
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The Psychology of Creating Meaning

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The quest for psychological meaning is one of the most profound and defining aspects of human life, shaping how we make sense of the world, pursue our ambitions, and construct our identities. This book takes a deep dive into the psychological forces behind meaning making, weaving together insights from perception, motivation, and emotion. How do we transform scattered experiences into a coherent narrative? What drives us to seek patterns, purpose, and understanding? The essays in this collection unpack the mechanisms that structure our reality and govern our actions.

Although the quest for psychological meaning runs through much of the research in psychology and spans various subdisciplines, it has not been systematically defined and studied until recently. In fact, this is the first collection of essays that is explicitly devoted to the processes and consequences of creating psychological meaning. Although the evidence was scattered through the journals of our discipline, the story has not been told. At least not until now.

But before we dive in, what exactly is *psychological meaning*? Why do humans seek to create it?

Psychological meaning arises from a mental connection between stimuli or between a stimulus and a concept. This connection is not formed through some self-evident features of the stimuli but is actively created or constructed by the person. By forming this mental link, a person places a stimulus within a broader context. They may recognize that an item is part of a group, that an action has caused an effect, that

a behavior reflects intention, or that an object serves a purpose. A meaning is created, for example, when a person concludes that a rock is a paperweight (or art) or that their action conveyed generosity (or fear). They may reflect on their life's work, believing it advanced science or strengthened their legacy and impact. In either case, when the stimulus is perceived as part of a larger context, it is understood, fostering the experience of psychological meaning.

Indeed, the world does not reveal itself in an orderly fashion. The broader picture is rarely announced. For example, effects do not immediately follow causes, and finding the cause of something is often a difficult endeavor. Actions occur without the actor explicitly declaring their purpose. Objects typically lack labels indicating their potential use. People may belong to groups whose members may not appear near one another. Causal associations, intentions, usages, category memberships, and group affiliations must be inferred.

Without the psychological process of “meaning making,” the world would present itself as a stream of unrelated stimuli, much like the static between stations on a radio dial. The social world, in particular, would be what William James (1890/1981) described as “a blooming, buzzing confusion” (p. 462). Information would feel scattered, fragmented, and piecemeal. Thanks to meaning making, however, this is not our experience of the world. Instead of chaos, humans perceive order. Instead of getting stuck in the concrete, they can abstract. The process of creating psychological meaning can take many forms. For example, basic perception is largely a top-down process—one in which meaning is actively created from what people see, hear, and otherwise experience. Further, people construct narratives about their lives.

Yaacov Trope argues that the process of creating meaning is fundamental to human experiences and involves “reducing mental entropy by transforming irregular and disconnected elements into coherent, interconnected, and stable cognitive and conative structures” (this volume). The quest for meaning happens in all processing modes (e.g., automatic or controlled, conscious or unconscious, fast or slow; Gawronski, Sherman, & Trope, 2014; Ferguson & Hassin, this volume). By forming connections that embed stimuli in context, humans perceive the world as organized and purposeful—a world governed by rules and order, where we can operate with ease.

This collection of essays on the quest for meaning is inspired by Yaacov Trope's seminal work in experimental psychology, and it is authored by many of his colleagues, friends, and students—categories that often overlap. Contributors explore a wide range of topics within psychological science that, at first glance, may seem unrelated: The

book highlights recent research on emotion, perception, social interaction, and motivation—subjects typically covered in separate chapters of an introductory psychology textbook. Despite working within distinct subdisciplines, the common thread uniting these authors is their focus on the basic question of how psychological meaning is created. They all explore how we come to understand our world and ourselves, how we imbue the world around us with meaning, and how we imbue our lives with meaning.

We thus study the quest for meaning in cognition, or what people believe exists, and in motivation, or what people desire to exist. We investigate meaning seeking as both an intrapersonal process and an interpersonal one because social networks shape meaning, and individuals bond over shared understandings of the world. Additionally, we examine how humans make sense of the world and how they find meaning in their lives. The search for meaning is fundamental to self-knowledge, often emerging through reflection and self-observation. After all, the self is both familiar and unknown. It is a source of endless curiosity as people seek the meaning of their lives through art, culture, science, and most critically, through the everyday psychological processes that we describe here.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Is the quest for meaning a new topic in psychological research? Yes and no. Starting with a clear “no,” we noted earlier that in classic texts, William James observed that human psychology imbues meaning in a world that might otherwise appear chaotic. Consistent with his thoughtful observation, much of early experimental work in psychology uncovered the principles underlying the perception of connections, context, and hence, meaning making.

Consider, for example, the discoveries of Gestalt psychology in studying low-level perceptual processes (Koffka, 1935). These researchers identified key principles that explain how we perceive visual elements as parts of a unified whole rather than as isolated fragments. The Gestalt principles—proximity, similarity, closure, continuity, figure–ground, and common fate—demonstrate how we group nearby or similar objects and how our brains fill in missing information to create shapes out of disjoint elements (closure). These principles describe how we perceive continuous lines despite interruptions (continuity), how we distinguish objects from their backgrounds (figure–ground), and how we infer that stimuli that travel together in space form a unit (common fate). These

principles are all about ways of creating meaning. They illustrate how perception is shaped by the quest for understanding a stimulus within a broader context.

Beyond cognition, early research documented the creation of meaning to motivate action. For example, Bruner and Goodman (1947) found that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds overestimated the size of coins compared with wealthier children. The need for financial resources shaped these low-income children's visual perception, making a desirable object seem bigger and perhaps closer, consistent with their motivation to seek out money. Bluma Zeigarnik's early research on the need for closure—the "Zeigarnik effect"—documented that people remember unfinished or interrupted tasks better than completed ones (Zeigarnik, 1927). Why does the mind "get stuck" on incomplete tasks, finding it hard to let go? Possibly because the meaning of these tasks has not been realized yet.

Early psychological research also recognized that people seek meaning in their lives. They want to understand themselves. Atkinson's achievement theory (Atkinson, 1957) posited that people set goals to gather information about themselves based on their performance. Specifically, people wish to succeed and fear failure. Those with high achievement motivation set challenging goals where the probability of success is moderate because this offers the greatest potential for personal satisfaction. Conversely, those with a higher fear of failure opt for very easy or very hard tasks, such that success will be granted or, alternatively, failure will be nondiagnostic. According to Atkinson, humans choose tasks to make their lives meaningful.

The field's seminal cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and self-perception (Bem, 1972) theories further documented the desire to understand behavior within the context of a person's overall sense of self. Individuals seek to interpret the meaning of their actions in relation to who they are or might be and how they should understand themselves.

The essays in this collection explore the quest for meaning as an everyday pursuit rather than a response to unusual circumstances. Humans engage in meaning making not only when they perceive a lack of meaning. These processes are not solely designed to solve problems. As such, the pursuit of meaning is not just a response to perceived chaos, nor is it abandoned once order is achieved. For example, although a conflict between one's actions and cognitions may require resolution (e.g., through dissonance reduction), people strive to identify and categorize their actions even in the absence of conflict. They may infer that they have a goal or a trait, and they may perceive purpose and continuity. In either case, they imbue their actions with meaning.

MAJOR THEMES

The essays in this book explore three areas of research on psychological meaning: creating meaning to understand the world (perception), to find direction in personal striving (motivation), and to make sense of the self and one's life (meaning in life). The authors point out new discoveries on how humans seek and create meaning in the world around us. Some of the main insights from their research agendas are summarized next.

Creating Meaning to Understand the World

The quest for psychological meaning is universal, yet its manifestation is highly individualistic. When evaluating the same stimulus, different people see different things. Todorov and Albohn explore this heterogeneity in meaning making, demonstrating that people's evaluations of stimuli are not universally shared. Evaluations of complex stimuli, such as faces or art, reveal significant *idiosyncratic preferences*, suggesting that subjective factors heavily influence how people derive meaning from their environment.

How individuals intuitively evaluate *distance*—whether spatial, temporal, social, or probabilistic—is essential to their understanding of the world. Maglio explores this process. Building on construal-level theory (Liberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2010; Trope, Ledgerwood, Liberman, & Fujita, 2021), he argues that psychological assessment of distance (e.g., how close a travel destination feels) explains how individuals move from perceiving their environment to making sense of it and ultimately finding meaning. In this way, the perception of distance influences subsequent actions, decisions, and feelings.

Meaning making happens both within the person and between persons. Meaning as an interpersonal process occurs whenever people seek to understand each other and form a shared meaning of the world. Moving to the social context of meaning making, Speer et al. explore how people come to understand themselves and others through *conversations*. Conversations contribute to a sense of belonging, self-worth, and identity. However, not all conversations yield these benefits equally. Successful conversations balance psychological closeness (through alignment and empathy) with distance (through exploration and diverse viewpoints), enabling deeper connections and collective cohesion.

Further exploring interpersonal meaning making, Waksak explores *communication*. She finds that the way people communicate is shaped by their audience's distance, size, and diversity. Communicating with distant or diverse audiences often prompts speakers to use more abstract

language. The reason is that abstraction facilitates understanding across differences. This dynamic is not only functional—allowing messages to resonate more broadly—but also reciprocal because abstract communication can shape perceptions of the speaker, signaling power or competence.

Creating Meaning to Find Direction in Personal Striving

Much of the research on meaning making addresses its functionality in enabling and facilitating personal striving. Landy, Daley, and Balceris study *motivated perception*. Like Todorov and Albohn, they demonstrate that perception is idiosyncratic, and they explain these variations by noting that people see the world through a motivated lens. Their perceptions are a function not just of what is actually presented to them but also of their goals, expectations, identities, and experiences. By “filling in the gaps,” people create meaning at the earliest levels of information processing. This motivated perception, or “wishful seeing,” allows people to create a desired meaning of the world around them.

Next, Nakkawita and Higgins explore a particular context where meaning making influences motivation: *multitasking*. They demonstrate that how people structure their engagement in multiple activities affects the inferences they draw about their enjoyment of and interest in those activities. Through the lens of activity engagement theory (Higgins, Lee, Kwon, & Trope, 1995), they explain that switching between tasks—especially those that are enjoyable—can undermine perceived interest in the primary task because the act of switching signals that the initial activity might not have been sufficiently engaging. Conversely, switching between tasks that are initially unattractive can enhance perceived interest in those activities.

Staying on the theme of juggling *multiple goals*, Fishbach and Wang explore how our various ambitions—whether career, family, or health—can either fuel one another or create tension. Research reveals that when people perceive their goals as harmonious, they feel more intrinsically motivated, making long-term pursuits feel rewarding and engaging. In contrast, when goals seem to clash, self-control kicks in as a necessary tool to resist short-term temptations and stay on course. Ultimately, these authors suggest that effectively navigating multiple goals often depends on the perceived relationships between goals and the resulting meaning of their pursuits.

Kleiman argues that in the course of pursuing meaningful outcomes, cognitive control—the ability to regulate attention and behavior

in alignment with goals—can transfer across different domains. When tasks are motivationally meaningful, people can leverage a general *control readiness* mechanism that enables cross-domain conflict resolution: Prior engagement in cognitive control can reduce stereotypical biases, influence attention allocation, and enhance decision-making flexibility. When meaning connects two previously unrelated tasks, mechanisms engaged in one may “carry over” to the next.

Finally, metamotivation matters for creating meaning. *Metamotivation* refers to the beliefs and processes that support people’s ability to regulate their motivational states to attain desired outcomes. For example, whereas some tasks demand being sensitive to more distant priorities (e.g., delay of gratification), others demand being sensitive to more immediate concerns (e.g., proofreading). According to Carnevale and Fujita, metamotivation allows people to flexibly construct new meanings for tasks to motivate themselves to perform at their best.

Creating Meaning in Life

How do people find meaning in their lives? How does research on the quest for psychological meaning explain self-perceptions?

First, Ferguson and Hassin challenge the view that finding meaning in life is mainly a conscious process, arguing instead that *non-conscious* and *implicit cognitive processes* play a crucial role. They explore difficult, life-changing decisions that reshape our sense of self (e.g., having a child or getting divorced), arguing that what is considered “thinking” and “deciding” in these decisions is often governed by non-conscious processes. More broadly, their approach suggests that implicit cognition is not rigid and simplistic but flexible, capable of updating beliefs, integrating relational information, and even engaging in causal reasoning.

Next, Sedikides and Wildschut explore *nostalgia* as an emotion that bridges gaps between disjointed aspects of the self, fostering a sense of self-continuity, which in turn enhances meaning in life. When individuals experience self-discontinuity—feeling disconnected from their past selves—nostalgia acts as a psychological resource that reconnects them to their past to promote emotional resilience and reinforce identity. In this way, nostalgia mitigates discomfort, reduces existential anxiety, and provides meaning (in this case, coherence) to one’s life narrative.

Ultimately, meaning making is the process by which a stimulus is evaluated within a broader context. Applying this principle to the self, Liberman explains that the experience of meaning in life arises from the interplay between engagement with reality and the creation of *abstract mental constructs* such as narratives and purpose. According to this

analysis, meaning emerges when individuals feel a sense of continuity across time, space, social connections, and possibilities. Such continuity must align with higher-level abstractions that organize experiences into coherent narratives and purposeful goals.

Finally, Moskalenko and Kruglanski distinguish between two systems of meaning in life, based on two complementary motivational states: a need for significance and a need for awe. *Need for significance* refers to the desire to feel important and to matter; it prioritizes status, competition, achievement, aggression, and clear and firm answers to questions or problems (need for closure). By contrast, *need for awe* is a desire to contemplate vast and incomprehensible phenomena that make one feel insignificant by comparison, such as God, beauty, and nature; it prioritizes harmony, equality, connectedness, and questions rather than answers. Although the need for awe and the need for significance are both essential, individuals and cultures often focus on one over the other, resulting in different “default” interpretations and meanings assigned to the same events.

CLOSING REMARKS

The last chapter in this book is authored by Yaacov Trope, and we would not blame our readers if they read it first. In it, Trope teaches us that meaning making is a fundamental psychological process that reduces entropy by connecting elements into a coherent structure. Drawing from cognitive and social psychology, he explains that meaning emerges from integrating beliefs, behaviors, and goals into unified frameworks, both at the individual and collective levels. This process not only provides individuals with a sense of predictability, agency, and self-worth but also expands the regulatory scope of collectives, enabling societies to extend their influence across time, space, and social contexts.

As a final note, this introduction would not be complete without sharing with you, the reader, another main reason this group of authors got together to write about the quest for psychological meaning. Our collective work is a tribute to our friend and mentor, Yaacov, and it was inspired by his scholarship. Each of the authors was deeply influenced by him on personal and intellectual levels. Yaacov taught us to pay close attention to people and to how they see the world. We learned to look carefully, to find patterns and rules in the messy data on human thought and actions. Yaacov has shaped the field of social psychology, and many researchers have been personally influenced. We count ourselves among those fortunate scholars. His guidance continues to inspire us to seek meaning and understand how people find it in every facet of life.

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