

The social dimension of meaning in life

By Tatjana Schnell, 2020

In an existential context, “belonging” is understood as the experience of having a place in this world, of being part of something that goes beyond the self (Schnell, Höge, & Weber, 2019). As such, it is a response to the fundamental experience of separation between self and world that Irvin Yalom (1980) calls existential isolation. In a psychological context, belonging stands for social inclusion. Thus, Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 497) define belonging as “strong desire to form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachments.” Such bonds manifest themselves in the form of family and friendship or in belonging to different collectives. Meaning deriving from the social dimension is at the forefront of this chapter.

7.1 Asked directly: social relationships as primary sources of meaning

Whenever researchers ask the direct question of what gives meaning to people’s lives, social relationships come up first, with particular emphasis on the family. Let me summarise the corresponding studies in chronological order – even if this may be a little monotonous, given that the findings have repeatedly been confirmed. In 1981, Karen de Vogler and Peter Ebersole reported that relationships were most frequently mentioned when they asked 96 US citizens about their most important sources of meaning. In a study by Steven Baum and Robert Stewart (1990), who interviewed 185 Americans of different ages, two sources of meaning, specifically love/marriage and work/career/education, took the first two places, with apparently no gender or age effects. Kay O’Connor and Kerry Chamberlain (1996) interviewed 38 middle-aged New Zealanders about their purpose in life. All (100 percent) mentioned social relationships. Dominique Debats (1999) asked 732 Dutch students (321

of whom were in psychological treatment) to name their current most important sources of meaning. Relationships were by far the most frequently mentioned by patients and non-patients.

Antonella delle Fave and her colleagues conducted a particularly extensive study (2013): They interviewed 666 adults in Australia, Germany, Croatia, Italy, Portugal, Spain and South Africa. Participants were asked to indicate “the three most important things in their lives (sources of meaning)” (p. 520). After coding the open answers, family proved to be the most frequently cited source of meaning (84 percent); as much as 40 percent of the answers referred to it. Work followed by a large margin (44 percent of the people, 15 percent of the answers). This strong prioritisation of family and the ranking of work in second place was found among respondents from all cultures surveyed.

Melissa Grouden and Paul Jose (2014) asked their 247 middle-aged New Zealand study participants to describe their sources of meaning. Again, relationships were the most frequently cited: In first place (36 percent) was family, followed by social relationships (14 percent). Only just under 9 percent of the surveyed New Zealanders cited work as a source of meaning, which could indicate a cultural peculiarity. In addition, participants were asked to rate to which extent a list of sources of meaning contributed to their personal meaning in life. Again, family achieved the highest rating. The important role of family and other social relationships applied to both sexes and all ages.

Paul Wong developed the Personal Meaning Profile, which defines eight sources of meaning and measures their personal relevance. In the presentation of the instrument (Wong, 1998), relationships were rated the highest of all eight sources of meaning. In a study by Liora Bar-Tur and colleagues (2001), 362 Jewish and Arab Israelis were asked to assess the importance of 11 given sources of meaning; family relationships were given the highest rating. A group of American authors (Lambert et al., 2010) conducted a series of successive studies to explore the role of the family in young adulthood. The studies confirmed the assumption that when asking an open question about personal sources of meaning, family would be mentioned most frequently by young adults. Family also came first in a ranking of given sources of meaning. As expected, the perceived closeness to the family and support by the family correlated with meaningfulness. Another of their studies suggested that these results had nothing to do with social desirability. The authors concluded that “for young adults, family relationships are a primary source of meaning in life and they contribute to their sense of meaning” (p. 517).

Through in-depth interviews, I have researched interpersonal sources of meaning in young adults in Germany (Schnell, 2012). Ten men and ten women aged between 19 and 26 were interviewed about their personal myths, rituals and experiences of transcending (Schnell, 2003, 2009). The importance of peers and family was evident in all three dimensions, although in contrast to the American study just described, friendship was mentioned even more often than family was.

When asked what they would put on a “personal altar,” what they “considered sacred or inviolable,” 55 percent of the participants named “friends” and 40 percent “family.” These are three examples:

Male, 19 years old: “Music, parents and brother, guitar, openness, friends.”

Female, 20 years: “My parents, the family itself, tolerance, reliability, loyalty, honesty, love, children, consideration, happiness, my friend.”

Female, 21 years: “Family, plants, books, candles, studying, astrology, bed, boyfriend, photos, plush toys, friends.”

We also asked our interviewees about past key experiences. In the majority of cases, they mentioned interpersonal experiences such as moments of solidarity, closeness, or first love. Also, when asked about a life motto or life task, responses revolved around social concerns. Many participants referred to “being able to be the way you are” in relationships, to “being able to let your feelings run free,” thereby receiving strength, encouragement and support. Mutuality, the willingness not only to take but also to give, was emphasised again and again. A 20-year-old man expressed it succinctly: “If I am friends with someone, I can do anything. I could die for my friends. If someone is a friend of mine, that’s not so easy. That is friendship” (Schnell, 2012, p. 18; transl. TS).

Such commitment to social relationships was also reflected in personal rituals reported by respondents. They were about special forms of greeting or communication, gifts and regular shared activities. They were the space for experienced closeness and belonging, for helpfulness and expression of appreciation. They thus also created a medium for significant experiences of selftranscendence. As an example for many others, a 17-year-old recounted the following self-transcending experience:

When I’m with friends; that you can really do any nonsense and then not be portrayed as stupid or so, but that you have fun together and everyone can do something that is not considered normal. For

example, if you say something stupid and just spin a stupid idea and get into it. That everyone says something about it and that it's only funny afterwards. For me that signifies stability, to have fun, to enjoy life and to see the beauty in life.

(Schnell, 2012, p. 21; transl. TS)

Several people shared that in caring and active listening, they forgot everything around them. A 25-year-old man recounted the following:

It means that I give someone my attention and of course he also gives me recognition because he tells me something. And then I am not interested in the fact that a nuclear bomb might fall next door, but at that moment it is crucial to me that I am there for this person, that I can perhaps help him.

(Schnell, 2012, p. 21; transl. TS)

Experiences of transcending are extraordinary states of consciousness characterised by the deactivation of standard cognitive control mechanisms (Schnell, 2009, 2011a). Those who self-transcend are temporarily helpless, vulnerable, childlike. Trustworthy interpersonal relationships seem to represent a shelter in which an unconditional acceptance applies. The experience of being recognised and held despite unmasking and being “stupid” is an important contribution to a person’s experience of meaningfulness, probably by strengthening the sense of belonging and significance (Schnell, 2012).

7.2 Family and friendship as sources of meaning?

When there is no reason for explication, sources of our meaning are not part of our working memory but stored as implicit knowledge. They are part of our worldview, along with other fundamental (ideological, ontological, epistemological, etc.) assumptions. “Worldviews are not products of thought,” Dilthey (1960, p. 86, transl. TS) wrote: “They emerge from life behaviour, life experience, the structure of our mental totality” and are therefore not easily accessible through cognition.

Anyone who thinks they can access this hidden structure with a simple, direct question could end up with all-too-simple, obvious answers. Family and friends always take top positions when people are confronted with the direct question of what gives meaning to their lives. Nevertheless, they do not number among the sources of

meaning assessed by the Sources of Meaning and Meaning in Life questionnaire (SoMe; Schnell & Becker, 2007; Section 3.2.1). This is because sources of meaning are understood as part of our worldview, as fundamental orientations guiding thinking, acting and experiences in different areas of life. Sources of meaning are the ultimate concerns mentioned when we are asked about the meaning of our values, assumptions and action. Of course, the terms “family” and “friends” often appeared in the qualitative studies that preceded the development of the SoMe. But underlying them were many – highly individual – ultimate concerns.

Consider the following responses of a young man to the following question: “Are there any celebrations or ceremonies that are particularly important to you?” obtained with the laddering technique Section 3.1.1).

Answer 1: Family celebrations

Interviewer: What do these celebrations mean for you?

Answer 2: I like being with my family. They are very funny; we can laugh a lot.

Interviewer: What does that mean for you?

Answer 3: To relax, unwind, compete a little with the others, a few challenges!

We have summarised the meanings that the young man finally came up with by the terms “comfort,” “fun” and “challenge.” They represent what family celebrations meant to him and thus reflect a personal experience of family. Other meanings that our interviewees associated with family were communion, care, tradition or generativity. Concepts such as family or friends are too superficial, too generic, to inform us about actual personal meanings. For this reason, the SoMe does not include family or friendship as a source of meaning.

7.3 Meaning and marital status

The significance that family has for meaning in life can also be captured via demographic variables. For example, we know that meaningfulness is closely associated with marital status (Damásio, Koller, & Schnell, 2013; Schnell, 2009). The institution of marriage seems to play a special role here: Married people, for example, report higher meaningfulness than singles but also than cohabitants. Perhaps people with a higher sense

of meaning are more willing to enter into marriage. On the other hand, marriage might also strengthen meaningfulness. Although the number of people living in a non-marital partnership is increasing, for many, there seems to be a significant difference between a partnership per se and its being sealed by marriage.

However, this does not mean that unmarried people more often experience crises of meaning than married people do. With an existing partnership – whether official confirmed or not – crises of meaning are significantly less frequent than among single people. This suggests that the possibility of loving a partner and being loved by this person might constitute a protection against a crisis of meaning.

7.4 Children as a source of meaning

And what about children? In the literature, we can read about the paradox of parenthood: Many people regard children as a goal in life, as positive and desirable. At the same time, the social discourse on children and parenthood revolves largely around problematic aspects. The low birth rate is criticised with the primary reason that too few workers “grow up.” Parenthood focuses on the (expected) burdens associated with children. A study by the German Federal Institute for Population Research stated that a culture of concern, doubt and worry dominates parenthood (Schneider, Diabaté, & Ruckdeschel, 2015). Potential parents assume that their own needs will become less important with the birth of a child; that the mother’s employment in particular might be impeded; and that the parents’ participation in social life will be hampered. Financial insecurity and fear of educational errors further prevent or delay the practical implementation of a widespread desire to have children.

In fact, these concerns are not entirely unfounded. A meta-analysis showed that both life satisfaction and partnership satisfaction decline continuously after the birth of a child and that they do not increase again (Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid, & Lucas, 2012). But the limitation of this hedonic aspect of well-being (Section 10.1) is – according to one theory – compensated for by an increase of eudaimonic well-being: Parents’ sense of meaning is significantly higher than that of childless adults, as Baumeister and colleagues demonstrated (2013).

We continued to investigate the issue and came up with some surprising results (in preparation): In fact, at first glance, parents’ sense of meaning is higher than that of childless adults. If, however, parenthood and marital status are considered at the same time, parenthood does not additionally contribute to the explanation of meaningfulness. In other

words, married parents' sense of meaning is no higher than that of childless married couples.

Further information was provided by gender-specific analyses. In principle, meaningfulness is somewhat *higher* among mothers than among childless women, whereas it is *lower* among fathers than among childless men – irrespective of age and marital status. On the other hand, men report significantly higher meaningfulness in marriage, compared with single men or cohabiting men. There are no differences among women in this respect.

Are there any insights into the paradox of parenthood that the available data can provide? According to Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, and Garbinsky (2013), a loss of happiness after parenthood should be compensated for by an increased sense of meaning. This seems to be the case with the women in our sample, but not with the men. A possible explanation can be found in Trivers's parental investment theory (1972). It assumes that investment by mothers is far higher than investment by fathers. Consequently, motherhood should be more important for female identity (and female meaning in life) than fatherhood for male identity and meaning in life.

For the average man in our study, paternity is not a strong source of meaning, but marriage appears to be. How is this to be understood? Here too, evolutionary psychology could provide an explanation. It has shown that women are selective in their choice of partners in order to ensure that their offspring grow up optimally. Accordingly, women attach importance to the dedication and commitment of their partners, especially when it comes to a long-term partnership (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). The subgroup of married men in our study represents those who were “chosen” as husbands – perhaps because of their strong sense of meaning. On the other hand, there is also evidence that people with a high sense of meaning are more willing to marry than people with a lower sense of meaning (Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016).

Marriage is accompanied by expectations, rights and duties that can strengthen all four aspects of meaningfulness. Marriage implies a special *significance*: In Germany, for example, it is still subject to special state protection (see Article 6 of the German Constitution). It is also regarded as a particularly stable form of *belonging*, which is publicly affirmed and legally protected (which, of course, can be questioned in view of high divorce rates). Furthermore, married life is associated with a number of codes of conduct (Waite & Gallagher, 2002), which, if followed, strengthen *coherence* in behaviour and self-perception. Last but not least, marriage is associated with a generative *orientation* since it is

still regarded (by the state as well as many contemporaries) as the ideal environment for children to grow up in. Generativity (Erikson, 1980; Section 6.1) has repeatedly been identified as the strongest predictor of meaningfulness (Damásio, Koller, & Schnell, 2013; Pedersen et al., 2018; Schnell, 2011b; Schnell & Hoof, 2012).

The fact that today every third marriage in Germany fails and more and more children are born without prior marriage announces a change in our understanding of possible forms of relationships. Nevertheless, marriage still appears to remain attractive, as evidenced by the fact that in 2018 one-third of marriages were performed by couples of which at least one partner had previously been divorced or widowed (DESTATIS, 2019).

7.5 Social inclusion

Our need for social inclusion is not limited to family and friends. According to Maslow (1943), social needs such as group membership, communication, social exchange, mutual recognition and support are human deficit needs: as long as they are not satisfied, they are salient (accessible to consciousness) and urge us to fulfil them. Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (2008) consider social inclusion, autonomy and competence to be the three basic psychological needs.

Impressively, Jean Twenge and colleagues (2003) showed the importance of social inclusion through the consequences of social rejection: In experiments, they brought about the experience of social rejection by first letting the participants talk to each other in small groups and then asking them to write down the names of the two with whom they would like to work. Half of the (randomly selected) participants were then told that no one wanted to work with them; the other half learned that they had been named by all. This information had nothing to do with reality but was intended to create a feeling of social exclusion in some and a feeling of social acceptance in others. The study participants then worked on several tasks and questionnaires. As the authors had hypothesised, the socially rejected had entered a state of cognitive deconstruction (Baumeister, 1990): They had the feeling that “time was dragging on” – they estimated time intervals to be significantly longer than they actually were. They avoided thinking about the future. Compared to the socially accepted, they opted more often for momentary advantages than for the option of later but farther-reaching advantages (which is considered an indicator of low self-control). Regardless of which decision they made, they were not very convinced of it. Further experiments in this

study showed that social rejection was associated with slower response times, emotional flattening and the avoidance of self-attention. Last but not least, socially excluded people were much more likely to agree that life was meaningless.

Tyler Stillman and colleagues (2009) also confirmed the hypothesis that social exclusion and loneliness affect meaning in life. In another series of studies, Lambert, Stillman and colleagues (2013) focused on the positive experience of social belonging. Both in a cross-sectional and in a three-week longitudinal study, social belonging correlated with meaningfulness. In a subsequent experiment, various forms of belonging were evoked: feeling belonging, experiencing support and receiving compliments. Participants were prompted to recall the people whom they linked to these experiences and then to describe the people and the situation. Those who had evoked a sense of belonging reported higher meaningfulness than the other two groups did (although the initial values were not given, and it is therefore unclear whether the groups differed from the start or whether this was attributable to an actual increase in meaning through the experimental induction). In a replication of the experiment with Indian students, the evocation of social support was accompanied by a similar increase in meaningfulness as the evocation of felt belonging.

In a longitudinal study with older Americans, Neil Krause (2007) has demonstrated that social support can indeed increase a person's sense of meaning. The study showed that the type of support plays an important role: Meaningfulness was most influenced by anticipated social support: trusting that you will receive help when you need it. This finding recalls the importance of manageability that Antonovsky (1997) postulated in his sense of coherence. He assumed that health is promoted by the following:

- 1 We experience our life as meaningful (meaningfulness).
- 2 We have sufficient resources available to master life (manageability).
- 3 We perceive the world as comprehensible and coherent (comprehensibility).

The three aspects of the sense of coherence are closely related, and anticipated social support can be viewed as an aspect of manageability.

Krause also found that emotional support from family and friends played an important role in meaning in life in old age. Interestingly, this did not apply to active or informational support – at least not *per se*. Perhaps these types of support – so the author muses – put age-related

functional limitations too much into the foreground, thus exposing older people in their need of help. But they were still important, as further analyses showed: The more tangible help or information the study participants received, the higher they rated their emotional support – which in turn increased their sense of meaning.

7.6 From social inclusion to meaning – or vice versa?

Olga Stavrova and Maike Luhmann (2016) used data from American and British long-term studies to examine the effects of social inclusion on meaning in life but also in the opposite direction – the influence of meaningfulness on social inclusion. They distinguished three forms of social connectedness: intimate, relational and collective. The analyses showed that collective involvement predicted meaningfulness ten years later. However, this effect was not found for connectedness with partners, family and friends. The authors speculate that more than spouses, friends and family, the experience of involvement in a collective community contributes to strengthening self-esteem and self-efficacy and thus also to meaningfulness.

In a further step, the other possible direction of influence was analysed: Does meaningfulness contribute to people feeling connected to their partners, friends, family or the social community? Here effects were observed with regard to all three forms of social integration: Ten years later, those who had perceived their lives as meaningful at the time of the first study reported a stronger sense of partnership, family, friendship and social solidarity. Stavrova and Luhmann substantiated this finding on the basis of British survey data: Here it became apparent that a high level of meaningfulness at the time of the first study predicted higher levels of social solidarity and voluntary activity two years later. In addition, the rate of marriages contracted within these two years was significantly higher among those who had reported a high level of meaningfulness two years earlier.

We can thus conclude that being integrated into a larger social whole strengthens meaningfulness to a particular degree. More than partnership, family or friendship, feeling attached to a community seems to promote belonging in an existential sense. We might argue that it also offers more possibilities for experiencing personal significance, such as through various forms of generativity (Section 6.1). Finally, this study shows that a sense of meaning in life can motivate people to take an active and responsible approach to life – demonstrated here by the respondents'

willingness to enter into long-term relationships and become socially involved (see also Chapter 14).

7.7 Social inclusion at work

For Aristotle, a human being is a social being (*zoon politicon*). Only in community – according to the Greek philosopher – can we realise our potentials. States and regional collectives have thus emerged. The world of work, too, is organised in the form of collectives: companies, organisations and institutions. Here, people work as experts but always also as social beings (Schnell et al., 2019). Therefore, belonging also represents a central criterion for meaningful work (Schnell, 2019; Chapter 13).

Relations between employers and employees are characterised by different types of give and take. Individuals who feel a sense of belonging are motivated to commit to a common goal, a shared task. Identification with a team or an organisation supports processes of self-investment (Leach et al., 2008), which in turn increase the satisfaction of being part of the group and the importance of the group for one's self-concept. Employees who offer commitment and identification expect loyalty from their employers as well (Rousseau, 1995; Schnell, Höge, & Pollet, 2013). They hope for recognition, appreciation and social support from colleagues and superiors (Siegrist, 1996).

Successful social inclusion in the workplace is associated with increased occupational and general well-being, whereas a lack of belonging has been associated with depression (Cockshaw, Shochet, & Obst, 2014; Somoray, Shakespeare-Finch, & Armstrong, 2017; Shakespeare-Finch & Daley, 2017). Some psychological constructs therefore explicitly address this important aspect. Early on, Allen and Meyer (1990) emphasised the importance of affective commitment for an organisation, rooted in positive emotions towards it. The concept of organisational identification takes this one step further. It describes a psychological fusion of self and organisation with regard to organisational norms, values and interests (van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). Empirical studies have shown that the experience of work as meaningful predicts both affective commitment (e.g. Geldenhuys, Laba, & Venter, 2014; Milliman, Czaplewski, & Ferguson, 2003; Steger, Dik, & Duff, 2012) and organisational identification (Demirtas, Hannah, Gok, Arslan, & Capar, 2017). Likewise, it can be assumed that organisational identification and affective commitment contribute to a sense of meaningfulness at work (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008).

The concept of psychological ownership also addresses employees' connectedness with the organisation. It describes the experience of being a (co-)owner of a material or non-material object – in this case, the organisation, or a part (project, area of work, tool, idea, etc.) thereof. The experience of ownership is perceived as an extension of the self (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001). Pierce and Jussila (2010) define jointly experienced psychological ownership as “a collective understanding that we are one, bound and interdependent on one another for some purpose that is larger than the self” (p. 817).

While the previously mentioned concepts describe individuals' attitudes, the socio-moral atmosphere is a characteristic (perceived by individuals) of the organisation (Weber, Unterrainer, & Höge, 2008). It is characterised by trusting and respectful relationships; participative cooperation; an atmosphere open to diversity and criticism; mutual support between colleagues, employees and superiors; and the transfer of responsibility for the well-being of others. Studies have shown the socio-moral atmosphere to be associated with prosocial work behaviour, solidarity in the workplace and democratic orientation (Weber et al., 2008; Pircher Verdorfer, Weber, Unterrainer, & Seyr, 2013) and to contribute to meaningful work (Höge & Weber, 2018; Schnell et al., 2013).

Time and again, social and economic developments in recent decades have jeopardised experiences of belonging to the workplace. Organisations have responded to intensified global competition and structural change with deregulation and restructuring strategies. These include unconventional, precarious working conditions and high flexibility requirements for employees. For temporary workers, part-time workers, teleworkers and outsourced self-employed people, it is difficult to impossible to develop affiliation with an organisation (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Schnell et al., 2013). The experience of alienation is a possible consequence (Rosa, 2014; Schnell et al., 2013; Yeoman, 2014).

Yet a strong sense of belonging in the workplace cannot be regarded as unreservedly positive. It raises the question whether merging with the organisation (see organisational identification) is desirable and mentally healthy. Anyone who derives identity and meaning solely from their professional affiliation has little balance in their life and runs the risk of losing autonomy and becoming dependent (Mael & Ashforth, 2001; Schnell, 2011b, 2016). Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2014) offers great literary insight into such processes. Further potential disadvantages of a strong identification with the profession are described in Chapter 13, which deals more generally with meaningful work.

7.8 Know thyself!

SELF-EXPLORATION: SOCIAL BELONGING

In some of the experiments described earlier, social belonging was evoked via *priming*. This process produces a vivid memory, allowing for further introspection. Use it to explore your personal social involvement:

Think of two people or a group to whom you feel closely connected. Describe these people or this group in writing. Describe your relationship with them. Outline an experience you had with these people or group that you remember as particularly strong social inclusion and belonging.

Reflect: How often do I experience myself as socially well integrated? What characterises such situations? With which people or groups is this possible? Am I satisfied with the social integration I experience? If not, how could I strengthen it, and what can I personally contribute to it?

FOR CONTEMPLATION

No relationship can eliminate isolation. Each of us is alone in existence. Yet aloneness can be shared in such a way that love compensates for the pain of isolation.

(Yalom, 1980, p. 363)

7.9 Literature

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