research findings also suggest that if people succeed to understand the meaning of the adversities that are faced and figure out the inevitability of such occurrences in terms of their personal growth, they seem to experience less emotional distress, anxiety or depression. Every time they encounter with yet another adversity, due to an increase in their capacity to integrate, they express greater psychological adaptation and resilience (Bonanno, 2004; Marcu, 2007; Park, Malone, Suresh, Bliss, & Rosen, 2008; Steger, Mann, Michels, & Cooper, 2009). Some people, on the other hand, does not require any external event or adversity to trigger them to search for the meaning of life and their unique place in the world. They are natural seekers for higher truths, the ultimate significance of life and their mission in it. Such difference is what made us to re-think the importance of meaning of life especially in these times of global pandemic when humanity in general is reminded that we are mortal, vulnerable and our lives are threatened by a microscopic virus called Covid-19.

The question of the meaning of life can be traced back to ancient times. Its systematic research, nevertheless, was carried out with the development of existential philosophy whose pioneers can be listed as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Husserl and Jaspers (see Auhagen,

2000). Existential psychology, inspired by the existentialist philosophy, mainly circles around the relationship between responsibility and freedom, the true nature of humanity, the meaning of existence and authenticity (van Deurzen, & Kenward, 2005). Existential psychotherapists usually focus on dilemmas such as existential anxiety, fear of death, freedom of choice and how an individual may create or find meaning in their lives. To date, there has been no single definition of the meaning in life or the meaning of it. The most common definition is that ‘one sees himself as part of something larger that makes sense to him and can cognize his experiences within a wider context (van Deurzen & Kenward, 2005). Many existential theorists – from Antonovsky (1979), Baumeister (1991), Emmons (1989), Frankl (1979), Maddi (1967), Reker (1997), Reker and Wong (1988), Yalom (1980) to Zika and Chamberlain (1992) - have come up with certain conceptions regarding the meaning of life, suggested unique models on how to “discover” or “invent” its meaning and developed different scales to measure them. Within the confines of this paper, we preferred to delve into the works of Victor E. Frankl (1905-1997) as an existential psychiatrist and Roy F. Baumeister (1953-...) as a social psychologist and focus on a debate questioning whether meaning is artificially “invented or constructed” or rather naturally “discovered”. The recent literature findings especially provided by the positive psychology has developed and expanded in the last 20 years. Because, for nearly 20 years, meaning started to be re-considered as an important component of psychological well-being or authentic happiness throughout many disciplines. As it is explained earlier, a great deal of research revealed that people who have meaning in their lives are happier, healthier, resilient and even live longer (Boyle, Barnes, Buchman, & Bennett, 2009; Kim, Lee, Yu, Lee, & Puig, 2005; Lightsey Jr, 2006; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008; Steger et al, 2009).

Even though the “meaning of life” and “meaning in life” or “personal meaning” are used interchangeably in the literature (See Auhagen, 2000), they indeed slightly

differ. In “meaning in life”, researchers focus more on psychological questions such as “what makes a life worth living” and “what are the possible components of obtaining a meaningful life”. In “meaning of life”, however, questions turn out to be more philosophical in nature. Perhaps the difference can be explained briefly as follows as well: The “meaning in life” suggests that meaning is internal and it is something that is constant for everyone in any given condition. The “meaning of life”, on the other hand, refers to that which meaning is something external and therefore can be constructed and reconstructed relatively, that is to say, it can change from person to person. Once again, our aim, in this paper, is to roughly discuss the two leading perspectives whether meaningful life can be achieved through discovery or rather it is invented by an individual. We intended to introduce the most recent empirical findings related to resilience and trauma without digging too much into the major philosophical debates which may well be the subject of a different study. Also, for practical reasons, we decided to follow the general tendency in the literature and preferred to use “meaning in life” and “meaning of life” as synonyms.

Frankl’s Theory of Search for Meaning

Victor E. Frankl, during the Second World War, was imprisoned at the most deadly concentration camps, Auschwitz and Dachau, in Nazi Germany. He lost his parents, brother, and wife in these camps. After he was released, he wrote several books based on his terrible memories and psychological observations derived from the concentration camps with an existential philosophical perspective. He was the founder of “logotherapy” which can be seen as an extension of existential psychotherapy.

According to Frankl (1967, 1981, 1985), life is naturally full of meaning. Yet the delicacies are difficult to define as it varies from one person to another. Life contains meanings designed for every person and it is one’s primary duty to discover those. Meaninglessness should be avoided as it leads to even physical death. Thus, a person is obliged to accept his own mortality and find the hidden meaning given or bestowed to her in life. The feeling of responsibility is the essence of having a meaningful life and everyone is obliged to live or keep going even under the harshest conditions. In other words, humans are responsible to keep living. One should use the slightest chance of survival even in a case of danger (Pattakos, 2010). Frankl (1967) argued that genuine responsibility is associated with consciousness through conscience. Consciousness, in modern life, is enforced to be free and lack responsibility. However, a true consciousness should be accompanied with a sense of conscience and enriched by morality. Modern times is distinguished by people not knowing how to live their lives due to an excessive sense of emptiness and boredom which usually are tried to be compensated by hedonistic actions such as gambling, money, sexuality and drugs. No matter what is done to compensate it, a good portion of this innate void or inner emptiness cannot be avoided and keeps creating existential anxiety as a form of toxicity. This emptiness leads one to search and discover more meanings in life is called “will to meaning” (Frankl, 1981, 1985). “Will to meaning” can be frustrating at times, yet it is a requirement for personal growth. Searching for more meaning is a normal process and

healthy part of life that could be challenging but also enjoyable.

Frankl suggested that in order to find meanings, one should obtain three sources of values (1) meaning of suffering (attitudinal values) (2) meaning of love (experiential values) and (3) meaning of work/creative values (1985).

The meaning of the suffering involves that meaning in life cannot be achieved only through pleasure and excitement. Life naturally includes pain, suffering, guilt, shame, misery, and death, and they all are unavoidable part of life, unlike hedonism describes it. In his memories from the concentration camp, Frankl said that, almost all of the prisoners/inmates experienced “inferiority complex” because they were just “numbers” and treated as animals or any entity rather than individuals (1985). However, even in extreme conditions, he never ceased to believe that by suffering, the individual would still be able to maintain his decency, honor, and character (Frankl, 1981). Life itself makes sense in any case, even in tragic scenes. Even in the most tragic conditions, the person has the right to choose. In these conditions, it is hard to predict what will come out of someone: Some experience holy figures like angels, while others confront with demonic creatures depending on their level of frequency and the choices they make in life.

The second source of meaning in life is love. Love is the sincerest way of knowing another person and the only thing that enables the actualization of both parties –the beloved one and oneself-, seeing the potential inside him or her. True love is the greatest need for man, and its absence leads to a great sense of emptiness and even may create neurosis.

The third source to get a meaningful life is related to the work that refers to being productive and creative rather than having a dull full-paid job. According to Frankl (1981), a purposeful life is a requirement and is characterized by being productive for building a responsible and interdependent society. Because people should be responsible not only for their existence, but also for society. Frankl also notes that unemployment neurosis, involving individuals’ indifference, uselessness, or emptiness, thus, beloved work, is one way to fulfill the meaning (Frankl, 1985).

To summarize, Frankl suggested that life contains meaning, but anyone can discover it on their own using their experience, even while suffering. One does not need to invent or construct a new meaning system as it has already been there. The meaning of life is intensely buried to be discovered if a person especially provides three values in his life. Meaning cannot be invented or created, it can be only discovered or re-discovered and be transformed in time. Meaning in life is not an externally structured process, but rather a process we discover according to the roles and choices given to us in life. There is no need to lose meaning to look for more meaning. Man has always been an entity seeking for more meaning. The meaning exists in the moment and all moments holds meaning waiting for its discovery (Pattakos, 2010). Each moment of life is precious and deserves to be grateful.

Baumeister's Approach of Basic Needs for Meaningful Life

Roy F. Baumeister defines the nature of meaning as "connection of two things" and it links two distinct entities in the human mind and is "shared by mental representations of possible relationships among things, events, and relationships" (1991). Meaning requires a mental ability to relate things in your mind. Therefore, only people who can make these connections in their minds can create meaning in their lives. For those who cannot, life can be experienced quite meaningless. Because they only deal with survival issues and never question the possibility of a sense of life behind the appearing scenes. It requires the ability to step back to question or search for the meaning of life, to abstract thinking, and seeing the larger picture. However more or less, every person has a goal to pursue that motivates them to keep living.

According to Baumeister (1991), modern man with the ability of abstract thinking no longer thinks that there is a deep, inclusive, and broad meaning of life. Modern people believe that the meaning of life is a construction that they somehow must build with their own efforts as they have an understanding with over-emphasis of "self" at the center of it. This self-center or egocentric view has been expanding that lead every person to actively invent their own meaning system based on some resources they choose such as relationship, love, career, fate, or religion. People subjectively and actively construct their meaning system according to their socio-cultural conditionings. There are four needs -Purpose/Fulfillment, Value/Justification, Sense of Efficacy, and Self-worth that motivate people to make sense of their lives (see Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Stillman & Baumeister, 2009). These needs are overlapping to some extent. People who manage to meet these needs tend to build their meaning system in their lives. Thus, meaning can be constructed and reconstructed over and over through experiences. The quality or quantity of the satisfaction of needs may also vary. Modern life offers many goals and a sense of efficacy but a less sense of value (Stillman & Baumeister, 2009).

Purpose

First need is purpose or purposiveness. Everyone, even the most ordinary man, needs a purpose to keep living. Because, trying to reach a goal motivates people to carry on surviving. Although these goals are never fulfilled throughout one's life, a purpose is required to create the meaning of life. Baumeister stated that meaning enables people to regulate their existing or targeted behavior to achieve certain goals (Baumeister, 1991). Modern life offers so many goals for everyone, especially the ones related to career options.

Value

The second need is value or justification. Values are distinguished into two; positive (altruism, defending the group, and group solidarity) and negative (social norms, moral rules). According to Baumeister (1991) in order to create or construct a meaningful life, one needs positive or negative values and justification of his behaviors. He desires to assume that past and current actions or behaviors are not bad or morally incorrect. Value is a type of motivation that leads people to have both positive

and negative values (Stillman & Baumeister, 2009). The belief that the action is morally wrong prevents one from not choosing certain actions. Meaningful life will be built on meeting this need for justification. Indeed, this particular perspective makes Baumeister close to Frankl's ideas.

Efficacy

The third need is a sense of efficacy. Efficacy means a sense of strength and ability to do things to deal with the adversities since a meaningful life does not just contain attaining purposes. Rather, it requires a sense of subjective control over the environment and make a difference for the world (Baumeister, 1991). Especially, modern people desire to believe that they have control over their lives. There are primary and secondary controls defined by Baumeister. Primary control refers to changing the environment to adapt oneself, while secondary control means altering oneself to adapt to the environment. Thus, sense of efficacy facilitates the adaptation that leads to motivation for having a meaningful life.

Self-Worth

The final need for having a meaningful life is to gain a sense of self-worth or self-respect. This need is more related to the values and sense of efficacy. In the past, a societal rank would determine one's value, prestige, and reputation. However, in the modern world, one has to construct or determine his own values based on the culture he lives in. Thus, they have to seek and find out ways to make them feel superior, more valuable, admirable, virtuous and respected so on and so forth in certain areas in their lives. This also leads to a belief that they have more control over the people they interact with. Modern individuals have to use some modern strategies to boost his self-worth such as financial status or career achievements. People use different sources in order to create or invent their sense of worth or value and individuals who receive their self-worth from more than one source will be able to handle with their challenges. Expanding the self and gaining its own value or worth from a variety of sources is a burden and a way to make life meaningful for a modern individual.

These needs offer a framework how people construct their meaning system or how the life make sense for the modern person. When these needs are not met, people generally suffer from distress and deprivation. According to Baumeister (1991) and Baumeister and Vohs (2002), people only look for new meanings when they think they fail to provide these needs. Otherwise, no one will search for higher or greater meanings and consider the looking for higher meanings is barely a myth.

To sum up, Baumeister believed that there is no extensive, deep, grand, and comprehensive meaning inside the life. Moreover, life can be quite meaningless for some people. Sophisticated modern people can only construct or invent situational, simple, and low-level meanings, because, life is full of shortcomings and contradictions by its own nature. Among these ironies and shortcomings, it should be accepted that it is not possible for every event to comply with a major master plan. There is no expansive interpretation or general answers for the world. Only cultures shape and organize what meaningful life is and how it looks. As long as

culture permits -within the framework of rules, societal norms and codes- subjective and specific meanings can be built and re-built so as to create a relatively consistent worldview.

Discussion and Conclusion

Some common characteristics of meaning can be inferred from the theorists discussed above even though they differ in their prerequisites for conceptualizing of meaning. Firstly, both theorists believe that the meaning of life is an individual experience that requires both cognitive, affective, and motivational effort to achieve it. Frankl who said “whoever was still alive had a reason for hope” (1985, p.83) also claimed that even though human beings are inevitably affected by their negative surroundings, one still has an option to act differently and there is always a choice to make. Even under horrible conditions, one can preserve his spiritual freedom and free of mind (1981, 1985). Meaning in life is not independent of the person, there are hidden meanings designed for everyone. What one has to do is to discover this meaning reserved for him as everyone needs to find meaning in all conditions, even in the most terrible and tragic ones. This is a normal yet at the same time, can be very exhausting, and frustrating. On the other hand, according to Baumeister, life does not have to be meaningful, he does not believe that there is a separate meaning of life independent of the person. People who succeed in thinking abstractly only motivate to desire meaning as a need. Thus, a meaningful life, a kind of fiction or scenario created by the person among the cultural choices offered to him. But still, modern man is not satisfied with the answers given to him in his meaningful life fiction, one needs to construct his own explanations, and reasons for being, as in, building a house from scratch. Second, both theorists think that some devices or tools obtained in life facilitate the meaning experience. For instance, according to Frankl (1981, 1985), the basic mission of people is to chronically discover meaning in life through personal accomplishments, interactions with others, interest in art and nature (see also King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006). Love, work, and even suffering are the main means of achieving a meaningful life. On the contrary, Baumeister, believes that in order to construct individualized or subjective meaning system, one should utilize some arbitrary criteria in cultural options such as purpose or fulfillment, value or justification, sense of efficacy and worth.

In the light of the theories or perspectives mentioned above, it seems that Frankl believes that life has a natural value or essence inside of it. Even we destroy the layers of “what meaningful life looks like”, there is still an essence kept alive behind these layers of life. Baumeister, on the contrary, believes that meaning is something that can be given or gained from the outside. However, we believe that the distinction as to whether the meaning in life is to be invented or discovered is an artificial or arbitrary distinction. Because, it is very difficult and perhaps irrelevant to find where meaningfulness starts and ends, just like nature vs. nurture diffusion in social sciences. The nature of meaning is both given/discovered and made/built, so it is something that can be graded or rated for a man. Meaning does not include all-or-none characteristics, so all these debate on whether life meaning is a product of an invention and a discovery is

quite arbitrary. A meaningful life is something that can only decrease or increase depending on the subjective conditions. Life cannot be completely meaningless or full of meaning. In other words, life cannot be 100% percent meaningful, nor can it be 100% percent meaningless. Meaning is a matter of degrees and contains both the elements of invention and discovery especially under traumatic circumstances.

As known, critical or traumatic life events prompts us to make a life review and question the basic premises of narratives of our lives. This is true even for people who do not even bother to think if they have a meaningful life. When traumatic or even highly distressful life events experienced such as chronic mobbing, heavy workload or academic stress, terminal diseases, assault, terror, natural disasters or sudden loss of loved ones, people start to question their core beliefs, goals, and feelings related to their own existence and general meaning of life (Park, 2010). If they could not fit or assimilate these stressful events into pre-existing belief systems, they start to search for a deeper and greater meaning and try to discover hidden meanings underlying these sufferings such as Frankl suggested. Especially open, intrinsic and transcendent religious beliefs, a certain degree of self-acceptance, positive reframing and the presence of social support can be listed as primary coping mechanisms that people use often in the times of crises (Dunn, & O'Brien, 2009; Krok, 2015; Martos, Thege, & Steger, 2010, Steger & Frazier, 2005). Moreover, acceptance and religious coping due to providing coherent ultimate truths was not only associated with meaning but also make an increase in meaning levels over time (Park et al., 2008). When people feel that they have found enough new and deeper meanings to explain these events, they start to construct or invent their new belief system within the allowance of cultural boundaries as Baumeister argued. Thus, meaning system includes both an invention and discovery processes that cannot be separable.

It is certain that religion, family, social relationships, attachment, love, bonding, meaningful work, and altruism are vital sources that people use in their meaning making process (see Lambert et al., 2010; Schnell, 2009). Additionally, there are some protective personality characteristics in dealing with trauma including psychological resilience. Resilience is defined as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant source of threat” (American Psychological Association, APA, 2013). Since the resilient individuals have greater self-esteem and optimism (Lee, Brown, Mitchell, & Schiraldi, 2008), higher self-efficacy, control, planning, persistence and low anxiety (Martin & Marsh, 2006), more tolerance, acceptance, and adaptive coping strategies (Karoly & Ruehlman, 2006; Parker, Cowen, Work, & Wyman, 1990), greater ability to regulate emotions, social connectedness, religiousness, altruism, cognitive flexibility (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014), they display greater ability to bounce back, adapt well or maintain a stable equilibrium only with a period of time disruptions expressing none or fewer symptoms of psychopathology including post-traumatic stress disorder when faced with the traumatic events (see Bonnano, 2004; Bonanno, Galea, Bucciarelli, & Vlahov, 2006; Bonanno, 2008; Bonanno, Moskowitz, Papa, & Folkman, 2005). They are more likely to use their pre-existing meaning systems in dealing with the

new crises, thus, adjust well and create their new narratives and meaning systems sooner than others (Pan, Wong, Chan, & Joubert, 2008; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Resilience is a both resource that people use to buffer from the impact of traumatic events and the outcome of the meaning-making process that provides protection from future threats. Aftermath meaning-making (re-search, re-discovery and re-construction) process, people acquire a sense of psychological growth and resilience that include new narratives, wisdom, and psychological well-being (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; King & Hicks, 2009). Eventually, people become more resilient that enable them to better cope with possible adverse events. Although individuals' trauma reactions vary extensively, in the treatment, clinicians can use clients' resilience levels in meaning-making which seems to include both the discovery and the construction processes to create a new belief or narrative system for the recovery and adjustment.

To conclude, not only philosophers, theologians, social scientists, psychologists and anthropologists but also everyday people may have a strong desire to understand themselves and their unique place in the whole world. Everyone seek for meaning and/or the ultimate purpose of their lives. Some people do not concern in fitting themselves into the world, on the contrary, some people never stop to seek further or higher meanings. Accordingly, last empirical findings have indicated that especially within the framework of positive psychology, which focuses on the positive functioning, resilience and growth of people, it is believed that people have a high motivation both to seek meaning and have meaning in

their lives especially depending on certain situations (Martela & Steger, 2016; Park, Park, & Peterson, 2010; Steger, 2012). Meaning simply refers to one's life or place in the subjective experience of meaningfulness. It is a subjective experience that requires certain amount of cognitive, affective, and motivational efforts. The degree of meaning changes in time as life is forced to be changed naturally. Even though the content of meaning changes for individuals, the general motivation of people to make sense and cope with for traumatic events will never cease.

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Ethics Approval and Consent To Participate

Not applicable.

Consent For Publication

Not applicable

Availability Of Data and Materials

Not applicable.

Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

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Authors' Contribution

PA was responsible for the editing, revision, outline and general structure of the study. PD was responsible for the writings of the drafts. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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