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MEANING RECONSTRUCTION IN BEREAVEMENT: SENSE AND SIGNIFICANCE

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Recently there has been growing empirical and theoretical attention to the role of meaning in grief, along with increased recognition of the need for more sophisticated definitions of meaning. The present article highlights philosophical issues inherent in the study of meaning and grief, reviews the place of meaning in current theories of grief, and provides a brief overview of the ways that meaning has been operationalized by grief researchers, including sense-making, benefit finding, identity change, and purpose in life. It is argued that, in our focus on the ways mourners make sense of loss, we have neglected an important aspect of meaning: life significance. Life significance *is the felt perception that some aspect of one's life experience "matters." The construct is explored as a potentially important outcome of bereavement; mourners may lose life significance along with their lost loved one, or they may develop new avenues to life significance as they confront mortality and rebuild shattered worldviews. Related literature, such as appreciation of life as a facet of posttraumatic growth, is surveyed for clues as to the role of life significance in grief. Suggestions for future study are offered.*

In the last several decades, a "new wave" of grief theory has emerged that acknowledges the ways in which grief changes the griever permanently, resulting in long-lasting (and potentially positive) changes in identity, worldview, relationships, and values (Neimeyer, 2001a). Contemporary grief theories emphasize the sociocultural context in which mourners navigate bereavement and the constructive nature of many important grief processes

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and outcomes (Kastenbaum, 2008). Rather than being viewed as a primarily emotional, individual process, grief is increasingly being seen as a process in which important cognitive, social, and existential adjustment occurs. Mourners struggle not only with the absence of their loved one and a corresponding flood of emotion, but often with a bewildering sense of meaninglessness.

As the question of meaning reconstruction in grief has garnered increasing attention, a number of sophisticated and useful conceptualizations of this construct have emerged: searching for meaning (Bonanno, Wortman, & Nesse, 2004), meanings made (Park, 2010), positive reappraisal (Folkman, 2001), rebuilding shattered assumptive worldviews (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), and sense-making and benefit finding (Davis, Noelen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998) are just a few. This explosion of constructs has resulted in increased clarity as researchers develop a common language to describe different aspects of meaning reconstruction, but also increased confusion as to the conceptual relationships among these constructs and the conceptual boundaries of "meaning" itself. This article will discuss meaning reconstruction as an aspect of adjustment to loss and as a research construct. The place of meaning in major grief theories, as well as the specific ways in which meaning has been conceptualized and operationalized by grief research, will be reviewed. I will argue that a common thread running through much grief research and theory has been the question of whether one's life makes sense; we have rarely explicitly asked the question of whether anything in life "matters," or is ultimately significant. Literature pertaining to life significance will be surveyed for clues as to how such a concept would fit into existing grief theory and what its correlates and implications might be. Finally, suggestions for future work will be offered.

Definitions

This article will follow Stroebe, Hansson, Schut, and Stroebe (2008) in using *bereavement* to refer to the "objective situation of having lost someone significant through death (p. 4)," whereas *grief* and *mourning* refer, respectively, to the individual and social-level processes of reaction and adjustment to the death. Grief is typically viewed as the most personal, immediate aspect of the various processes that unfold in the wake of bereavement (Stroebe et al., 2008), whereas *mourning* refers to the public processes of

displaying grief and interacting with the societal "death system" (Kastenbaum, 2008).

In contrast to the relative clarity in the field regarding usage of *bereavement, grief,* and *mourning,* consensus surrounding a definition of "meaning" has remained elusive (Davis et al., 1998; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Park, 2010). For the sake of consistency, the terms *meaning reconstruction* and *meaning-making* will be used interchangeably to refer to the process of mourners' efforts to find or construct meaning however it may be defined; *meaning* will be used as a shorthand for the sociocultural, cognitive, and/or affective schemas, narratives, experiences, or values so constructed (Neimeyer, 2001a; Park, 2010). *Life significance* as an aspect of meaning will be defined here as the assignment of value to a goal, relationship, or aspect of life experience that exists in the present and future. The term *life significance*, rather than simply *significance*, is used to distinguish this construct from Janoff-Bulman and McPherson's (1997) discussion of the significance of a stressful event.

Meaning as a Research Construct

Meaning is increasingly recognized as an important bereavement outcome in its own right, apart from its ability to predict other outcomes such as the number and severity of grief symptoms (Davis, 2008; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). Although the extent and severity of grief symptomatology is undeniably important, important aspects of well-being are not assessed by symptom-based outcome measures alone (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 1989). "Existential well-being," defined broadly as a sense of coherence in viewing the world, as well as purpose, value, and significance in life, is not only conceptually and statistically separable from measures of positive and negative affect (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006) but is part of the folk concept of a good or desirable life (King & Napa, 1998). This is likely to be particularly true in the study of grief, an experience that is not only biological and psychosocial, but also existential (Schneider, 2008).

If meaning is regarded as an outcome in itself, it becomes subject to the same difficult question applied to the selection of any outcome measure: who decides what "positive" looks like? Most would agree that more meaning is better than less meaning. But depending on exactly how meaning is defined, more than one

meaning may be constructed in response to any given event. For example, some parents bereaved by suicide may view themselves as failures in parenting; others may interpret the death as a reminder to enjoy life in the moment (Wheeler, 2001). Still others may search desperately and without relief for an answer. Thus, two questions are possible: Which meanings are most likely to occur for which individuals under which circumstances? (meaning content as outcome), and which individuals under which circumstances are most likely to come to any meaning after a loss (meaningfulness as an outcome)? Meaning has been operationalized both in terms of meaning content (e.g., Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991) and as meaningfulness (e.g., Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006), but this distinction is often not articulated.

Meaning Reconstruction in Grief Theory

Theories of grief and other stressful life events have varied in the extent to which meaning is explicitly discussed, whether it is viewed primarily as a predictor or an outcome and what constitutes meaning within the model. Early psychoanalytic and attachment perspectives described grief as a primarily intrapersonal, emotional process of decathexis, de-emphasizing the role of meaning (Freud, 1917/1957; Bowlby, 1961). Although these perspectives continue to evolve (Klass, 2001), the focus remains on meanings associated with the lost relationship, rather than on the meaning, purposes, or significance of the loss itself or of life after loss.

Cognitive Models

In contrast, cognitive models emphasize the role of cognitive processes and de-emphasize the role of emotional and biological experiences as predictors of adjustment to loss and other stressful events (Stroebe & Schut, 2001). Meaning, usually conceptualized in terms of explicit beliefs and appraisals, plays an important role as determinant of poststressor adjustment. Despite assertions by some cognitive theorists that changed meanings are themselves outcomes of interest (e.g., Park & Folkman, 1997; Janoff-Bulman, 1992), research stemming from these models has typically examined meaning as a moderator of the effects of life events on other

outcomes (e.g., Bonanno et al., 2004; Folkman, 1997; Wickie & Marwit, 2000).

STRESS AND TRAUMA MODELS

A number of models of coping with stressful or traumatic life events show a remarkable degree of consistency with one another in terms of the basic assumptions underlying each model (e.g., Taylor, 1983; Thompson & Janigan, 1988; Park & Folkman, 1997; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Each of these models includes a system of global beliefs and/or goals, which is compared with more specific appraisals of the stressful life event itself (Park, 2010). Distress results from a perceived discrepancy between global beliefs (i.e., world- or self-meanings) and event-specific appraisals (i.e., the meaning of the event). This distress sets in motion a process of coping, which includes efforts to revise either the global belief system or the event appraisals. Beyond these similarities, however, each of these models uses slightly different terminology to describe the processes and products of meaning-making.

Park and Folkman's (1997) influential model describes *global meanings* as "a person's enduring beliefs and valued goals," whereas *situational meanings* are more narrowly defined as appraisals or attributions associated with the event (p. 116). Thus, global meanings are comprised of both cognitive (i.e., beliefs) as well as affective and motivational (i.e., values and goals) components. The processes by which situational and global meanings are reconciled, however, are described in cognitive terms: attributions, appraisals, assimilation, and accommodation. Park and Folkman acknowledge and lament the relative inattention to goals and values in the study of meaning, citing for example the lack of adequate measurement tools to capture global life goals.

Janoff-Bulman (1989, 1992) terms global meanings of the self and the world assumptive worldviews. These cognitive schemas are generally stable and positive (i.e., consisting of a view of the self as worthy, and the world as benevolent, predictable, and just) but are challenged by unjust, uncontrollable life events such as a traumatic loss. Consistent with Park and Folkman (1997), individuals must either assimilate event-specific meanings into existing assumptive worldviews, or the assumptive worldviews must change to accommodate the event (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Thus, meaning is central to Janoff-Bulman's model but is explicitly

limited insofar as it is defined and measured as a series of specific beliefs (i.e., predetermined meaning content is measured as a proxy for the presence of meaningfulness). Further, Janoff-Bulman's original model does not acknowledge the role of goals, values, or motivational/affective aspects of meaning, though her later work suggests the importance of an enhanced awareness of the value of life in some individuals' recovery (Janoff-Bulman & McPherson, 1997).

BEREAVEMENT-SPECIFIC MODELS

In Stroebe and Schut's (2001) dual process model of bereavement, mourners oscillate between confrontation with appraisals, roles, and tasks associated with the loss itself (loss orientation) and avoidance of loss-related activities to focus on reconstructing a life apart from the decedent (restoration orientation). The loss orientation includes meaning-related appraisals of the loss (i.e., as described by Folkman, 2001; Park & Folkman, 1997), and the restoration orientation entails the construction of new meanings necessary for recovery (e.g., new goals and identities). Thus, "meaning" may take on a variety of definitions within the DPM, but as in other cognitive models, it refers primarily to the "types of cognitions bereaved people are going through and how these are regulated across the course of time" (Stroebe & Schut, 2001, p. 56). However, the DPM's lack of specificity regarding which meanings are presumed to serve an adaptive function (in contrast with Janoff-Bulman's [1992] formulation) allows for flexibility in considering the role of either meaning content or overall meaningfulness.

Social Constructionist and Constructivist Models

Social constructionist models of bereavement emerged as part of a larger trend toward an explicitly contextualist understanding of coping, emphasizing idiographic patterns of adaptation driven by sociocultural and relational forces (Neimeyer, 2001a). Meaning is at the heart of this postmodern understanding of human experience; grief, in this view, is not merely an experience in which meaning plays an important role but rather is in itself "an active process of meaning reconstruction in the wake of loss" (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006, p. 32). Like the cognitive models reviewed above,

constructionist and constructivist models emphasize the importance of an individual's *interpretation* of an event, over and above the inherent fact of the event itself. However, in keeping with a postmodern position of "epistemological humbleness," social constructionists tend to evaluate such construals according to their value to the individual mourner, rather than according to their accuracy in describing a fixed, external reality (Burr, 1995). Thus, the range of possible meanings is broadened, and the issue of meaningfulness (as opposed to specific meaning content) becomes more salient.

MEANING RECONSTRUCTION

Gillies and Neimeyer's (2006) model of meaning reconstruction systematized and summarized many of the themes that have permeated social constructionist accounts of grief and mourning. As in the stress and trauma models reviewed above, distress and meaning-making are driven by a discrepancy between global meanings and event-specific meanings, resulting in changed understandings of the loss and/or of the world. However, in contrast to cognitive models, Neimeyer (2001b) described meaning as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon existing at multiple levels of an individual mourner's awareness, from explicit, consciously held beliefs to more tacit "deep structures" used to organize perception of the world and the self. Gillies and Neimeyer's (2006) model explicitly labels three ways in which mourners reconstruct meaning: sense making, identity change, and benefit finding. These distinctions are based on recent empirical work (discussed in more detail below) which seeks to more carefully define and measure the components of meaning (e.g., Davis et al., 1998, Davis, Wohl, & Verberg, 2007; Currier et al., 2006).

Meaning: Sense and Significance

Davis et al. (1998) reviewed the literature on meaning and identified two commonly studied subdimensions: sense-making and benefit finding. Because this seminal article was published, many empirical studies of grief have explicitly operationalized meaning as sense-making (e.g., Bonanno et al., 2004; Currier et al., 2006) or as sense-making and benefit finding (Michael & Snyder, 2005). Other researchers, following Gillies and Neimeyer (2006), have

integrated a conceptualization of meaning as sense making, benefit finding, and identity change (e.g., Neimeyer et al., 2006). A relatively separate literature has examined the predictors and consequences of purpose in life among bereaved individuals (e.g., Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Hershberger & Walsh, 1990).

Sense-Making

The need to "make sense" of a loss by explaining why it happened in terms consistent with existing worldviews, or by changing worldviews to accommodate the fact of the loss, is perhaps the most well-studied aspect of meaning reconstruction after loss. Each of the cognitive theories of grief outlined above uses some variation on this theme, highlighting mourners' need for a coherent set of schemas, assumptions, and appraisals to explain the world and the self (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Park & Folkman, 1997; Stroebe & Schut, 2001). Similarly, constructivist theories of grief have heavily emphasized meaning reconstruction as the development of a coherent life narrative within which losses make sense (e.g., Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Nadeau, 1998). Mourners may need to direct coping efforts toward understanding the loss itself, or toward making sense of their lives, selves, and world now that the loss has occurred (Park, 2010). A rich empirical literature has examined predictors and outcomes of sense-making in terms of specific meaning content (e.g., Matthews & Marwit, 2003–2004; Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991; Wickie & Marwit, 2000). Other studies, following Davis et al. (1998) and social constructionist theories (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006), have examined sense-making in terms of meaningfulness, most often with the use of a single item asking participants whether they have "made sense of" the loss (e.g., Bonanno et al., 2004; Davis et al., 2007; Davis et al., 2000; Neimeyer et al., 2006).

Benefit Finding

Davis et al. (1998) also described a specific dimension of mourners' cognitive responses to loss: the ability to identify benefits or "silver linings" to having lost a loved one. Whether or not such benefits are actually experienced, the perception of benefits is theorized to promote grief recovery, and individuals who perceive benefits

have been found in some studies to experience shorter or less intense grief (Davis et al., 1998; Michael & Snyder, 2005; Neimeyer et al., 2006). Several studies have supported benefit-finding as empirically distinguishable from mourners' efforts to "make sense" of a loss when both constructs are measured using single items (Davis et al., 1998; Holland et al., 2006; Michael & Snyder, 2005). Conceptually and theoretically, however, benefit-finding is similar to sense-making in that it concerns mourners' efforts to reappraise the loss in such a way that it is less threatening to beliefs about the world and the self (Davis et al., 1998; Janoff-Bulman & McPherson, 1997).

Identity Change

Unlike Davis et al.'s (1998) formulation, Gillies and Neimeyer's (2006) model explicitly considered identity change as a form of meaning reconstruction in grief. The suffering associated with difficult losses may result in a new view of the self as "sadder but wiser," simultaneously strengthened and softened by the experience of grief (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). A limited number of studies have investigated issues surrounding identity in bereavement specifically (Neimeyer et al., 2006; Nerken, 1993; Pals & McAdams, 2004), and only recently has an appreciation of the importance of the self as a dimension of meaning in grief been recognized (Neimeyer, 2001a). Though social cognition research suggests that identity change, as a process that concerns the self, may differ significantly from other sense-making processes (Strauman & Higgins, 1993), it is nevertheless similar to sense-making and benefit-finding in that it concerns the coherence and valence of one's narratives (Neimeyer, 2001).

Purpose in Life

Though absent from Gillies and Neimeyer's (2006) model, as well as other recent examinations of meaning in bereavement (Davis et al., 1998; Folkman, 2001; Stroebe & Schut, 2001), purpose in life has been an influential definition of meaning in the general literature and has been extensively investigated, including several studies of bereaved individuals. This construct was first described by Victor Frankl (1959/1984), who observed that concentration

camp survivors who were able to articulate a specific reason to survive fared better psychologically than those who had no such purpose. As might be expected, purpose in life among bereaved individuals is positively associated with other measures of life meaning and adjustment (Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Hershberger & Walsh, 1990). Conjugally bereaved adults who report a greater number of role involvements after the loss also report greater purpose in life (Hershberger & Walsh, 1990). Among bereaved parents, purpose in life is lower among those who lose more than one child or who lose an only child (Wheeler, 1993–1994). These findings speak to the importance of family roles in individuals' life purposes—bereaved parents are no longer able to work toward parenting-related goals, and consequently may come to view their lives as empty and valueless.

Life Significance

Life significance is the assignment of value to a goal, relationship, or aspect of life experience that exists or is pursued in the present and future. The assignment of value is a moral judgment about what is fundamentally, inherently good (Baumeister, 1991; Rokeach, 1973). Not every activity or experience that is viewed favorably by an individual is likely to result in perceptions of life significance. Rather, life significance implies a transcendent or ontological importance attributed to the experience in question. For example, when the train comes on time, this event is not typically attributed life significance. However, the arrival of the first train on a new line one worked hard to develop may well engender feelings of life significance. This is the sense in which people are using meaning when they refer to something that "means a lot" to them: It matters in a fundamental, inherent way, embedded within but separate from broader cognitive representations of the world and the self.

Life significance is implied in many of the cognitive and social-constructionist models described above. By "making sense of" the loss in the context of existing belief systems, identity, and purpose, mourners are likely to regain a sense of connection with important goals and values and to be able to again experience important moments in their lives as inherently significant. However, to assume restored life significance as a consequence of

sense-making, without explicitly describing or measuring it, may result in an incomplete understanding of meaning. What of individuals who, research suggests, see no need to "make sense" of their loss event but are nevertheless able to continue to live fulfilling and existentially gratifying lives (Bonanno et al., 2004;Davis et al., 2000)? Or those who are successful in reconstructing coherent belief systems, but who are left with little that actually matters to them in daily life? In the absence of significance life may be perfectly coherent and understandable but will feel empty, devoid of interest or motivation—in short, meaningless.

In addition to the implicit role of life significance in the stress and bereavement models described above, the construct has been more explicitly described in several general theories of meaning. Antonovsky (1987) described *life significance* as the "motivational element" of well-being: "the extent to which one feels that at least some of the problems and demands posed by living are worth investing energy in, are worthy of commitment and engagement" (Antonovsky, 1987, p. 18). Life significance also corresponds with Baumeister's (1991) concept of *value,* part of the "existential shopping list" for a meaningful life. As Baumeister described it, life significance is a "sake" in the sense in which people do something "for its own sake;" for example, one may do something for the sake of honor, or for the sake of love. Similarly, Reker and Wong (1988) described meaning derived from "values that transcend individuals and encompass cosmic meaning and ultimate purpose (p. 226)" as the deepest and most satisfying "level" of meaning.

Armour (2003), in a qualitative study of homicide survivors, described life significance as the "performative" dimension of meaning. In this study, over half of the survivors indicated that the "pursuit of what matters" served as a critical source of meaning. Several reported that by living in accordance with important values, they were able to salvage a sense of meaning and importance: "I went to every hearing they had for everything . . . It did matter and my thought was that I have always have wanted to be there for my kids and so this was my last time for Nate" (Armour, 2003, p. 534). Other bereaved individuals may view passive experiences of beauty or interpersonal connection as important sources of life significance, apart from any deliberate actions on their part. One participant in another qualitative study describes finding value in a renewed awareness of "people,

their love and support when I was so open by the hurt" (Wheeler, 2001, p. 59).

SENSE-MAKING, BENEFIT-FINDING, AND LIFE SIGNIFICANCE

Sense-making, benefit finding, and life significance are conceptually separable. Whereas sense-making asks "why?" and "why me?" and benefit finding asks "what have I gained?" life significance asks "what now?" and "what matters?" A mourner may be able to explain the loss in a larger framework or worldview (sense-making) and may be able to acknowledge having gained something from the loss (benefit finding) but still see nothing worthwhile in his or her life now that the loved one is gone (life significance). If benefit-finding is conceptualized as the *perception* of benefits resulting from a loss (rather than the actual benefits themselves, discussed below in the context of posttraumatic growth), then it can be distinguished from life significance on the same grounds as sense-making: Whereas sense-making and benefit finding both represent attempts to modify the cognitive structures and narratives surrounding the loss, the world, and the self (Davis et al., 1998; Janoff-Bulman & Mcpherson, 1997; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006), life significance includes equally important affective and motivational components.

By its very nature, significance cannot be assigned or defended rationally and does not depend entirely on coherent belief systems—it must be "felt." One cannot explain why one pursues what is valued; to say that it is valued is to say that one is motivated to pursue it (Baumeister, 1991). Nevertheless, life significance is also difficult to define in terms of discrete cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements. Like other experiences that occur on an existential level (Schneider, 2008), life significance transcends the mechanisms of everyday. Moments of particular life significance seem to simultaneously represent appraisals (of certain experiences or goals as valuable), emotions (in connection with such experiences), and action tendencies (to pursue the experiences). By including life significance in our conceptualization of meaning in grief, we shift toward a more integrative model that recognizes that constructs such as meaning are poorly defined as a set of completely separate cognitive and affective modules. Despite the clinical utility of models that conceptualize thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as separate units of experience connected by cause-and-effect processes

(e.g., Beck, 1976), contemporary emotion theory (Frijda, 2000) as well as social cognition research and theory (Bargh & Morsella, 2008) point to the presence of cognitive-affective-motivational schemas or networks. Our thoughts, and particularly our most deeply believed thoughts, are inseparable from our feelings.

Although they comprise separate constructs, sense making, benefit finding, and life significance are intertwined and are likely to reciprocally influence one another. First, individuals may derive life significance from a narrative of their experience with loss. For example, McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, and Bowman's (2001) study of "life stories" of redemption and contamination suggest that individuals may fit stressful life events into an overall sense-making framework that in itself implies valued goals and outcomes. Similarly, religious ideals such as salvation, sacrifice, and repentance hold life significance because of the sense-making structure in which they are embedded (Park, 2005). Finally, an important definition of meaning combines sense making and life significance: purpose in life, or the recognition of important life goals that organize and motivate one's activities (Frankl, 1959/1984).

PURPOSE AND LIFE SIGNIFICANCE

Purpose in life as described by Frankl (1959/1984) entails both the assignment of life significance to particular life outcomes, and a sense-making framework that indicates specific actions needed to bring about those outcomes. Individuals derive a felt sense of value from the pursuit of goals; whether one's purpose is caring for a child or writing a book, it feels important and necessary. In addition, to have purpose individuals must experience the world and their lives as sufficiently coherent and controllable that one's choices can have some effect on valued outcomes. Thus, purpose in life could be said to represent a conceptual framework within which life significance is pursued, or a narrative from which life significance is derived. Nevertheless, it is likely possible to experience life significance even in the absence of a verbally constructed purpose, as described by individuals who experience the very fabric of everyday life as suffused with beauty and richness (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Wheeler, 2001). This conjecture is supported by factor analyses of the Purpose in Life Test, which suggest that individuals' response to "exciting life" items (e.g., "If

I should die today, I'd feel that my life has been very worthwhile") do not necessarily correspond with items tapping purpose per se (Schulenberg & Melton, 2010).

Life Significance and Bereavement

Life significance can be difficult to construct in a culture that tends to weight rational explanation, scientific understanding, and objective, empirical knowledge more highly than values and emotions (Baumeister, 1991). Bereaved individuals in particular may find it challenging to maintain or reconstruct life significance after loss for a number of reasons. First, lost loved ones may themselves have constituted an important source of life significance. Each of the small experiences that make up an important relationship are freighted with meaning, and the sudden loss of these moments can leave a vast emptiness (Klass, 2001). Second, family members and close friends provide life significance in the form of cherished roles; in the absence of a spouse or child, mourners may lose the goals and values associated with being a husband, wife, or parent. This is particularly the case when other role involvements (e.g., friend, employee) are few (Hershberger & Walsh, 1990). This may explain, in part, the enhanced meaning of some mourners who feel a sense of ongoing bond with the deceased (Klass, 2001; Wheeler, 2001); life significance continues to be reflected in the relationship even after death

Alternatively, bereavement may lead to enhanced life significance in some instances. Janoff-Bulman and McPherson (1997) proposed that individuals whose worldviews are shattered may embrace the value of everyday life as compensation for lost coherence and safety. Violent losses, in particular, often render survivors particularly unable to "make sense" or "find benefit" in what happened; in such cases, life significance may supplant sense-making as a viable form of meaning (Armour, 2003; Currier et al., 2006). Even distant losses may affect an individual's sense of meaning by forcing a direct confrontation with mortality (Yalom, 1980). Although terror management research indicates that mortality salience can result in a tendency to "circle the wagons" (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004), other research suggests that confrontation with death can serve as a wakeup call to a passionate, value-driven life (Lykins, Segerstrom, Averill,

Evans, & Kemeny, 2007; Martin, Campbell, & Henry, 2004). In qualitative studies, some participants do report a renewed appreciation of life after bereavement: "Seeing how life can be taken away at any age makes me feel that we should make the most of our time here on earth . . . in understanding life's spiritual meaning, everything has become more beautiful and precious (Wheeler, 2001, p. 60)." Thus, although the death of a loved one eliminates important sources of life significance and may leave some mourners bereft and empty, others may emerge from their grief with an enhanced appreciation for the value of each day remaining in their own lives.

Life Significance and Posttraumatic Growth

In the absence of any research specifically examining life significance among bereaved individuals, a look at some related research may provide clues as to the place of life significance in the grieving process. Posttraumatic growth is a construct related to, but not synonymous with, life significance. Researchers examining stress-related or posttraumatic growth have found that a number of positive changes, including increases in perceived meaning, may result from bereavement and other stressful events (Engelkemeyer & Marwit, 2008; Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Wolchick et al., 2009). Posttraumatic growth may include changes that are not necessarily related to life significance (e.g., increased perceptions of personal strength; improved relationships). However, whether such changes can occur without accompanying feelings of significance—or whether changes which occur without accompanying significance represent true "growth"—remains an open empirical question.

The four-item "appreciation of life" subscale of Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) Posttraumatic Growth Scale does appear to directly measure changes in life significance, with items such as "I better appreciate each day" consistent with qualitative (Wheeler, 2001) and empirical (Martin et al., 2004) evidence that individuals can emerge from loss with an enhanced awareness of the value of life. However, measures of posttraumatic growth are designed to reflect only positive changes resulting from a stressor and are thus not useful tools to assess decreased or maintained life significance, nor can they be used assess change longitudinally. In

addition, appreciation of life (or, more broadly, perceived positive change following the loss) likely represents only one aspect of life significance, as individuals may also derive life significance from such varied sources as lifelong goals (Frankl 1959/1984), valued behaviors (Armour, 2003), and continuing bonds with the deceased (Wheeler, 2001).

Few studies have reported on the individual correlates of the Appreciation of Life subscale in bereaved populations. However, consistent with the present conceptualization of life significance as distinct from sense-making, one mixed-method study suggests that appreciation of life may represent a somewhat distinct outcome which does not depend on successful efforts to make sense of loss (Davis, Wohl, & Verberg, 2007; Davis, 2008). Davis et al. (2007) performed a qualitative cluster analysis on responses offered by individuals who lost a loved one in a mine explosion, resulting in three relatively distinct response profiles. One group of individuals reported only negative changes and shattered assumptions; a second group reported changes consistent with the majority of the Posttraumatic Growth Scale, including enhanced relationships, personal strength and resources for coping; and a third group reported changes consistent with Appreciation of Life or life significance (Davis et al., 2007). Interestingly, members of this last group were less likely to have experienced a shattering of worldviews following the loss or to have engaged in efforts to make sense of what happened. This suggests that if appreciation of life does increase following bereavement, it may occurs via enhanced awareness of the finiteness of existence (Martin et al., 2004) rather than because of a "meaning vacuum" left by the destruction of assumptive worldviews, as suggested by Janoff-Bulman and McPherson (1997) and Tedeschi and Calhoun (2006). As one participant stated, "You never know what's around the corner . . . and that's why it's important to live life now, to go for what you want. That's the positive" (Davis et al., 2007, p. 708).

Future Directions

Measuring Life Significance in Grief

Though the literature reviewed above provides tantalizing hints as to the processes at work in mourners' efforts to maintain or

reconstruct life significance in the wake of loss, clearly more work is needed—beginning with a reliable method for investigating life significance in a bereaved population. In developing such measures, the onus will be on researchers to demonstrate that life significance is empirically, as well as conceptually, separable from the dimensions of meaning discussed above. As discussed, perceptions of significance are likely to interact in complex, reciprocally causative ways with the coherence and positivity of one's beliefs, appraisals, and narrative structures. Although the present review suggests that life significance may be an important variable in its own right, it is possible that sense and significance can never be truly separated—in other words, that the two constructs function more as two sides of a coin than as two truly separate dimensions of meaning. In this case, the most useful role of this discussion will be to suggest a "deepening" and broadening of existing constructs to consider the feelings of significance generated by shifts in one's belief systems.

Life Significance as a Research Construct

Assuming a measure of life significance can be developed and validated, researchers can then begin to explore the relationships among life significance and related aspects of well-being and grief severity. In keeping with the overall emphasis in the bereavement literature on reconstruction of shattered meanings, as opposed to maintenance of preexisting meanings (e.g., Armour, 2003; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006), the present review has focused primarily on the ways in which bereavement might lead to changes in life significance and how these changes might interact with other variables. However, many individuals will likely find that they are able to maintain prior sources of life significance through bereavement. Other mourners may experience a shattering of life significance as important roles and memories disappear with the deceased, but discover new goals and values or an increased appreciation of everyday life. Exploring the predictors and consequences of each of these trajectories will be a valuable step in understanding the relationships between meaning and adjustment.

Another interesting question will be whether the particular goals, relationships, or experiences individuals imbue with life

significance helps determine extent to which life significance facilitates adjustment. That is to say, are some sources of significance more beneficial than others? For example, many survivors of homicide are motivated to prevent the deaths of other young adults; others may feel a strong sense of revenge and turn their energies toward inflicting further violence (Armour, 2003). Still others may pour their energy into more extrinsicially motivated pursuits such as the accumulation of wealth. Research does suggest that some goals, particularly the pursuit of financial success and hedonic comfort, are associated with poor adjustment outcomes (Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). Exploration of the phenomenological distinctions, if any exist, between life significance derived from behavior consistent with intrinsic versus extrinsic motivations may shed light on these questions.

If life significance is indeed found to represent an important aspect of the grief recovery process, it should be integrated into theoretical models of meaning reconstruction. In contemporary cognitive and constructionist theories, distress serves as feedback mechanism, prompting further meaning-making activities (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Park & Folkman, 1997). The relationship between distress and life significance is likely to be somewhat more complex. Grief distress may in itself be viewed by mourners as a source of life significance, as described by Frankl (1959/1984) in his discussion of the value of suffering. Viewed in this way, distress is transformed and becomes more bearable, though perhaps no less painful. Alternatively, enhanced life significance may offset grief distress by providing a source of positive emotions and intervening in negative grief coping activities such as rumination (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1997). Finally, intense or prolonged grief distress may impair individuals' ability to experience life significance via an hedonic mood and avoidance of potentially valued activities and interpersonal roles (Prigerson, Vanderwerker, & Maciejewski, 2008).

Relationships among significance and contextual variables should also be empirically examined. Whereas mourners' ability to make sense of loss has been shown to depend in part on the suddenness, timeliness, and violence of the death itself (Currier et al, 2006), life significance following a loss may depend on other factors. Evidence supporting the importance of lost roles and relationships in determining grief adjustment (Hershberger & Walsh,

1990; Wheeler, 1993–1994) suggest that mourners' relationship to the deceased (e.g., parent, spouse, child) may be an important predictor of the extent to which life significance is destroyed or maintained after a loss. If so, it will be interesting to examine whether this effect can be tempered to some extent by mourners' participation in an ongoing bond or relationship with the deceased.

Preliminary evidence surrounding enhanced appreciation of life among bereaved individuals suggests that this form of life significance occurs separately from sense-making and from changes in identity (Davis et al., 2007). Qualitative accounts of bereavement indicate that for many people, it is their confrontation with the fact of death that prompts a renewed awareness of the value of life and the need to engage fully in daily sources of life significance (Wheeler, 2001). Further research in this area should consider which types of loss (i.e., sudden losses, death of a similar other) facilitate an enhanced appreciation of life, and whether this effect is mediated by death awareness (Martin et al., 2004, Lykins et al., 2007).

Conclusions

The scope of bereavement research and theory has expanded over the last 20 years to include a number of new areas of focus, including a burgeoning literature on the role of meaning reconstruction in mourning. Cognitive and social constructionist theorists have developed sophisticated models of the ways in which mourners struggle to make meaning by "making sense," or locating the loss within a narrative structure that renders the world predictable and coherent (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Folkman, 2001; Stroebe & Schut, 2001; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). Other researchers have investigated meaning reconstruction as a process of finding benefits in the loss (Davis et al., 1998), changing one's identity to accommodate the change (Neimeyer et al., 2006), or maintaining a sense of purpose in life (Hershberger & Walsh, 1990). Implicit in these formulations, but rarely identified as an important dimension of meaning in its own right, is life significance, or the felt perception that some aspect of one's life matters. Following the development reliable and valid measure of this construct, mixed-methods programs of research can begin to test hypotheses concerning the ways in which life significance is affected by loss, both negative

and positive. Future studies should investigate the role of life significance as both an outcome and as a predictor variable in bereavement, eventually integrating this important aspect of meaning into our models of grief and recovery.

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