The Construction of Meaning from Life Events: Empirical Studies of Personal Narratives

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The relentless human propensity to interpret all events and experiences has encouraged many thinkers throughout the ages to conclude that a fundamental need or drive for meaning is an innate part of the human mind. Small children endlessly ask "why?" in response to adult generalizations and explanations. Teenagers question what they have learned from parents and authorities, by way of forming their own conclusions. Adults analyze the nuances of their spouses's acts as well as the grand import or causal implications of national events, from politics to sports. People may ruminate for years to search for meaning behind unfathomable events; they turn to scientific experts, poets, or religious leaders to give meaning to the incomprehensible.

Yet how is the quest for meaning structured, and what can satisfy it? Our approach to this question has been to collect first-person narratives of people's everyday life events, such as minor interpersonal conflicts and romantic heartbreak. We then compare different perspectives on similar events. For example, as we shall describe, people who have their hearts broken offer stories about unrequited love that differ in systematic ways from the stories told by people who played the role of rejector and broke someone else's heart. Such comparisons offer a key to understanding the interpretive activity of the human mind. If the events are roughly the same in an objective sense, then the systematic differences between the groups of stories reflect how the individual's interpretation is shaped by perspective, motivation, and bias.

Narratives are particularly instructive as a method of studying the human drive for meaning. McAdams (1993) has argued that self-knowledge is created, organized,

and stored in the form of narratives. In other words, the things people know and feel about themselves and others are not based on trait terms, but on stories. McAdams further argues that answering the grand question, "Who am I?" is best answered by telling one's life story. Narratives can be a rich source of information about personal meaning and a valuable tool in understanding the human drive for meaning (Beike & Crone, 2009;).

Our central argument is that people seek meaning in ordinary events along the same lines that they seek meaning in life generally. That is, the same factors that guide the effort to make sense out of life in general (so as to have a meaningful life) shape the daily efforts to make sense out of individual experiences. Baumeister (1991) proposed that the human quest for a meaningful life is shaped by four <u>needs for meaning</u>, and we shall invoke these same needs to explain the meaning-making activities of everyday life (see Baumeister & Newman, 1994).

First, people need a sense of <u>purpose</u> in life. That is, people want to perceive their current activities as relating to future outcomes, and so current events draw meaning from possible future circumstances. Purposiveness includes meeting objective goals and reaching a state of subjective fulfillment. Second, people desire feelings of <u>efficacy</u>. That is, they seek to interpret events in ways that support the belief that they have control over their outcomes and that they can make a difference in some important way. Third, people want to view their actions as having positive <u>value</u> or as being morally justified. Fourth, people want a sense of <u>positive self-worth</u>. They seek ways of establishing that they are good, admirable, worthy individuals with desirable traits.

People are most happy when these needs for meaning are satisfied (Baumeister, 1991). However, it is not enough to conclude simply that one has a sense of purpose, efficacy, value, and self-worth. Rather, these conclusions must derive logically from the evidence drawn from one's own life experiences. People must find a way to make sense of events whose implications contradict their understanding of what makes life meaningful (Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann; Wrosch, Miller, Scheier, & Carver, 2009). This involves processes such as searching for a higher purpose in negative or tragic life events (Aspinwall, Leaf, & Leachman, 2009; Park & Slattery, 2009), presenting the self in ways that enhance feelings of moral rectitude, construing a connection or coherency among outcomes which are truly unpredictable, and reinterpreting ego threats in ways that reflect positively on the self.

The drive for purpose, efficacy, value, and self-worth may be explored through use of autobiographical narratives in which individuals describe the events preceding and following important life outcomes. Evidence for personal meaning often appears under conditions in which one or more of the needs for meaning are thwarted. Life stories communicate a wealth of information regarding the ways in which people counteract the loss of meaning (Reker, Birren, & Svensson, 2009). Much of the evidence presented in this chapter is thus based on the personal accounts of individuals who have experienced negative or anxiety-inducing events, such as interpersonal conflicts or unexpected changes in lifestyle. The findings generally reveal that the construction of narratives provides individuals with an opportunity to restructure events in memory in ways that reflect positively on the self and add a sense of

coherence and stability to what would otherwise be viewed as a random and unpredictable world.

<div align="center">Four Needs for Meaning</div>

Life stories often reflect more than one type of meaning. That is, several needs for meaning may be threatened or satisfied by a single event. For instance, a virtuous person may be proud of her abilities to uphold a high standard of moral principles. Any event which subsequently tarnishes her character or calls into question her integrity could then cause a drop in perceived efficacy, value, or self-worth, or perhaps all three. As another example, a highly successful author who suddenly finds himself incapable of completing a book might lose both a sense of efficacy and a sense of purpose in life.

There is evidence that negative events cause a decrease in multiple needs for meaning. One such negative event that can be experimentally administered is interpersonal rejection. Williams (1997, 2002) has argued that social rejection harms multiple human needs, and in particular, renders people less able to make sense of their lives. One way of manipulating interpersonal rejection (or acceptance) in the laboratory involves Cyberball, an interactive ball-tossing computer game in which participants are assigned to either be included or excluded by what they perceive as fellow students (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). In fact, there are no other students— the computer includes or excludes participants by controlling the behavior of the on-screen characters ostensibly controlled by other students.

Following interpersonal rejection using the Cyberball program, participants report an extensive reduction in the perceived meaningfulness of life (Stillman, Baumeister, Lambert, Crescioni, & DeWall, & Fincham, 2008). Specifically, those rejected report an

increase in the perceived meaninglessness of life, as measured by the Kunzendorf No

Meaning Scale (Kunzendorf & McGuire, 1994; Kunzendorf, Moran & Gray, 1995-1996).

Items on this scale reflect all four of Baumeister's (1991) proposed needs for meaning.

For instance, "Life has no meaning or purpose" (purposiveness); "All strivings in life are

futile and absurd" (efficacy and control); "It does not matter whether I live or die" (value

and justification); "I just don't care about myself any more" (self-worth). Thus, negative

events can disrupt meaning broadly. Given the fundamental human drive to form close

relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Buss, 1990), a loss in meaning might be

particularly evident following social exclusion. In short, although purpose, efficacy,

value, and self-worth represent distinctly different types of meaning, a single event

(such as succeeding or failing at a goal) can affect more than one type of meaning. The

boundaries between these different types of meanings can be blurred.

Needs for meaning may also conflict with one another. Thus, for example, one

may wish to derogate a rival in efforts to increase self-worth but simultaneously feel

concerned about losing respect (value) in the eyes of others. Under these

circumstances, there are no clear criteria for determining in an a priori fashion which

need will predominate. Later stories about such events, however, typically relate the

relative import of each need through the narrator's description of the actions taken.

Using the previous example, one may suppress the desire to denigrate an adversary in

an attempt to appear decent and good to others — but then subsequently suffer a loss

in self-esteem due to the lost opportunity to assert one's superiority. Or, one may

aggress toward the rival and increase one's sense of worth but then lose face in the

eyes of others. The narrator's description of the event along with his or her reaction to

the event together convey the strength of each need and the process by which meaning is restored.

A single life story may therefore be taken as supporting the existence of one or more meanings proposed by Baumeister (1991). For clarification purposes, the research findings discussed here are presented according to whether they offer main support for the need for purpose, efficacy, value, or self-worth (though the overlap among these needs should become apparent). This framework has proven useful for organizing a wide range of stories based on everything from seemingly trivial circumstances (e.g., a short-lived argument with a spouse) to life-altering situations (e.g., becoming a quadriplegic) (Baumeister & Newman, 1994).

Need for purpose: Objective goals and subjective fulfillments

A sense of purpose probably comes closest to everyday conceptions of life's meaning (see Frankl, 1959/1976; see also Klinger, 2009, for the etymology and evolution of purpose). To believe in life's purpose is to believe that one is here for a reason, whether that reason is chosen by oneself, assigned by society, or decreed by divine powers. People have a sense of purpose in life when they perceive that their current behaviors are linked to future, desired outcomes. This form of meaning can be found through the pursuit of both objective goals and more subjective states of fulfillment. Undergoing years of education in an effort to secure a satisfying job would be an example of planning one's life around an objectively determined goal. The everyday drudgery and poverty of student life may be more meaningful and purposeful

to students when the distant goal of being a knowledgeable being with good credentials is kept in mind.

Not all purposes are objective goals; some are subjective states of fulfillment (Baumeister, 1991). Indeed, although most students seem to have specific career goals or ambitions that they are pursuing, we like to think that some are motivated by the intrinsic desire for understanding and knowledge. More obviously, people are sometimes driven by the quest for happiness or for spiritual salvation, and these future states can likewise shape how people interpret their events. Indeed, some major religions have proposed that salvation is not to be expected until after death, and yet the most important meaning of one's current life and activities is in relation to that state of fulfillment to be attained after death.

One role religion plays is to put the events of life in the context of a quest for future spiritual salvation. As such, religion has provided a sense of purpose to the lives of many people throughout history. The positive ways in which religion provides purpose to life are less striking and less easily observed, relative to the carnage and devastation that have resulted from extremist religious ideologies. Nevertheless, those who seek a life purpose through the practice of religion or spirituality demonstrate a variety of benefits relative to those who seek meaning elsewhere. A partial list of the benefits include health benefits such as improved immune function, reduced depression, lower blood pressure, and delayed mortality (Townsend, Kladder, Ayele, & Mulligan; 2002). Religion and spirituality also increase relationship satisfaction (Mahoney, Pargament, Jewell, Swank, Scott, & Emery, 1999; Fincham, Beach, Lambert, Stillman, & Braithwaite; 2007) and lower the risk of divorce (Booth, Johnson, &

Sica; 1995; Clydesdale, 1997; Fergusson, Horwood, & Shannon; 1984). Successfully dealing with the process of ageing also corresponds with spiritual and religious practice (Koenig, Smiley, & Gonzales, 1988; Reker & Wong, 2009).

Throughout history, religion has shaped how people view their life purpose in dramatically different ways (e.g., martyrdom, helping the needy, or escaping from suffering). Religious teachings cause people to give their money to strangers voluntarily, go without food, abstain from sexual activity; even kill themselves and others. Why would humans voluntarily perform activities that seemingly work against the biological imperatives of survival and reproduction? Baumeister (2005) argues that evolution shaped humans for culture. That is, humans are biologically designed to absorb and participate in large systems of meaning, such as religion (or democracy, conservation movements, etc). As a result, the purpose people see in life varies substantially as a function of their participation in religion.

It appears that actual achievement of a goal is less important for a sense of purpose than is the process of working toward one's goals. People do not become permanently satisfied upon reaching some goal or fulfillment state. Indeed, Baumeister (1991) coined the term the <u>myth of fulfillment</u> to refer to the contrast between popular notions of fulfillment, which are generally permanent, and actual experiences of fulfillment, which tend to be transient. In Western culture, the popular notion of passionate, romantic love is a striking example of the myth of fulfillment, because the image celebrated by novels, movies, poetry, and other sources promises undying love whereas the empirical evidence suggests that such feelings typically drop off substantially after a few months or years.

The mythical nature of fulfillment is suggested by the fact that the process of approaching it is often equally important as, or more important than, the fleeting moments of bliss. This can be appreciated by considering narratives of fulfilling sexual experiences. Baumeister (1988, 1989) examined stories drawn from magazines that solicit and publish narratives about masochism in efforts to understand the appeal of this somewhat bizarre sexual practice. These stories were characterized by elaborately detailed descriptions regarding the sequence of events preceding fulfillment. Stories emphasized the process of being tied up, whipped, or otherwise subjugated by others whereas the momentary fulfillment of orgasm often received a relatively brief or cursory mention. Evidently, engaging in masochism and further relating this experience to others are unfulfilling to the degree that they lack focus on the specific events leading to physical pleasure. Also, though not limited to stories about masochism, the simple act of relating one's experiences to others may allow a person to exaggerate the perceived degree of fulfillment he or she derived from the experience (Baumeister & Newman, 1994).

The idea that a sense of purpose in life is characterized by a chronic pursuit of higher meaning is further illustrated in the life stories of people who have suffered major negative life events. Thompson and Janigian (1988) argue that people search for meaning when negative life events call into question beliefs that the world is orderly and that life has a purpose. Negative events thus are not evaluated in isolation but interpreted according to one's life scheme or story-like representation of the self (Reker, Birren, & Svensson, 2009). Both positive and negative outcomes are imbedded in a

larger mental framework for how one's life should unfold. The acquisition of personal meaning involves a series of steps and, in this sense, has an underlying structure.

Janoff Bulman and Wortman (1977) interviewed paraplegic and quadriplegic individuals who had recently become paralyzed. As one might expect, the majority of respondents indicated that their victimization was the worst thing in the world that could have happened to them. In fact, the degree of self-blame for their victimization was higher than one would expect from an objective view of the circumstances under which the accidents occurred. The stories that participants generated, however, reflected more than a simple need to view themselves as having some degree of control over events. Instead, these accounts focused on the higher purposes served by the victimizations. For example, when describing how they answered their own questions of "why me?," over half of the victims generated stories that linked their fate to a higher sense of purpose, for instance a newfound appreciation for life. Individuals often made comparisons between their former and present selves and focused on what they had learned from the experience rather than dwelling on their new disabilities. Others who could not generate a clear benefit of their paralysis found solace in the conclusion that "God had a reason." Either way, victims best adapted to their new set of circumstances when they viewed their fates as predetermined and as being linked to future, desirable end states.

Similarly, Taylor (e.g., 1983; Taylor & Levin, 1976; Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985; Meyer & Taylor, 1986) spent several years investigating the processes by which people cope with negative life events. Her analysis revealed that three hallmarks of successful adjustment are finding meaning in an experience, which corresponds

roughly to the need for purpose, maintaining mastery over the environment (i.e., self-efficacy), and maintaining self-esteem through self-enhancing evaluations (which includes perceiving one's actions as good and just). Taylor examined autobiographical accounts of victimization and concluded that successful coping is linked directly to the perception that negative events serve a higher purpose (Taylor, 1983). For example, she found that over half of breast cancer victims reported that their illnesses caused them to reappraise their lives. This included a reported increase in self-knowledge and a tendency to derive greater satisfaction from current relationships. Negative setbacks thus appear to threaten feelings of purpose, which in turn instigate the need to view misfortune as being linked to future, positive outcomes — in this case, a greater appreciation for life.

The need for purpose thus drives people to attain objective goals and also pursue more idealized states of fulfillment. Purpose as meaning is not contemplated with respect to one's current situation but rather conceived according to the possibility of some future state of affairs. Narrative thought is a preferred form of mental representation here because it preserves the temporal order of events, which is a central aspect of purpose. Life stories also provide researchers with an excellent resource for understanding how individuals cope with negative life events, specifically, by revealing narrators' tendencies to view their victimization as linked to some positive outcome. By viewing a negative outcome as precursor for something positive, people can better cope with tragedy and maintain a sense of purpose in life.

Need for efficacy and control

The second need for meaning is that of efficacy or control. People want to believe that they make a difference and that they are capable of bringing about specific outcomes. Efficacy is thus related to purpose; the latter reflects the need to view one's actions as related to future outcomes, and the former entails the perception that one can achieve these outcomes. Mentally representing efficacious behavior in narrative form is beneficial in that it preserves critical information regarding the necessary steps toward goal attainment. As noted earlier, perceiving a logical connection between events enhances predictability.

Murray and Holmes (1994) devised a creative method for exploring how people restructure past events in ways that allow them to maintain a sense of efficacy in their romantic relationships. These researchers asked people to generate narratives about their partners' previous behaviors that facilitated or disrupted the development of intimacy in the relationship. Prior to writing these stories, half the participants were told that engaging in conflict is healthy or good for the relationship, whereas the remaining half were informed that conflict is bad for the relationship. The results showed that narrators reported higher levels of conflict in their relationships when they believed conflict was good as opposed to bad. Additionally, partners' dispositional tendencies toward conflict avoidance were interpreted in a manner consistent with the perceived benefits of conflict. When narrators believed that initiating conflict was good, they made excuses for their partners' conflict avoidance and emphasized the partners' other virtues. Conversely, when narrators perceived conflict to be bad, they downplayed the negative implications of their partners' tendencies to initiate conflict and minimized the importance of interpersonal differences. It thus appears that people want to view

themselves as effectively engaging in behaviors that are predictive of relationship success. This contributes to a sense of stability, predictability, and control in the relationship.

Research examining the lay perception of free will is consistent with a need for efficacy in the construction of meaning (Stillman, Sparks, & Baumeister, 2008). In one study, all participants provided narratives concerning an important experience in their lives. Half of the participants were further instructed that the experience should be about a time they controlled an action that they felt was freely chosen by them. For example, one narrator proudly described a time she summoned the courage to demand that a loud, rude customer leave the restaurant she was managing, despite her fears of retaliation. In contrast, the other half of participants were instructed to write about an important event in which they had not freely chosen the experience. One narrator described missing an important appointment and being sick because "my friends dragged me to the bar and made me drink. They made me drink a lot because they said I was in a bad mood." As suggested by these examples, free-will narratives were characterized by more positive outcomes than were the unfree narratives, according to raters who were blind to condition. Raters likewise scored the free-will narratives as substantially more positive in mood (with condition accounting for 37% of the variance of the rated mood of the essays). Narrators were also more likely to describe behaviors that were consistent with their own moral code when prompted to write about events they believe they controlled. Thus, when asked to provide narratives of meaningful life events for which participants viewed themselves as responsible, the event outcomes were positive, the narratives pleasant in mood, and the behaviors upright and moral—

relative to those who were asked to describe meaningful events for over which they did not perceive control. In short, varying efficacy and control resulted in narratives that differed widely in personal meaning.

The need for efficacy is further demonstrated in narratives in which people describe successful versus unsuccessful attempts at life change (Heatherton & Nichols, 1994). The contents of these stories are valuable indicators of efficacy because they reflect not only individuals' perceptions of control over day-to-day events but also their abilities to effect positive, large-scale changes in their lives. Heatherton and Nichols found that, compared to individuals who experienced failed attempts at life change, those who described successful attempts perceived greater degrees of behavioral control and personal responsibility for their outcomes. Failure narratives evidenced a higher rate of external attributions and were more likely to include statements attesting to the difficulty of change. Successful change stories, conversely, were more dramatic; they often portrayed the narrator as one who was faced with many challenges and much suffering but nevertheless was able to overcome these difficult obstacles and achieve happiness. Success accounts also revealed a higher incidence of identity change. Narrators who achieved change despite difficult obstacles reported a newfound knowledge or understanding of the self. Narrators who reported failure attempts reported little change in identity and instead tended to cling to their former roles. Success stories also were linked to a reappraisal of life goals, which in turn were associated with a perceived shift in life meaning. This finding relates back to the idea that people who finally achieve desirable end states will then form new goals as a means of maintaining a sense of purpose in their lives.

One instance that involves an especially difficult change in one's life is that of divorce. A large literature on interpersonal relationships shows that people are very reluctant to break close attachments (see Baumeister & Leary, 1995, for a review). It is of little surprise, then, that the dissolution of a marriage results in a variety of negative emotional outcomes, including confusion, regret, anger, negative affect, and decreases in self-esteem (Spanier & Castro, 1979). Another outcome might be a lost sense of efficacy. The findings of Murray and Holmes (1994), discussed earlier, suggest that efficacy may be disrupted by divorce because individuals are confronted the fact that things did not go the way they planned. In fact, other qualitative research suggests that this is indeed the case. Gray and Silver (1990) interviewed divorced couples and compared spouses' perceptions of events related to the marital breakup. The researchers found that both male and females assumed a relatively greater proportion of responsibility for the breakup than they assigned to their partners. Further, the greater the control given to one's former spouse, the poorer one's own subsequent level of psychosocial adjustment. Distorted illusions of control over negative events thus appeared to facilitate adaptation to change. These findings reinforce the notion that a sense of efficacy promotes healthy adjustment to difficult life circumstances.

Taken together, the evidence drawn from life stories suggests that people want to view themselves as capable of bringing about positive outcomes. When life circumstances threaten a sense of efficacy, one will reflect upon past events in a biased fashion and overestimate his or her degree of control over events. Often this involves exaggerating the number of obstacles to successful change in attempts to make one's

achievements appear even more impressive. Finally, efficacy facilitates healthy, emotional adaptation to negative life events.

It is important to note that declarations of control often become superseded by other needs, mainly those for self-worth and value. Recall that individuals who experienced failed attempts at life change denied responsibility for their current outcomes and emphasized their difficulties in trying to change (Heatherton & Nichols, 1994). Negative outcomes were thus characterized by the absence rather than presence of self-efficacious behaviors. Here, admitting to responsibilities for one's own failure likely posed a threat self-esteem. Concerns for efficacy may thus become overridden by needs to maintain a positive sense of self-worth. In a similar vein, narratives about both anger and unrequited love revealed a pattern of externalizing blame for others' negative consequences (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993). In these stories, needs to portray one's actions as morally right and justified necessitated denying responsibility for events.

Need for value and justification

A third need for meaning is the desire to view one's actions as good and just. A person wants to be able to reflect upon past behaviors as being right or morally justified. For example, inflicting harm on others is a clear violation of societal standards of right and wrong. Evidence suggesting a need for value often comes from stories about events in which individuals may be perceived as having brought harm to another. Narrators present the sequence of events in ways that absolve them of responsibility for others' negative outcomes.

The need to see one's actions as justified can be seen in narratives about anger. Baumeister, Stillwell, and Wotman (1990) asked people to write two stories, one about an instance in which they angered another and one which someone angered them. These narratives were subjected to in-depth content analyses and compared on the frequency of specific story characteristics. They found a series of systematic differences between the way the transgressors vs. the victims described such transgressions. First, transgressors downplayed the bad consequences, often by asserting that the victim's anger was completely unjustified. Any bad consequences were discussed only in the presence of other information suggesting that the transgressors had good intentions and did not anticipate that their actions would bring the other harm. Transgressors reported attempts to apologize or to compensate for the misdeed.

Second, transgressors presented mitigating circumstances, suggesting that they had a right to act the way they did. Third, transgressors externalized blame in attempts to minimize their own responsibilities for any negative consequences incurred by the victim. Last, transgressors exhibited a pattern of temporal bracketing; any harmdoing was considered to be "in the past" and as having no negative implications for the current self. This was in stark contrast to the perspective of victims, who continued to view the transgressor negatively and saw the past incident as reflecting poorly on the current relationship.

Further evidence for a need for value comes from research on the lay perceptions of free will described earlier (Stillman et. al., 2008). Participants who were asked to describe an instance in which they did something important that was freely

chosen by them provided narratives that differed substantially from those who were asked to describe an event they did not control. Those who wrote about events they controlled were more likely to write about morally upright actions (according to the narrators themselves) relative to those who wrote about events they did not control. For instance, one narrator in the free-will condition wrote about her organization of a charity soccer tournament. In contrast, a narrator in the unfree condition wrote about causing her brother lasting emotional pain by refusing his help. Thus, when people wrote about actions for which they take responsibility, their narrations described good and just behavior; but when they wrote about actions for which they did not take responsibility, they were more likely to write about doing something hurtful.

Narratives about unrequited love also demonstrate a need for value. (Baumeister & Wotman, 1992; Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993). Baumeister et al. (1993) asked people to describe experiences in which they were the object of another's unsolicited affection and also times where they were rejected by a potential lover. Consistent with norms against hurting others, rejectors often felt guilty for bringing emotional pain to the would-be lover. Guilt is aversive emotion that results directly from viewing one's own actions as bad or hurtful (Baumeister, Reis, & Delespaul, 1995; Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). The allusions to guilt suggest that people worry that breaking someone's heart is wrong and hence in need of justification.

Sure enough, rejectors filled their narratives with comments that might help justify their acts. They denied intention to cause harm and indeed often reported playing a passive role (which would minimize their responsibility). Many insisted that they had done nothing to encourage the other's affection, a fact that would indeed reduce or

eliminate their guilt. They often reported that they had tried to be explicit, clear, and considerate in discouraging the would-be lover's interest in them.

Some rejectors even conceived of themselves as victims when repeated attempts to thwart the advances of the other proved futile. In their accounts, the would-be lover was the irrationally persistent actor in the situation, whereas they were the innocent bystander who was helpless to bring the unpleasant situation to an end. As Baumeister and Newman (1994) suggested, claiming the victim status provides a sort of moral immunity. The victim role carries with it the advantage of receiving sympathy from others and thereby prevents the unrequited love episode as impugning one's character. Perceived victimization also provides a method of reducing guilt.

Thus, value as meaning presents itself in autobiographical accounts where one's integrity is called into question. As a way to restore meaning, the narrator devises a story that masks his or her faults and elevates feelings of moral superiority. Restructuring one's memory for a threatening event therefore provides an individual with the opportunity to reaffirm the self-concept, or restore the belief that one's actions are good and conform to conventional standards of right and wrong.

Need for self-worth

The last need for meaning, self-worth, involves both the desire to view one's own traits and abilities favorably and to elicit positive recognition from others. Most often, people speak of feelings of self-worth, which might be understood as the relative frequency of positive and negative emotions that result from the appraisal of one's personal qualities.

Threats to self-worth become apparent when examining the would-be lover's perspective in stories of unrequited love (Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993). Relative to the rejectors, "victims" of unrequited love suffered disproportionately large decrements in self-esteem. Interpersonal rejection, after all, implies that one is unworthy of another's attention or affections. In fact, some research and theory suggests that perceptions of one's appeal to others may be the underlying cause of low self-esteem (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Would-be lovers demonstrated various patterns of reducing the negative implications of rejection for their self-worth. First, the would-be lover tended to denigrate the romantic interest of the rejector, often by emphasizing his or her superiority over the rival and describing the target's choice of the rival over oneself as irrational and incomprehensible. Second, would-be lovers sometimes included in their narratives information about current romantic partners as a way to refute the conclusion that the narrators were not desirable. Thus individuals describing their unrequited love for another constructed their narrative in ways that buffered threats to their self-worth.

Similar evidence for self-worth comes from life stories about success and failure (Baumeister & Ilko, 1995). Participants in this study provided autobiographical accounts of their greatest success and greatest failure experiences. Additionally, half the respondents believed that they would later read their stories aloud to an audience. Evidence for self-esteem needs was furnished by two sets of findings. First, failure narratives written by individuals chronically low in self-esteem evidenced higher rates of temporal bracketing, or the tendency to relegate failures to the past. Temporal bracketing separates the present self from past behaviors and thereby allows

individuals to admit past failure while simultaneously rejecting the notion that this failure reflects negatively on the current self. This finding is consistent with other research showing that low (compared to high) self-esteem individuals are mainly concerned with self-protection, or sustaining any positive self-feelings they do have (Tice, 1991). High self-esteem individuals, due to their overwhelmingly positive evaluation of themselves, were less threatened by past failure and thus showed fewer needs to bracket off failure events from the present.

The second set of findings involved the assumed credit for success under public versus private conditions. When individuals believed they would be communicating their success stories to their peer groups, they included substantial information regarding the help and support they received from others. Sharing credit for success is a way to appear modest and further uphold norms (values) against self-aggrandizement. Once self-presentational concerns were removed, however, individuals abandoned all false modesty and readily described themselves as responsible. They downplayed any help or support from other people and instead reserved all the credit for themselves. Exaggerating credit for their successes enabled respondents to maximize feelings of self-worth and thereby reap more benefits from the process of constructing their narratives.

Recent qualitative work by Tangney (see Tangney, 1995 for a review) provides evidence for esteem-protection strategies among shamed individuals. Shame can be distinguished from guilt along several dimensions, the main one being the perceived implications of the emotion-eliciting event for the self. Whereas guilt entails a devaluation of a specific behavior (such as interpersonal transgression), shame reflects

a global devaluation of the entire self (e.g., Tangney, 1992; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Guilt is associated with feelings of remorse or regret, whereas shame is accompanied by more intense feelings of pain, powerlessness, and a "shrinking of the self" (Lindsay-Hartz, De Rivera, & Mascolo, 1995). Autobiographical accounts of guilt and shame experiences show that guilty people admit to their wrongdoings and report subsequent reparative behaviors such as apologies or compensation. Shamed individuals, on the other hand, show a pattern of avoiding blame and tend to externalize responsibility for negative events (Tangney, 1995). These findings are consistent with other empirical evidence revealing that shamed individuals tend to avoid public scrutiny and exhibit retaliative, defensive responses to ego threats by lashing out at disapproving others (Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992). Thus, unlike guilty individuals, shamed individuals respond to their own moral transgressions by devaluing the self, which in term activates attempts to regain self-worth by minimizing blameworthiness and aggressing toward disapproving others.

Finally, Taylor's (1983) theory of cognitive adaptation, presented earlier, underscores the significance of positive self-worth for positive emotional and psychological adjustment to negative life events. Interviews with breast cancer patients revealed that only a minority of respondents (17%) reported any negative effects of their illness (Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985). Further, the majority of women engaged in downward comparison by concluding that they were coping as well or better than other women who suffered the same illness (Wood et al, 1985). Downward comparison is well established as an effective self-enhancing strategy (Wills, 1981). Even the women who were objectively worse off comforted themselves with the idea that they

were not dying or experiencing a lot of pain. Thus, the literature suggests that major illnesses pose an important threat to feelings of self-worth and resultant cognitive efforts to escape feelings of low self-regard engender successful adaptation to these illnesses.

Self-worth therefore emerges as an important form of personal meaning. People want to feel good about themselves and believe that they are worthy of others' attention and affections. Threatened self-worth is succeeded by defensive attempts to bolster one's image such as by externalizing responsibility for negative outcomes or comparing oneself with those who are worse off. Failure to counteract threat leads to negative affect, perceptions of inferiority, and unhappiness.

Often times attempts to regain self-worth conflict with other needs for meaning, most often needs for efficacy or control. Under some circumstances such as those in which the outcome is negative for another person, one would rather feel guilty and still maintain the perception of control over events than to relinquish control. The evidence suggests however that people will avoid claiming control over events that hold long-term implications for their character. One example involves attributions among rape victims. Rape carries a negative stigma. Internal attributions of control which typically characterize personal misfortunes (e.g., Janoff Bulman & Wortman, 1977) may reinforce this stigma and thereby intensify feelings of low self-regard. This proposition is supported by research showing that high levels of characterological and behavioral self-blame for rape is associated with poorer adjustment (Meyer & Taylor, 1986). It appears, then, that efficacy needs diminish when self-blame is associated with a sense of deservingness for negative outcomes.

Conclusion

The personal quest for a meaningful life can be analyzed into four separate needs for meaning. People who have a sense of purpose, a sense of efficacy, a set of values that justify their actions, and a basis for positive self-worth generally find life meaningful (Baumeister, 1991). The same four needs for meaning probably shape the way people interpret individual events in their lives, and the systematic distortions or biases that shape autobiographical stories probably reflect these four needs

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