

## CHAPTER TWO

### Positive psychology and meaning in life

#### 2.1 Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore the relationship between two constructs, namely, meaning in life and optimism. This chapter will provide a detailed description of one of these two constructs, meaning in life. The discussion of optimism will follow in Chapter 3. However, before looking at the constructs themselves, we shall begin by examining the context within which they appear to exist, namely, positive psychology.

#### 2.2 Description of, and support for, Positive psychology

It has been evident for some time now that, in respect of its view of human beings and human functioning, the major emphasis within the field of psychology has been on and remains on pathology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). As we noted in Chapter 1, Strümpfer (1990) too observes that psychology has been operating primarily within a pathogenic paradigm.

Illustrative of the predominating emphasis on pathology within the field of psychology are Avia's (1997) comments regarding her work on emotions. Until very recently, she notes, it has been the case that the negative feelings have attracted far greater attention than the positive. She proposes several reasons why negative emotions have attracted so much more research attention. One of these reasons, for example, is that the roles played by negative emotions are thought to be "both ontogenetically and phylogenetically, more important for survival" (Avia 1997, p. 35). It has not only been human emotions that have been the target of this pathologizing approach. This predilection has also been directed at human cognition and behaviour.

The predominating historical - and continuing contemporary - emphasis on pathology, within psychology, reflects the attitude towards human beings held by the field of medicine. This attitude is epitomised by the system of psychopathology identification and the proposed explanations regarding the aetiology and treatment of the numerous disorders found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – IV (DSM - IV) of the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 1994), and it's predecessors. It would appear that in an attempt to gain the respect of the medical profession, and in seeking to emulate the field of psychiatry, the discipline of psychology has allowed itself to focus almost entirely on human deficits and failings. In aligning itself with the medical model psychology has sought to make itself scientifically respectable - within the modernist framework, at least - and in so doing has sought to gain some degree of credence with respect of the therapy-purchasing public (Heather, 1976).

The predominant emphasis to date has been to focus on what is wrong with people and to emphasise disease and malfunctioning. Lampropoulos (2001) has referred to this as the domination of the disease model. This emphasis has remained in spite of the fact that consistent calls have been made, over the years, for example by Battista and Almond (1973, p. 409), for “a psychology of human growth and potential”

However, a new way of thinking is gradually replacing this focus on pathology and a change of attitude is presently occurring within certain areas of contemporary American psychology. This change of heart is, to some degree, reflected in what is being referred to as positive psychology (Seligman 1999). It's proponents suggest that this psychology will be characterised by a “science of positive subjective experience, positive traits, and positive institutions” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 7). Psychology, they suggest “is not just the study of pathology, weakness and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue”. In respect of psychotherapy they state that, “treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 7).

This new attitude has an extensive - if neglected - history. Taylor (2001) makes reference to the origins, of what may be referred to as positive psychology, in the teachings of Emil Coue in the 1920's and the writings of Theodule Ribot in the 1880's. This perspective was to be later supported and enhanced by the view of man held by humanistic psychologists – most notably Maslow – who proposed an agenda for a positive psychology in the mid-1950's (Resnick, Warmoth & Serlin, 2001). The emphasis of humanistic psychology was, and remains, directed squarely at human potential, personal actualisation and viewing people holistically. In this it emphasised understanding and dealing with human beings in their entirety and not simply focusing on shortcomings and deficits.

The founding fathers of humanistic psychology argued that the “conscious experience of creative, healthy persons should be at the centre of psychological investigation” (Resnick, Warmoth & Serlin, 2001, p. 77). In their attempts to understand and appreciate this “conscious experience” humanist psychologists resorted to accessing the lived world of the individual person through that individual's own phenomenological lens. Humanistic psychology's foundations thus clearly include philosophical humanism, existentialism, and phenomenology (Aanstoos, Serlin & Greening, in Resnick, Warmoth & Serlin, 2001, p. 74). Of central importance is the fact that emphasis was placed on investigating what may be referred to as fully functioning, or optimally functioning people. This is a far cry from the obsession with illness and pathology represented by the medical model.

Despite these inauspicious beginnings, and in spite of the traditional focus on pathology and disease, there clearly have been periodic “forays into the realm of human excellence” (Rich, 2001, p.10). Apart from humanistic psychologists numerous other theorists and practitioners have played a significant role in this regard since the 1960's (Taylor, 2001). Murray, for instance, (in Taylor, 2001, p. 19), writing in the late 1930's, was of the opinion that psychology was heading toward, and therefore needed to attend to, the “largely neglected

positive, joyful, and fruitful experiences of a person's life, as well as his most admirable dispositions and endeavours”.

Mearns (in Dryden, 1992, p. 69) proposes that “psychology has long since lost its way in terms of understanding the human experience: it concentrates on cognitive functioning, while almost entirely neglecting emotionality”. In terms of the research conducted to date on human emotion a vast discrepancy exists in respect of the emphasis on the negative, as opposed to the positive, emotions (Avia, 1997). She proposes (Avia, 1997, p. 35) that perhaps people generally, and scientists particularly, tend to regard negative emotions as more “simplistic, uninteresting, and less ‘sophisticated’ feelings”. Lastly, she adds, perhaps we just take “normality for granted” (Avia, 1997, p. 35). She notes that substantially less effort has been expended on comprehending joy, happiness and other positive personality states and that less effort has also been spent on analysing the effects of these states on the total personality. The attempt to redress this imbalance represents a fundamental part of what the positive psychology movement is all about.

Positive emotions are vital to overall well-being and optimism is a fundamental part of this realm. As Avia (1997, p. 33) says, “to be in a good mood, to feel optimistic, to feel satisfied with one's life, to experience well-being and happiness, and to consider that the quality of one's life is good are not only desirable but, very probably, essential aspects of the healthy personality”.

This gradually emerging manner of viewing people positively clearly emphasises “the origins of health, or wellness” (Strümpfer, 1990, p. 265). Many health professionals, including psychologists, frequently view mental and physical health as little more than the absence of pathology (Handler and Potash, 1999). This attitude prevails in spite of the World Health Organisation's (1948) definition of health as a “complete state of physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.

In emphasising the sources of health, Antonovsky (1979, 1987) suggested the term salutogenesis. Strümpfer (1995, p. 82), however, proposed that the explanatory term fortigenesis is not only broader, but also one that is “more embracing, more holistic” than salutogenesis. His emphasis is therefore on the origins of strength, as opposed to health.

Strümpfer (1995) makes reference to several independently originating concepts that may be seen as readily belonging to this new vision of man. He refers to Kobasa’s hardy personality, Rotter’s locus of control and Bandura’s self efficacy. In terms of Antonovsky’s (1979) theory these may be seen as generalized resistance resources (GRRs). GRRs are conceptualised as being “*any characteristic of the person, the primary group, or the environment that can facilitate effective tension management*” (Antonovsky, 1979, p. 99, italics added). These characteristics: physical, biochemical, artefactual-material, cognitive, emotional, valuative-attitudinal, interpersonal-relational and macrosociocultural, include those of “subcultures or societies *that are effective in avoiding or combating of a wide variety of stressors*” (Antonovsky, 1979, p. 103, italics added). GRRs, therefore, help protect individuals against stressors.



Antonovsky (1987) believes that an abundance of GRRs results in positive consequences for the individual in terms of physical health, sense of coherence and other areas of well being. This writer takes this to mean, amongst other things, mental health. (Sense of coherence may be defined briefly as “a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence” that involves comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness (Antonovsky, 1987, p. 19)).

In support of Antonovsky’s (1979) proposed benefits of GRRs, Lightsey (1996) states that an ever-expanding literature points to personality traits and psychological resources (PRs) as being of central importance in human well-being. He refers to four such PRs: positive thoughts, hardiness, generalised self-efficacy and optimism. Although neither meaning in life, nor optimism, are

specifically mentioned by Strümpfer (1995), optimism is mentioned by Lightsey (1996) and others, for example, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) and Peterson (2000). In the light of these citations, it is this researcher's contention that in the spirit of a positive psychology - represented by both the fortigenic and salutogenic perspectives - these two constructs may be safely included in the pantheon of human attributes referred to as GRRs or PRs. As such, they fall within the purview of the new, affirmative psychology that is not only positive in orientation but also preventative in nature.

Research-oriented positive psychologists recognise positive human potential as a subject worthy of empirical studies (Resnick, Warmoth & Serlin, 2001, p. 81). As stated above, it is this writer's belief that the two constructs of interest in this study, optimism and meaning in life, are legitimate components of a positive human potential. That is, they represent part of a, as yet, largely unexplored field of study. As pointed out by Resnick, Warmoth and Serlin (2001), they are, therefore, worthy of investigation within such a positive framework.

Numerous studies have explored and employed the constructs meaning in life and optimism. However, to the researcher's knowledge no study to date has looked specifically at the relationship between these two constructs. The primary aim of this study is to investigate the nature of the correlation between these two constructs. However, before looking further at these constructs it will be of some value to explore briefly some of the criticisms that have been levelled at positive psychology.

### **2.2.1 Criticism of positive psychology**

In spite of the intrinsic appeal of the idea of a positive psychology there are several potential problems with regard to positive psychology as it is currently conceptualised.

Firstly, it is necessary to address the question, "What exactly is the good life?" (Rich, 2001). Rich (2001, p. 11) asks whether or not the positive subjective experiences, individual traits and institutions of positive psychology, of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), remain the same "over time and place, through history and across culture". Despite a cultural relativism regarding what is, and is not, or; may, or may not, be seen as acceptable behaviour, how, he asks, might positive psychology differ across diverse cultures? What differences and similarities exist between cultures and across time? Just as what is regarded as being negative, or pathological, is culturally relative so is what is perceived as positive and healthy. Who, he asks, gets to define what is good, or positive? He expresses serious qualms about the appropriateness of a single prescription for the "good life". Such a prescription, he argues, "will undoubtedly reflect the morals, values, and religious beliefs of the person and the society that write the prescription" (Rich, 2001, p. 12).

Taylor (2001, p. 16) agrees. He points out that one serious shortcoming of this approach is its somewhat simplistic and dualistic opposition to anything negative, "especially with regard to bad behaviour and faulty cognitive thought processes". He observes that whatever is regarded as being positive, "in the most general sense has no externally verifiable objective standard". In other words, whatever is regarded as positive is simply that which someone has defined as the opposite of negative. That someone, Taylor (2001, p. 16) suspects, will be a "controlling elite...chosen and certified by each other". This coterie will impose their definitions and standards on everyone else whether they agree or not. This approach is, therefore, explicitly dualistic. In this it is inherently contradictory and antithetical to its humanistic roots (Taylor, 2001).

Despite the criticisms that have been levelled at positive psychology it is this writer's contention that such a psychology is important and necessary in that it will help to redress the historical emphasis on pathology. The time has come to emphasise resilience and resources.

The discussion will now turn to meaning in life.

## 2.3 Meaning in life

### 2.3.1 Introduction

It is important to conceptualise the constructs that this study is attempting to investigate. The construct to be discussed in this section is meaning in life. Two concepts, meaning in life, and meaning of life are deceptively similar, inextricably inter-linked and therefore, easily confused. For the purposes of this study the following distinction is proposed. The phrase, meaning in life, is considered to allow for, or suggest, multiple meanings. In other words, numerous, diverse and concurrent meanings are thought to be possible in life.

On the other hand, the concept meaning of life is, for the purposes of this study, understood to connote, or imply, that a single, intrinsic, invariant, absolute and ultimate meaning exists, and is, therefore, potentially discoverable (Battista & Almond, 1973, p. 414). This conceptualisation is reflected in, for example, the idea that a single, absolute answer is possible to a question such as, "What is the meaning of life?" Many thinkers are adamant that there is no such ultimate meaning of life to be discovered, Schlick (1987) for example, promotes this view. If, as he does, we refute the notion that a single meaning exists, we are then left with the question as to what meanings there are to be found or derived from life, in other words, meaning in life. Such questions of meaning, as we shall see later on, are traditionally and primarily the domain of philosophers.

However, the search for meaning is not solely of interest to philosophers. Frankl (1988) believes that the search for meaning or, will to meaning, is the primary motivation of human beings. Existence, he stresses, falters unless there is a strong idea or ideal to hang on to. Life without meaning is barren, alienating and empty. For Frankl (1988), human existence is intentional in nature. But even more importantly, it is essentially and profoundly transcendental too. One vital facet of this self-transcendence, or reaching out into the world, is to fulfil one's own meaning, or meanings.



We have noted that the construct to be explored in this study is meaning in life, we shall now look at a few definitions of this construct.

### **2.3.2 Definition of meaning in life**

Numerous definitions of meaning in life are to be found in the literature and it soon becomes clear that the term, meaningful life, has no single, all-encompassing definition. Some of the more helpful definitions are discussed below.

Meaningfulness may be defined as “the presence...of the feeling that one can make sense of or find order or coherence in one’s existence” (Debats, 1996, p. 504). Meaninglessness then, may be viewed as the absence of these feelings of being able to make sense of, or perceive the order in one’s life (Debats, 1996).

The subjective experience of life is seen as meaningful and reflects feelings such as integration, connectedness or relatedness, fulfillment and significance. A definition of meaning includes “an individual’s belief that he [or she] is fulfilling his [or her] positively valued life -framework or life-goal” (Battista & Almond, 1973, p. 409). Meaning in life is thus understandable in terms of each individual’s belief that he, or she, is fulfilling his or her life as conceptualised in terms of that individual’s own, subjective, rational, conscious and valued life framework or goal. Meaning in life is, in respect of this definition at least, highly personal and subjective. It is also self-determined. In this it reflects the aspirational and actional and personal perspectives of Titus (1964) and Schlick (1987), (refer Section 2.3.6.2).

Battista and Almond (1973) emphasise that their definition of meaning in life rests upon a conscious framework. They appreciate that it is conceivable that a person may have unconscious or non-conceptualised beliefs regarding his, of her, life and that these may serve as a framework which allows the

individual to experience his or her life as meaningful. They acknowledge too that in this event the LRI scores would be biased, based, as they are, on a conscious framework.

Meaning in life has two components: a conceptualisation of a meaning, and a realisation of that meaning. The first aspect of this definition, namely that one has a meaning for one's life, implies, they suggest, that the individual "is committed to, values, or believes something" (Battista & Almond, 1973, p. 410). In order for a person to experience some sense of meaning in life a degree of faith or commitment in something is considered to be necessary. However, simply believing in something is, in itself, insufficient. They propose that in order to have meaning in one's life an understanding of that meaning is also required. This, conscious, understanding of life may be seen as serving as a framework within which the individual views himself, or herself, as living his or her life. Examples of such frameworks would be intellectual or religious systems, such as humanism and certain religions (Battista & Almond, 1973). Alternatively, this understanding may be viewed as representing a goal, or purpose, in life, toward which the individual strives. For example, self-expression, or religious or political vocation.

Importantly, the development of a meaning in one's life is also dependent upon "the generation of an internal 'scale' from this understanding of life"; a scale with which the person may measure the fulfillment of his or her life (Battista & Almond, 1973, p. 414). Lastly, the development of a meaning in life is dependent on the individual's "positive self-evaluation" of his or her life in terms of this scale.

To summarise, Battista and Almond (1973) state that in order for people to have a sense of meaning in their lives the following four criteria are implied:

- that people are positively committed to some concept of the meaning of life;
- that this concept of the meaning of life provides them with some framework or goal from which to view their lives;

- that they perceive their lives as related to or fulfilling this concept of life;
- that they experience this fulfilment as a feeling of integration, relatedness or significance.

This definition clearly relates more closely to the idea of a personal or individual meaning, as opposed to a greater, cosmic meaning. We shall now explore the question of meaning.

### **2.3.3 The question of meaning in life**

Most, if not all people, have given some thought to, and have developed some ideas regarding the critical issues of the nature of human beings: death, morality, aesthetics, the meaning of life and God. Indeed it is the reality of death and the inevitability of our dying that is one reason why the question, “What does my life mean?” is so often asked (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Death thus provides an ultimate, profound and non-negotiable context to life.

There are several useful ways to address the question of meaning in life. Beauchamp, Blackstone and Feinberg (1980) suggest that in order to answer the question, “What is the meaning in life?” it may make sense to ask this question in terms of specific individuals. For instance, we could begin by asking, “Whose life?” Some lives, at least in common sense terms, appear to have more meaning, point or importance than others. What then, is it that confers meaning on the lives of such people, or, how do they derive meaning? These are issues to which we shall return later on, for instance, when we consider the sources of meaning in life. Part of the discussion involves a consideration of the various sources of meaning as identified in the literature (refer Section 2.3.5).

Alternatively, from a broader perspective, the question becomes perhaps whether or not, any life at all can have meaning. For example, the question, “What, if anything, is the meaning of (human) life in general?” It is this writer’s contention that questions and issues relating to meaning of life concern

general meaning or meanings, whereas issues regarding meaning in life concern meaning as it affects individuals. Beauchamp, Blackstone and Feinberg (1980, p. 558) observe that if the last question is answered negatively, the question must necessarily arise, “Why, if human life has no meaning, is this the case? What is missing, and what would, or could provide meaning?” Discussion regarding these issues will be covered in more detail in Sections 2.3.4 and 2.3.5 below.

The purview of this study extends only as far as investigating how meaning in life relates to optimism, pertaining to a certain sample group. The issue of whether, or not, all life has meaning will not be directly considered although clearly the two are inextricably linked. From the respondent’s answers regarding the research questionnaire certain inferences will be drawn regarding meaning in life.

### **2.3.3.1 Meaning**

In order to examine meaning in life it becomes important to explore what is meant by the word meaning. The word is used in various ways to denote different things. One of the ways in which the word meaning is often used implies the notion of purpose. Frankl (1988, p. 55), for instance, states that “man’s heart is restless unless he has found, and fulfilled, meaning and purpose in life”. Purpose frequently implies a conscious goal, end or an aim (Beauchamp, Blackstone & Feinberg, 1980). The central component of meaning - as purpose - is that it involves consciousness and intention. (There is a definite similarity between this point of view and that of Battista and Almond (1973)). Beauchamp, Blackstone and Feinberg (1980) observe that, in this sense, we are regarding life, and therefore the meaning, or purpose, of life as an artefact of a conscious creator.

This creator may – depending on one’s belief system – be referred to as God, or, alternatively the individual person may consciously determine meaning. Firstly God. The ultimate meaning, or purpose, of life would then be whatever

God had, or has in mind. Schlick (1987), as we saw earlier, does not feel that there is any unitary or single meaning in life, especially if purpose is used as the criteria. This writer agrees. It is the refore felt that for the purpose of this study this definition of meaning, as purposive, is unhelpful and, therefore, will not be employed. However, it is clear that this distinction is as nebulous as that of meaning of life versus meaning in life, as touched upon earlier.

However, there is another way of looking at purpose. If we consider purpose in life, the issue is somewhat different. Purpose in life relates to the question of “*my* conscious goals” (Beauchamp, Blackstone & Feinberg, 1980, p. 561, italics in original). The question then becomes one of ascertaining what the individual’s own conscious aims are. One may ask of oneself, “What goals or objectives should I aspire to?” If one explores meaning and purpose from a personal perspective, then meaning is not found but created. For the purposes of this study this sense of the word purpose is far more helpful.

Another useful distinction to the purpose in life issue is offered by Beauchamp, Blackstone and Feinberg (1980, p. 561). An individual, they suggest, may have either as a goal a “single dominant end”, that is the object of a single prime desire, for example, wealth, power or service to God; or a “single inclusive end”. This would mean that the individual would desire that all his or her other goals, whatever these might be, should be achieved. The former, they suggest, is unusual. The latter, a desire governing other desires, is far more common but presupposes a given number of first-order purposes from which the individual may achieve at least one.

Beauchamp, Blackstone and Feinberg (1980) point out that Plato allowed for three categories of desire. We may have instrumental desires, things that we desire and value only because they serve as means to other things; intrinsic desires, things that are valued and therefore desired for their own sake; and desires for things valued both as means and also in themselves. The things that serve as sources of meaning in life represent a combination of these three categories; some instrumental, some intrinsic and some both, as we shall see in Section 2.3.5, below.

The word meaning may also refer to that which has “significance” or “importance” (Sykes, 1984, p. 628). For the purposes of this study the word will be used in the sense of significance and importance more than that of purpose, however, the purposive aspect of meaning will not be totally overlooked. Hence, meaning in life will be taken to refer to that which individual people find vital or central to making their life fulfilling and significant.

Quite apart from the issues above is the notion of the practical value of an understanding or appreciation of a meaning in life. Titus (1964) notes that all people must inevitably make decisions and act. If we are to decide wisely and act consistently, he says, it is necessary to discover both values and the meaning of things. This would naturally include meaning in life.

There is, therefore, a pragmatic element involved in having, or not having meaning in one’s life. The manner in which one will behave and the other beliefs one will hold will no doubt reflect whether, or not, one has a sense of meaning in one’s life. Some people find meaning in self-negating and destructive pursuits: hyper-materialism, sexual promiscuity, misguided rebellion, violence, substance abuse, suicide etcetera. These are, as we shall see, both symptoms and precedents of the absence of clear and mutually acceptable meanings in life in the contemporary West. It is to this that we now turn.

#### **2.3.4 The crisis of meaning**

The fact that most, if not all, people question the meaning of their existence and search for meaning, or meanings, in life would seem to indicate that they believe that life indeed has some meaning to be gleaned (Titus, 1964). Zohar and Marshall (2000) state that meaning is the predominant issue on people’s minds today. If we consider why this might be the case, Davidson (1966) observes that we live in a time of crisis, both in terms of our civilization and,

more importantly - although perhaps more vaguely - in terms of human life itself. Titus (1964, p. 4) goes so far as to say that “the events of recent decades have made it clear that something has indeed gone tragically wrong with human affairs”. If one is to look around oneself today, it quickly becomes apparent that not a great deal has changed since he made this observation.

This crisis is not exclusively due to technological, political or spiritual factors. The advances made in these areas, although impressive, have not allowed humanity to advance in any appreciable way towards happiness and well-being (Titus, 1964). In fact, it may be cogently argued that the exact opposite has, and continues to, occur. It would appear that our technological progress has outpaced our philosophical/intellectual/emotional ability to comprehend that progress and to manage it.

The current, and ongoing, crisis is, in all probability, a result of multiple factors. Whatever the origins, however, Davidson (1966) suggests that the precise nature of this emergency is existential. O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996, p. 461) concur, they mention that the present times have been described as “involving the loss of a meaningful world and a loss of a sense of self embedded in a context of meaning”. It is a crisis that involves the very meaning of - and in - life. It is regarded by some as a crisis of such gravity that, “without some clear sense of meaning and purpose in life ...we cannot hope to meet successfully the uncertainty and danger of our day” (Davidson, 1966, p. 1). Many humans are currently suffering from some degree of intellectual, emotional and spiritual anxiety because there is no longer any certainty about the meaning of life, the nature of the world in which we live, or the kind of life we want to live with our fellow humans (Titus, 1964).

Zohar and Marshall (2000) agree. The crisis is evident, they suggest, in the pervasive search for meaning in numerous and diverse areas of contemporary life. This searching is most obvious in the questioning that abounds in connection with issues such as work, family, interpersonal relationships, commitments and death. Much of this questioning arises as a result of the decline of the collectivist cultural framework within which people, in previous

times, were traditionally immersed. Few people in medieval Europe would have stopped to consider life's meaning because meaning was intrinsically enmeshed in the routines and traditions of daily life and the Christian view of life (Beauchamp, Blackstone & Feinberg, 1980; Zohar & Marshall, 2000). However, this time-honoured and meaning-giving framework has now diminished to such an extent that many people, particularly in the technologically advanced Western societies, feel alienated and must often live without such a frame of reference from which to derive meaning (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). The unequivocal, established and respected rules no longer exist and people consequently no longer have a given, overall context for their lives. Nor, frequently, do people have unquestioning loyalties to, or beliefs in, something greater than themselves of which they can feel a part, and from which they may derive comfort and meaning. The upshot of this is that many people are plagued by doubts and fears and have been left with existential and spiritual questions that they feel ill equipped to answer. We noted above that meaninglessness may be viewed as the absence of feelings of being able to make sense of, or perceive the order in one's life (Debats, 1996). For many people today their lives are marked with despair and a sense of futility arising precisely from an inability to make sense of and find order in life.

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The current crisis is particularly severe, in part, because there are no longer any obvious, given meanings. We are thus obliged to either live without meaning, or to seek, or create our own meanings. That it is up to the individual to find, or generate his or her own meaning is the position held by many existential thinkers, and espoused, particularly, by Frankl (1988). This task is made all the more difficult in that we are living - within Western society - within a fiercely individualistic ethos. The network of relationships, values and traditions in people's lives – such as these exist at all – no longer serves to bind us together as once it did. Many people feel, as do Zohar and Marshall (2000, p. 22), that “all my...life I have sought some meaning, some way to live or some vision to live by that could put my actions, my parenting and my work in some larger framework”



Given the prevailing and general absence of unambiguous, given meanings in our lives today, the very questioning of meaning, or meanings, in life makes many people feel uncomfortable. Many people choose not to give much thought to these, and other, questions because they can't bear to (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). This is partly because the very asking of the question serves to remind us of our existential isolation, vulnerability and finitude. And, ultimately, What if we are unable to find a reason? (Naiditch, 2000). What would that mean?

Yet we are a species that is inherently inquisitive, that yearns to answer the fundamental or ultimate questions. We also, as we have seen above, have a need to perceive our lives within some larger, meaning-giving context. The answers that we find help to provide us with just such a context. We long for "something towards which we can aspire, for something that takes us beyond ourselves and the present moment, for something that gives us and our actions a sense of worth" (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, p. 4). Questions of meaning are questions that many are compelled to ask.

### **2.3.5 Sources of meaning in life**

We have already seen that Battista and Almond (1973) consider that in order to have meaning in one's life a commitment to something and a belief in that thing is required. Also required is an understanding of that meaning.

Battista and Almond (1973) acknowledge that the LRI implies that meaning in life stems predominantly from a single source of beliefs. They realise that in the complex, modern society - in which Westerners - live today it is more likely that meaning in life arises from a number of sources as opposed to a single source. This contention has been empirically supported by researchers such as De Volger and Ebersole (in Showalter & Wagener, 2000).

If we accept each person as unique, (Allport, 1961), then it is conceivable that each individual will have an idiosyncratic idea of what is meaningful, or

meaningless, in as much as one's own life goes. Meaning in life is therefore largely individualistic and subjective. It is not unique in as much as there are certain commonalities underlying people's beliefs regarding what is meaningful. This reflects the subjective component of meaning in life. Given the absence of pre-ordained, objective meaning/s it is incumbent upon each individual to find or create his or her own idiosyncratic meaning in life.

Along these lines Battista and Almond (1973) make reference to the variety of belief systems from which individuals have developed meaning in life. Debats (1999) identified eight important sources of meaning. These meaning in life categories, within which the individual's life-meaning/s may be categorised, are relationships, lifework, service, personal well-being, self-actualisation, materiality, future/hope and beliefs. These include some of the major life orientations which make up Battista's (in Battista & Almond, 1973, p. 422) Life Orientation Index. These orientations are interpersonal, service, understanding, obtaining, expressive and ethical. Showalter and Wagener (2000) identified eleven meaning in life categories based on previous studies (De Volger & Ebersole; Ebersole & De Volger; in Showalter & Wagener, 2000) in addition to a catch-all, miscellaneous category. These included eight categories derived from adult-based research and an additional three from studies using adolescents. Reker and Guppy (in O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996, p. 463) found twelve sources of meaning in a sample of adults; personal relationships, altruism, religious activities, creative activities, personal growth, meeting basic needs, pleasurable/leisure activities, personal achievement, legacy, enduring values or ideals, traditions and culture and social/political causes. O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996) add another category, namely, experiences of meaning relating to the natural environment. These numerous sources, from which meaning may be derived, indicate an identifiable commonality underlying peoples' life-meaning(s).

The above discussion attempted to explicate where people may find their meaning(s) in life. We shall now address how this occurs. For the sake of clarity it has been decided to consider meaning in life under three primary

headings: philosophy, science and spirituality/emotion. All three of these perspectives are closely linked and mutually influencing.

## **2.3.6 Meaning and philosophy**

Before attempting to explicate a description of the question of meaning in life from a general philosophical perspective - in as much as this is necessary for our present purposes - we shall begin by exploring the one school of philosophical thought that has taken as its own the human experience; existentialism. This discussion will also look at the role played by phenomenology.

### **2.3.6.1 Existentialism and phenomenology**

Although not a cohesive school, existentialists share certain common tendencies and points of view (Beauchamp, Blackstone & Feinberg, 1980). Titus (1964) describes these underlying commonalities as being primarily an opposition to certain features of the modern world and traditional philosophy. Examples of this existential reaction include an opposition to the logical, the objective and the impersonal, as represented by eighteenth century enlightenment and especially as these pertain to the life of man.

The central focus and concern of existentialism is, thus, the description and understanding of the human predicament (Titus, 1964). In attempting to fashion an understanding of human existence and the human predicament no other philosophical movement has more directly confronted what it means to be human than the existentialists. Existential theorists and adherents believe that an understanding of meaning is fundamental to a full experience of life (Yalom, 1980). Both meaning of life and, meaning in life, therefore represent constructs of central importance to existential philosophy and existential psychology. Foremost amongst existential psychologists are such writers as Frankl (1978, 1988, 1992), May (in May, Angel & Ellenberger, 1958) and Yalom (1980). Frankl (1988, p. 16), for instance, states that the foundation of

logotherapy rests on: “the freedom of will, the will to meaning and the meaning of life”. It is quite apparent that the essence of existential thinking revolves around the question of meaning. In seeking answers to such questions of meaning much emphasis has been placed - particularly by the European thinkers such as Sartre - on the role played by meaninglessness in people's lives (Titus, 1964).

To the existentialists then, the search for the meaning in human life is the most important question of all. In fact, it is this question which is the *raison d'être* for existentialism and one of the reasons that it is a major force in modern thought (Davidson, 1966). It is no coincidence that this movement was born during the twentieth century and has gained ground given the nature of the crisis alluded to earlier.

Frankl (1988) believes that it has been due to existential thinking in particular that the emphasis of recent times has shifted towards the experience being human and what it means to be human. However, we shall explore the role played by phenomenology in this regard shortly. Beck (1975) says that in addition to placing emphasis on human existence (in general), the existentialists also focused on the nature of that existence, and (more specifically) as a response to quite specific modern conditions; conditions noted above.

It is evident that existentialism may thus be seen as a philosophical position primarily concerned with articulating human experience as it is experienced in the modern world. As such, answers to the question, “How may one find or create meaning in one's life?” or, “What may serve or provide meaning in one's life?” are of vital concern to existential thinkers - as they are to many other people.

In as much as existentialism emphasises what it means to be human and the centrality of the human experience it has leaned heavily on phenomenology. Phenomenology may be viewed as the “systematic investigation of conscious experience as experience” (Wallerstein, 1983, p. 210). At the centre of

phenomenology is the human subject and his or her consciousness. This is what Titus (1964, p. 526) refers to as “the experiencing knower”.

Phenomenology is also deemed to be of relevance in determining how meaning in life evolves, particularly in so far as individuals subjectively judge themselves, in terms of how quickly they reach their goals. Battista and Almond (1973, p. 425) go as far as to say that the phenomenological approach may be the most valuable in that it “most closely simulates how we actually develop values and beliefs about meaning”.

Battista and Almond (1973) assert that the level of an individual’s positive life regard at any time is a function of his or her present role-position in relation to his or her ultimate life-goal. The upshot of this, they suggest, is that the closer one perceives oneself to be to one’s life-goal the greater the likelihood that one will experience meaning in life.

Additionally, the rate of progress towards one’s life-goal will also have a direct impact on the individual’s degree of positive life regard (Battista & Almond, 1973). In other words, the perceived speed with which one is progressing towards one’s life-goal or, conversely, the amount of frustration one is experiencing in respect of how much progress one feels one is making toward one’s life-goal, is felt to play a central part in just how meaningful one finds one’s life at the present time.

Another factor believed to be of relevance in respect of the person’s positive life regard is that of temporal relativity. This involves the individual’s comparison of his or her current goal position and rate of progress with his or her previous goal position and rate of progress at some previous time (Battista & Almond, 1973). If individuals perceive themselves to be making comparatively good progress in respect of the rate and the direction of change toward their life goals then there is felt to be a greater probability that they will experience greater meaning in life. Again there exists a strong subjective component in this evaluation.

Closely allied to the above condition is the notion that the amount of meaning a person will experience in life is also a function of the favourable, or unfavourable, comparison between the present position and the individual's previously predicted position. In other words, where the person had planned to be and where he, or she, is right now. Again, this relates to both the rates of progress and goal-position. Therefore, if an individual's present position exceeds his or her previous predictions in terms of his or her rate and goal achievement then the person is far more likely to feel a greater degree of positive life regard and *vice versa*.

Battista's own research (in Battista & Almond, 1973) in respect of his Life Orientation Index (LOI) strongly supported the phenomenological perspective in so far as it serves to predict the development of positive life regard.

However, given the complexity of human functioning it would stand to reason that several determinants would interact with one another to result in the individual's sense of meaning, or meaningless, in life. A phenomenological, subjectivity is only one of them.

We have seen that the starting point for existential philosophy is the attempt to know the reality of the lived human experience, the "concrete situation of man in the world" (Beck, 1975, p. 474). As we saw earlier, the current, concrete situation of many people is one of crisis, be it individual, cultural, technological, material, spiritual or intellectual. This clearly relates to the way in which we live today, particularly in Western society. We shall now turn our attention to a brief consideration of the broader philosophical thinking as this concerns meaning in life.

### **2.3.6.2 Philosophy in General**

A fully comprehensive discussion of the philosophical debate surrounding meaning in life is beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, in so far as it

applies, it will be helpful to look briefly at some of the ideas and concepts used in the philosophical debate surrounding meaning in life.

Broadly speaking, philosophy may be seen as an attempt to "integrate man's knowledge from the various areas of human experience and to set forth a comprehensive view of the universe and of life and its meaning" (Titus, 1964, p. 96). Human experience and meaning in life are central to this definition of philosophy, as they are to the present study.

There are two levels at which it is possible to find meaning. At one level, meaning may be found in aspiring to achieve some specific goal, or in realising some goal. In other words, through aiming to, or in managing to, attain something specific or immediate. Alternatively, the question of meaning may involve the somewhat larger issue as to whether or not, all life, in its entirety, is meaningful (this has already been touched upon in Section 2.3.3). This is a question of central interest and importance to philosophers. The answer ultimately rests upon the position we assign ourselves in the universe as a whole, or on our world-view (Titus, 1964). As we will see in the section, Meaning, Spirituality and Being (Section 2.3.8), the positioning of human beings in the cosmos, and the view and role of people which arises as a result of this placement, is markedly different for religion and science. Titus (1964, p. 159) continues, "if man can acquire a feeling for his distinctive, strategic, and directive role in the general scheme of things, he may gain a new sense of meaning and direction that will give poise and significance to his life". It is apparent that both Titus's levels are intimately interconnected and mutually influencing. However, for the purposes of this discussion we are more interested in the former of the two levels, that of the more immediate aspiration to and realisation of goals.

Schlick (1987, p. 61) too, describes two types of meaning and, by inference, two types of meaninglessness in life. Firstly, he suggests, there exists a personal meaningfulness/meaninglessness. Secondly, there is a meaningfulness/ meaninglessness to existence in general. These obviously relate very closely to the two levels of meaning described by Titus (1964)

above. Schlick (1987) makes an important point about these two types of meaning. It is possible, he proposes, that a person may not have a sense of meaning in one's own life, yet still believe in an overall meaning. Alternatively, it is conceivable that because one has been unable to find any meaning in one's own life one may come to feel that there is no meaning to existence either. It is therefore possible to distinguish between an individual, or personal, meaning in life (van Ranst & Marcoen, 1997), and a cosmic meaningfulness/meaninglessness. Both the personal, and the cosmic, meaning in life have been the focus for a great deal of theological and philosophical thought (Showalter & Wagener, 2000).

In terms of the definition of meaning in life used in this study it is clear that this research project is an investigation into the personal or, individual, meaningfulness/meaninglessness in life dimension. In developing the LRI, Battista and Almond (1973, p. 409) attempted to construct a measuring instrument which empirically assessed personal meaning in life. The questions they sought answers to, for example, "What is the nature of an individual's experience of his life as meaningful?" and "What are the conditions under which an individual will experience his life as meaningful?" also serve to provide direction for this study.

Battista and Almond (1973, p. 414) refer to what they call the philosophical approach. They suggest that, according to this perspective, positive life regard develops "only from the commitment to and fulfillment of the *intrinsic* meaning of life" They cite numerous models, including religious, existential, humanistic and self-transcendental models which support this approach. According to Battista and Almond (1973) these models argue that the content of one's belief is the determinant of positive life regard and that there is a single meaning to life. The proponents of this approach thus all have in common the view that there is only one true meaning of life. Bugental (1965), however, believes that, in all likelihood, most thinkers would not limit themselves to only a single meaning of life - if they were forced to choose. Nonetheless they use this heuristic in order to apprehend the issue of meaning. Ultimately, the majority of thinkers who have considered the development of meaning in life



have intentionally, or not, supported the philosophical approach. Frankl is cited as an example of a theorist who proposes both a philosophical and a relativistic position (Battista & Almond, 1973).

Another position mentioned by Battista and Almond (1973) is the relativistic perspective. The relativistic approach represents the perspective that “commitment to *any* system of beliefs can serve as a life-framework for the development of positive life regard” (Battista & Almond, 1973, p. 414). According to this perspective, any system of beliefs can serve as the foundation of a person’s meaning in life. The focus here is not on the nature, or content, of the person’s belief system, but instead on the commitment to it. In opposition to the view held by the philosophical approach above, this approach holds that “the process of believing itself “ is a determinant of positive life regard (Battista & Almond, 1973, p. 414).

In terms of a suitable foundation for the study of the conditions under which people are likely to develop meaning in life Battista and Almond (1973) align themselves with the relativistic perspective. The emphasis here is on the person’s commitment to his or her belief system, and that this alone can provide meaning/s in life. In other words, what is important according to this view, is the fact that the person believes in something; anything. This is what Schlick (1987, p. 62) is referring to when he asserts, “the core and ultimate value of life can only lie in such states as exist for their own sake and carry their satisfaction in themselves”.

Battista and Almond’s (1973, p. 414) support for the relativistic perspective stems partly from their observation that the wide range of belief systems from which people have found, or created, meaning in their lives “do not appear reducible to one fundamental system”. Some of these belief systems, they note, are diametrically opposed to one another and are, therefore, irreconcilable.

The second factor that influences their adherence to the relativistic position is the fact that this model “promotes tolerance toward all systems of belief and is

thus inclusive of all the philosophical models of the development of positive life regard” (Battista & Almond, 1973, p. 415). Any of the numerous definitions that arise out of the philosophical approach and that serve as a basis for the development of meaning in life, may thus be readily accommodated under the relativistic banner.

In electing to support the relativistic position they state that they had hoped to reduce or, at least, discourage “abstract philosophical discussion” over which of the belief systems is “ultimately” the better (Battista & Almond, 1973, p. 415). They thus emphasise the responsibility of each person to determine his or her own personal beliefs.

Battista and Almond (1973) also mention three other perspectives: the psychological, transactional and phenomenological. We have already looked at the phenomenological point of view (in Section 2.3.6.1, above). These three approaches “emphasise the conditions under which an individual will perceive his [or her] life as fulfilling the terms generated from his [or her] understanding of life” (Battista & Almond, 1973, p. 414). We are thus dealing with the second part of their definition; the component dealing with the understanding of one’s meaning. The psychological and transactional perspectives will be covered in the next section along with an examination of the role of science in meaning.

### **2.3.7 Meaning and Science**

In spite of the enormous material wealth and extraordinary technological expertise that many people now have, particularly - although not exclusively - within Western civilization, people lack something fundamental in their lives (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). One of the reasons for this state of affairs, they note, was the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century and the concomitant arrival of individualism and rationalism. Within this scientific way of seeing things traditional culture and the meanings encompassed by that cultural way of life began to dissolve. The result was that the religious beliefs and philosophical perceptions that had until that time served as a foundation

for society began to vanish (as we shall see in the following Section; Meaning, Spirituality and Being).

The thinking of Newton, and others, resulted in a fundamental change in the way in which human beings viewed the world. We noted earlier, that Titus (1964) observed that the answers we discover for the questions we ask, depend - to some extent - on the position we assign ourselves in the grand order of things. The basic tenets of Newtonian thinking included the concepts of atomism, determinism and objectivity (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). These three ways of conceptualising the world split the world up into pieces and fragmented things that had been previously seen holistically; thus alienating and making people more remote from one another. This thinking also elicited the idea that there are immutable, linear, causal laws that determine how the world functions, including the functioning of people. Consequently, we came to see ourselves as helpless and passive victims of forces greater than we perceive ourselves able to deal effectively with. Finally, we now experience ourselves as objects, no longer connected to, or a part of, the world around us, instead isolated and alone, simply living in the world, but not of the world. This isolation encompasses our social institutions and relationships too. It reflects what Beck (1975) refers to as the loss of the individual. This is an integral part of the crisis of meaning noted earlier (refer to Section 2.3.4).

The result of the scientific revolution is that the world is still largely seen as mechanistic and linear, predetermined and inhuman. (It is this writer's belief that the conceptualization of the question of meaning of life - as opposed to meaning in life - is a product of precisely this kind of thinking). The people who inhabit this world and the relationships between those people and the nature of, and the functioning of, the systems that make up the world are also seen in this light. It is not surprising that we find ourselves incapable of, or, at least, sorely challenged to find the meaning of our human experience in such a place.

So, in spite of the technological and political progress humans have made to date, and the knowledge and insights that we have gleaned so far,

contemporary Western civilization is in a state of crisis. Marcel (in Davidson, 1966) felt that it is technology that is largely responsible for alienating people and smothering that which is distinctly human in us all. For Marcel, technology and the predominating scientific world-view have intensified the spiritual poverty of people. Our existence, he suggests, has become basically empty. As a consequence of this barrenness, Davidson (1966, p. 3), asserts that "our age must fashion its own understanding of human existence and find for itself a meaning in life that can enable thoughtful men and women to meet successfully the crisis we face".

We can see that the view of the world that science provides is very different to that which has been on offer via religious dogma. Much of what had been taken for granted and was rarely questioned in earlier times has been modified, revised or rejected. For example, when science displaced humans from their position as the centre of the universe, a paradigm shift took place (Beauchamp, Blackstone & Feinberg, 1980). The technological advances made in the last century especially, resulted in both enormous benefits and colossal consequences for mankind. For some people these changes resulted in a loss of predictability and security, the new perspective left them in a seemingly alien world and leading lives which now appear empty and fundamentally pointless (Beauchamp, Blackstone & Feinberg, 1980). The scientific world-view alone, without the security offered by the traditional ways of thinking, seems to have resulted in many people feeling despair and a sense of hopelessness (Beauchamp, Blackstone & Feinberg, 1980).

Zohar and Marshall (2000) point out that for meaning itself to have meaning it must be defined within a frame work or boundary - a sentiment shared by Battista and Almond (1973), as we have seen. It is when these boundaries cease to exist that we feel anguish and our experience becomes meaningless and we find ourselves unable to cope.

Zohar and Marshall (2000) also talk about the influence on human thinking of the potential for global destruction - as a direct consequence of scientific invention. They suggest that one reason that people seek immediate

gratification and limit themselves to short term goals is that science has potentially reduced the time frame of human existence. Living in a nuclear age promotes short-term thinking and a, live fast, die young, attitude that has consequences for all that we do and the types of lives we lead. In areas as diverse as government, economics and the environment our thinking and our institutions are singularly immediate and generally self-serving.

Science has also contributed to this short-term hedonism in another way. By exposing the enormity of the cosmos it has reminded us how puny and inconsequential humans really are. Viewed from this macro, scientific perspective, human affairs are of little importance. This space-frame has irrevocably altered what it means to be human. The previously held illusions of relevance in the world, and beyond, and the security that came with such beliefs have been erased. A consequence of this has been that we, in the West, indulge ourselves more and more, frequently at the expense of others, in our desperation to assuage our deepest fears.

We shall now turn to the role played by research as this relates to meaning and science.



### **2.3.7.1 Meaning and epistemology**

How do we know that which we know, or think we know? This short section will look briefly at the question of epistemology as far as it touches on the issue at hand. Adams (1975, p. 32) observes that in our, Western, culture the situation has arisen where, generally, we regard the “empirical scientific method as the only way to get at truth about reality”.

Battista and Almond (1973, p. 409) point to the fact that the tendency of contemporary researchers to neglect meaning of life as a topic for research is, in part, attributable to the misperception that the study of meaning in life is primarily concerned with the philosophical question, “What is the meaning of

life?” As alluded to above, the distinction may be made that meaning in life refers to multiple, as opposed to, unitary meanings (i.e. meaning of life).

The concept, meaning in life, has tended to be ignored by mainstream psychology because it has long been considered “too vague and boundless for purposes of theoretical and empirical psychology” (Debats, 1999, p. 31). This, despite the fundamental and global importance of the concept in human thought in general (Battista & Almond, 1973; and Ebersole & Quiring, in Showalter & Wagener, 2000) and in existential thinking specifically (Yalom, 1980). This perception has been refuted as invalid by Battista and Almond (1973, p. 423) who assert that meaning in life “is a legitimate psychological dimension that can be studied in an empirical...scientific manner”. However, in order to do so they suggest that the philosophical-type question, “What is the meaning of life?” must necessarily be re-framed as, “What are the conditions which will allow or facilitate an individual to experience his or her life as meaningful?”

The question, “What is the nature of an individual’s experience of his or her life as meaningful?” serves, they state, to provide a descriptive and operational definition of meaningful life (Battista & Almond, 1973, p. 423). As such the emphasis is placed on the process of believing as opposed to the content of an individuals’ beliefs.

Another facet of what meaning, or meanings, life may have is encompassed in what Battista and Almond (1973) refer to as the psychological perspective.

### **2.3.7.2 The psychological perspective**

This view focuses primarily on human development. It offers a potentially helpful method of explaining both the nature and evolution of a person’s commitment to a meaning in life and the processes through which the individual’s meaning may, or may not be fulfilled.

Viewing the evolution of meaning in life from a developmental perspective is particularly helpful (Battista & Almond, 1973). Human development covers numerous and diverse areas of functioning (Louw, van Ede & Louw, 1999). Of special interest in this case is the development of personal world-views and meaning in life. Battista and Almond (1973, p. 415) refer to Jung's concept of individuation and the existential concept of authenticity in as much as these constructs appear to be intimately associated with the development of positive life regard. They also refer to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, in so far as these represent a hypothesised progression towards a higher psychological state.

Most important for this study is the idea that meaning in life is thought to follow after the individual has attained some degree of self-esteem. Meaning in life - if it becomes relevant at all in a person's life - arises after self-esteem (Battista & Almond, 1973). Self-esteem, they suggest, is a "necessary but insufficient prerequisite of positive life regard" (Battista & Almond, 1973, p. 416). In other words, it is proposed that, developmentally-speaking, positive self-esteem precedes positive life regard, and that people with positive life regard will also have high self-esteem. However, high self-esteem alone is insufficient to assure the development of positive life regard. In developing the LRI, Battista and Almond (1973, p. 417) found support for the hypothesis that there is a high positive correlation between self-esteem and positive life regard and "a significant difference between positive and negative life regard subjects in their degree of self-esteem". (However, this writer would suggest that the sample for their study - Stanford University medical students - would, in all likelihood, share a higher than average level of self-esteem given their situation as not only medical students but also students at a prestigious institution such as Stanford). They note that the difference between the two is that, positive life regard, unlike self-esteem, does not evolve as a consequence of the internalisation of societal and parental messages regarding one's value; instead it arises more from the individual's unique consideration of his life goals (Battista & Almond, 1973).

The development of positive life regard is thought to occur in two stages. First, the development of a positive self-image during childhood and adolescence is

required. Secondly, during late adolescence or early adulthood the individual develops a life-image. The successful resolution of the second stage hinges on the development of self-esteem (in the first stage) and the commitment to the achievement of the individuals' life goals (Battista & Almond, 1973).

It would appear that life meaning is not static, or fixed, and that it changes with time and, therefore, with age. Meaning in life – from a developmental point of view – particularly the period of early adulthood is of concern to the current study. Bee (1996) describes early adulthood as the period between 18 and 40 years old. For the purposes of this study, however, the period from 18 to 25 years old will be considered to represent early adulthood. This is the age range that Arnett (2000) refers to as emerging adulthood. She suggests that this is a distinct period, with specific developmental issues, which serves to distinguish it from other age groups.

We shall now turn to the transactional point of view.

### **2.3.7.3 The transactional perspective**

Battista and Almond (1973, p. 418) describe transactional theory as a form of systems theory that regards the person in terms of “a set of needs or goals that he [she] attempts to fulfill through socially determined roles”. According to this view the development of meaning in life is vitally dependent on social roles. There is clearly a strong interpersonal dimension to this perspective and this is perhaps most evident in the interactive role played by social systems in the development of belief systems.

The value of the transactional approach is that it “provides a mechanism for predicting the development of positive life regard by predicting the conditions under which an individual will perceive himself [herself] as fulfilling the criteria of his life-framework belief system through an analysis of the fit between an individual and his [her] society” (Battista & Almond, 1973, p. 418).



In terms of the transactional model the person's ability to see himself, or herself, as achieving his or her life framework belief system requires: (a) a role which serves to satisfy the individual's goals and needs as these are defined by the person's life-framework; (b) that the role must be accessible and available to the person; (c) that a suitable fit exist between the demands of the role and the abilities of the person; (d) that a suitable fit exist between all the person's values, needs, goals and roles (as defined by his [her] life-framework); (e) that a fit exist between the values, goals, needs and roles of the person and those of the social environment in which he [she] lives (Battista & Almond, 1973).

With regard to the propositions above, Battista and Almond (1973) observe that the development of positive life regard is related to the degree of fit between the needs, goals, values and roles of the individual and of his or her social environment. They mention that many studies have supported the hypothesis that the degree of fit between the person and the environment is of great importance for the development of positive life regard. An important observation, based on their own research, was that the required fit between individual and social environment appears to extend beyond the immediate social sphere to include the wider social environment (Battista & Almond, 1973). It appears, therefore, that both one's immediate social network and the broader community are involved in the development of meaning in life.

We now turn to meaning in life as it relates to spirituality and being.

### **2.3.8 Meaning, Spirituality and Being**

Meaning and spirituality are, in one way or another, fundamental to the human experience. Before exploring being we shall look briefly at meaning and spirituality.

### **2.3.8.1 Meaning and spirituality**

We have seen that some commentators believe that we currently live in an age of uncertainty and flux, and that many of the older beliefs and ways of doing things are now inadequate or irrelevant. We have also seen that under such circumstances we urgently require both values and direction (Titus, 1964). We need, urgently, to make sense of our lives.

Finding meaning in daily life is not only the concern of the average person, religion too is involved in the search for meaning - although for very different reasons. Moreover, the questions asked by the world's religions tend to relate more to seeking answers to the question, "What is the meaning of life?" There can be no doubt that the decline in the power and influence of the church in the modern age has, in no small measure, contributed to the present situation of lack of direction and purpose and the resulting obsessive search for meaning in other areas of life. Many people - as we saw in Section 2.3.4 - feel an emptiness or absence of meaning that needs desperately to be filled. For many people spirituality offers a way of filling that inner emptiness (for the present purpose spirituality is considered to include religious belief/s - although this writer appreciates that there are implicit differences between the two).

If we understand the word spiritual to mean "of spirit as opposed to matter; concerned with or based on the spirit" (Sykes, 1984, p. 1023); and if we appreciate spirit to mean the "animating or vital principle of person or animal; intelligent or immaterial part of person, soul" (Sykes, 1984, p. 1023), then the current crisis of meaning may be perceived to be, in no small part, a spiritual crisis. This is because the crisis may be regarded as being not solely a material one, in the sense of possessions and wealth, but more an intellectual and/or essential one.

Zohar and Marshall (2000, p. 18) refer to the human experience of the spiritual as being somehow in touch with a "larger, deeper, richer whole that puts our present limited situation into a new perspective. It is to have a sense of

'something beyond', of 'something more' that confers added meaning and value on where we are now". This 'something more' may, they suggest, be a more profound social connection, a mythological or religious connection, an appreciation of significant truth or beauty, and/or a connection to a cosmic or universal wholeness. This relates to Frankl's (1988) notion that the essence of human existence is self-transcendence or, that existence is essentially transcendental. Whatever the precise nature of our spiritual experience, "without it our vision is clouded, our lives feel flat and our purposes dreadfully finite" (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, p. 19). This is what Frankl (1988) refers to as the existential vacuum. It is also referred to as the "existential experience" (Beck, 1975, p. 473). For many people today their reality is one of emptiness and aimlessness and for many such people the "fundamental crisis of our times is a spiritual one" (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, p. 19). One of the areas of human functioning affected by this crisis is that of our essence, or being. It is to this that we now turn.



### **2.3.8.2 Meaning and Being**

May (in May, Angel & Ellenberger, 1958) reminds us that the term that existentialists use to describe the unique and distinctive character of human existence is *Dasein*. Simply put, this term describes the nature of human-beingness and human existence. This may also be understood as being-in-the-world. Humans, in existential terms, exist in a dynamic world and are continually changing, emerging and becoming (May, 1983). In existential terms humans exist in relation to three levels of the world, the natural (*umwelt*), social (*mitwelt*) and personal (*eigenwelt*), (Maddi, 1996).

One reason that contemporary Westerners invest so much time and energy in short-term gain and gratification is that we have lost our ability to imagine that anything else may be worthwhile. During the last two or three centuries we have tended to restrict our vision more and more to the merely human (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Our self-centredness has increasingly divorced us from more expansive meanings and broader ways of perceiving the world. Human

self-centredness has become a fundamental tenet of the Western tradition (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). This self-centredness is at the centre of Western hyper-individualism.

We have become steadily and more irremediably myopic in terms of how and what we perceive and value. This applies to the natural, social and personal levels of being. We have become more and more emotionally stunted without realizing it. We are now alienated from nature, alienated from God, alienated from mystery and most importantly perhaps alienated from one another. This is what Zohar and Marshall (2000) refer to as the poverty of western humanism.

Much of what Zohar and Marshall (2000) refer to relates to values. If we take value to mean something of “worth”, or “utility” (Sykes, 1984, p. 1186) and valuable as, that which is precious, it seems apparent that the issue of meaning in life relates closely to the notion of values. Indeed this does appear to be the case, as we saw earlier (in Section 2.3.2). A life with value, say Beauchamp, Blackstone and Feinberg (1980), is a good life. Such a life may be judged admirably, even emulated. They observe that most people would agree that if a life could be said to have meaning, then it would also have value. However, the reverse of this proposition is not as uncontentious. What we value and believe to be worthwhile is not necessarily imbued with meaning. Be this as it may, in order to fill the vacuum within us it is proposed that each individual will have to invent or discover for himself, or herself, that thing that at present our collective culture is incapable providing us with (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). It is up to each one of us to find, or create, our own meaning in life. A point made repeatedly by Frankl (1988). This - as we have alluded to - is not an easy task.

### **2.3.9 Conclusion**

In summarising the contents of this chapter it is important to mention what may be referred to as the diseases of meaning.

We have noted that we, in the West, have become unable, or are finding it increasingly more difficult, to see the “deeper levels of symbol and meaning that place our objects, our activities and ourselves in a larger existential framework” (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, p. 23). The traditional symbols and meanings have become irrelevant or are rapidly dissolving and the new ones are, as yet, not apparent. Alternatively they are still in the process of being established. Zohar and Marshall (2000) see this inability to perceive the deeper levels of meaning as a form of spiritual illness. This malady occurs when a person becomes detached from, or is at odds with the essential basis of self. In other words, from the deepest parts of his or her being (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Frankl (1992, p. 131) was very conscious of this situation, referring to it as an existential vacuum; “the mass neurosis of the present time”. He defined this existential vacuum as “a private and personal form of nihilism”; defining nihilism as the “contention that life has no meaning” (Frankl, 1992, p. 131). Jung too, (in Zohar & Marshall, 2000) was very concerned with this spiritual, or existential, illness. Any psychoneurosis, said Jung (in Zohar & Marshall, 2000, p. 166), “must be understood, ultimately, as a suffering soul which has not discovered its meaning”

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Zohar and Marshall (2000, p. 166) assert that in this spiritual pathology the same conditions are dealt with as in mainstream Western psychology and psychiatry. Among these are depression, eating disorders, addictions, etcetera. They, however, attribute the aetiology of these conditions to issues of “meaning and value and to a consequent inability to integrate and balance the personality”. In so doing, they are asserting an essentially existential position. Fabry (1968) notes that Frankl identified four symptoms of the collective neurosis, namely; provisional living, fatalism, collective thinking and fanaticism. These symptoms, he says, also serve to promote the existential vacuum. There is an increasingly Kafkarian quality to people’s lives, the symptoms of which include loneliness, isolation, meaninglessness and despair. Schizoid personality traits, Zohar and Marshall (2000, p. 170, italics in original) suggest, are “*characteristic of life*” in the twentieth century.

Importantly, as we have noted, the problem extends beyond the individual. This malady is endemic in society at large, so much so that Zohar and Marshall (2000) go so far as to describe Western society as schizoid in nature. They believe that this is due in no small part to problems of meaning. “Our personal and collective mental instability follows from the peculiar form of alienation associated with alienation from the centre-alienation from meaning, value, purpose and vision, alienation from the roots of and reasons for our humanity” (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, p. 170). This is a bold and unequivocal indictment of our modern, Western, way of life.

In summary, “What then, may we view as meaning in life?” Beauchamp, Blackstone and Feinberg (1980, p. 562) articulately state that the meaningful life “is not only happy, it is rich and various, balanced and harmonious, exhibiting a fine proportioning of instrumental and intrinsic satisfactions, neither constantly postponing gratification, nor wallowing in it in forfeiture of future gains and achievements”. They continue, adding that the variety of what may be perceived as meaningful in terms of human life is as expansive as the variety of human values. There are, then, as many avenues to human meaning as there are people, for each person values different things differently.

According to Aristotle (in Beauchamp, Blackstone & Feinberg, 1980, p. 572), every species is characterised by an essence, that which makes it “the sort of thing it is and not another sort of thing”. It also has an end, or goal, the realisation of which “constitutes its highest good”. Aristotle thought that humanity’s natural end is a “full lifetime of vigorous self-fulfilling activity performed with excellence”. The key word here is fulfillment. Perhaps the essence of human beings is, as Frankl (1988) would have it, to search for meaning; perhaps the achievement of that individual meaning for each one of us represents our “highest good”, that through which we may transcend ourselves. Perhaps through this we may live lives that are ultimately fulfilling.

The essential difference between the philosophical and psychological positions on meaning in life is that the former tend to be prescriptive, whilst the

latter tend toward being less so. This is evident in the distinction, made earlier, where the philosophical perspectives appear to frequently promote, or at least, attempt to answer the question, “What is the meaning of life?” From a psychological point of view numerous alternatives are provided from which an individual may select his or her meaning, or meanings, in life.

In the next chapter we shall consider optimism, the second of the two constructs of interest in this study.

