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Meaning in a World in Crisis: Perspectives of Societal Resilience and Growth: An Introduction to the Special Issue of the *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*

Joel Vos[a,b], Pninit Russo-Netzer[c], and Stefan E. Schulenberg[d]

[a]Research, Metanoia Institute, London, UK; [b]IMEC International Meaning Events and Community, London, UK; [c]Department of Counseling and Human Development, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel; [d]Psychology, University of Mississippi, University, MS, USA

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Meaning in crisis

The world is in crisis! While we are writing this introduction, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to hold many countries in its tight grip. Countries have gone into lock-down over the Omicron variant. People have lost their jobs. Above all, the current pandemic highlights the underlying long-term crises of racism and social inequality, whereas for example communities of color and individuals with lower socio-economic status are impacted disproportionally by the pandemic (Vos, 2020). In the context of these inequalities, gun violence and terrorism loom over many societies. At the background of these crises dawns an even larger existential crisis: the icecaps at the poles are melting, sea levels and temperatures are rising, and natural hazards such as droughts and tropical storms are becoming increasingly severe. Indeed, ecological collapse may be imminent according to environmentalists. The impact of these crises on children and young people is unimaginably large, while educational systems do not seem to provide them the meaningful tools and answers they need. How can we make sense of this world in crisis, and how can we respond in a meaningful way? Instead of sharing vision and joining forces, many countries have seen a larger polarization than ever before. For example, during the pandemic, many people have become polarized into camps of 'covidiots' and 'conspiracy theorists'. Science is under attack, with simplifications of complex scientific topics and uncertainties by laymen and pop scientists, misinterpreting science, letting our emotions drown out the ability to reason, process and make decisions. While people have become sick, many have died, medical care professionals are continuously taxed, and we fight over how we should translate science into effective health care policies.

Amongst the plethora of answers in specialist academic journals, this special edition of the *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* raises burning questions and focuses on one unique answer which may go above and beyond: meaning as a source of societal resilience and growth. The perspectives cast in this journal move away from the

CONTACT Joel Vos joel.vos@metanoia.ac.uk Research, Metanoia Institute, London W5 2QB, UK.

theoretical focus on meaning in life by existential philosophers, and from the individual focus on personal meaning advocated by positive psychologists and existential therapists. This special issue focuses on a new meaning of meaning: the social power of meaning. The authors of the respective articles stand up for the crucial role that the social power of meaning could play in this world throughout its course in crisis. Whereas previous authors have alluded to the social power of meaning, its full power in this respect has only recently started to become more meticulously examined (Vos, 2020). An example of a key moment that afforded an opportunity for people to experience the social power of meaning occurred at the International Meaning Events and Community (IMEC) conference in 2019. The meeting was entitled: 'The personal and social power of meaning: standing up for meaning in a globalized world'. This special issue serves as a natural evolution based on this initial meeting, consisting of five articles written by speakers from this conference. In the next paragraphs we describe the new meaning of meaning that emerged at this conference, how this new meaning could help us during the current collective crises, and indicate how these aspects of meaning are addressed by the authors in their contributions.

The new meaning of meaning

To understand the new meaning that emerged at this conference, it is important to understand the philosophy behind the conference and the organization itself. The organizers of the International Meaning Events and Community (IMEC) describe themselves as 'an ever-growing collaboration of people from across the world, each with a unique background and personal story. At IMEC events, questions are raised about society and the self, questions that are essential to human health and well-being. (…) Emphasis is placed on the importance of building authentic relationships, creating a meaningful society, and existing and growing as a meaningful community.' (meaning.org.uk).

The social power of meaning was exemplified by the meaningful community and synergy that emerged at the conference from 12 to 14 July 2019, in London, United Kingdom. During these three full days, 65 workshops, lectures, social meetings, and artistic and musical events happened, with 167 speakers and participants from all continents. The rich tapestry of these wide-ranging events was brought together in the conference's last session, where conference participants were invited to develop a joint conference statement. Participants present at the final session had received one post-it note to write a key message or take-away point from the conference. The room subsequently transformed with alacrity as people enthusiastically engaged in the work. Upon considering and writing their respective messages, people walked to the front of the room to place their post-it note on one quickly-filling whiteboard. The conference chair reorganized the post-it notes on the board and categorized them into various themes and sub-themes, in an informal method that reminds of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Three themes appeared amongst the post-it notes, and together they revealed a new meaning of meaning.

The first theme was about the multidisciplinary approach to meaning: we need the synergy across the range of professions to analyze and understand how individuals

live a meaningful life. This was reflected in the diversity of the participants: amongst them were psychologists, existential therapists, qualitative researchers, sociologists, artists, political activists, musicians, poets, and many more. Despite their diverse professional training backgrounds and experiences, they connected on the topic of meaning. This shared concept of meaning seemed to emerge as a Gestalt, rising above individual definitions by individual disciplines. The participants seemed to address meaning as a pluralistic concept. This seems in line with a previous systematic literature review of definitions of the concept of meaning, which indicated that the concept of meaning is a wide continuum, ranging from micro-experiences of 'making sense of the here-and-now flow experiencing' to 'the experience of meaning in life'. The macro-concept of meaning in life across disciplines may be summarized as the combination of motivation, values, goal-management, self-worth, understanding, existential skills, and commitment to action (Vos, 2016a, 2017). Some experts have used other specific terms, such as purpose, significance, and coherence. Each of these aspects show different facets of the same multi-faceted phenomenon of meaning; we need to cast light from many angles to see the totality of a diamond (Vos, 2021).

The second group theme the post-it notes described involved the relational nature of meaning. That is, the messages written on the post-it notes described that our individual experience of meaning is often related to other people. For example, several sessions at the conference had addressed the detrimental impact of loneliness, when we cope with crises on our own, which could be ameliorated by fostering social connections and a sense of community. Participants described that meaning is often experienced in relationships, and that it also develops in relationships, like the philosopher Martin Buber (2012) wrote that an individual develops their sense of self and world in relationships with others ('Ich werde am Du').

The third group theme revealed by the post-it notes may be summarized with one particular post-it note that read: 'the personal is political'. What is going on in our personal life is often a reflection of what is going on in the world around us. This also implies that we may be in a personal crisis because our world is in crisis, as Viktor Frankl (1994) wrote: 'an abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior'. At the same time, the individual has the freedom to influence the world around them, via their way-of-being and their actions. This theme also brought up the topic of response-ability: the individual is called into action by the crises of the world. The post-it notes reflected a sense of personal responsibility for one's own life and one's individual contributions to the world in crises, but some post-it notes also included an ethical call to action to help others and work to prevent the larger crises in the world. Thus, the meanings of the individual and the meanings of the world around them are intertwined. Personal meanings and social meanings co-constitute each other, to some extent. It is this intertwining that gives meaning its pro-active (instead of reactive) emphasis. The social power of meaning serves as a catalyst that galvanizes health and adaptive collective action.

Thus, to summarize, the conference participants present at the final session seemed to collectively conclude that meaning is a relational topic at the dynamic intersection of individual and societal processes, which could possibly only be fully understood with a multidisciplinary approach and pluralistic definitions. In other words, the participants focused on the social power of meaning. When this conclusion was stated to the

audience, the participants seemed to feel that this focus on the social power of meaning was innovative, or even 'revolutionary' (as one person wrote). One of the post-it notes stood out as it indicated that the 2019 IMEC conference gave 'new meaning to meaning'. What could be 'new' to this approach to meaning? It could be that some traditional textbooks and conferences focus on meaning as a relatively individualist and static phenomenon, that looks at meaning as an unchangeable state-of-mind of individuals independent from their social and socioeconomic context. It could be that other conceptualizations have focused more on a philosophical or theological abstraction from the dynamic totality of our subjectively lived experiences. For example, we were not only speaking about meaning as a theory or model, although inspiring theoretical papers were presented, rather, we specifically examined how the conference participants made sense of their own experiences, and how for example therapists, coaches, clients, and politicians can apply these theories in practice. The conference participants were challenged to look at how we make sense of the world from many different disciplinary and artistic angles. Thus, the conference participants were explicitly invited to examine the relational, dynamic, and multidisciplinary nature of meaning. Naturally, we should not overinterpret these conclusions, as the three themes merely reflect the informal analyses of the responses of this selective group of IMEC conference participants.

A world in crisis

At the time of the finalization of this introduction to the special issue, it is the Spring of 2022. None of the participants of the 2019 IMEC conference could have foreseen what was lying ahead. Indeed, no one could have. Soon after the conference, we (the guest editors for this special issue of the *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*) invited speakers whose presentations reflected the key themes from the conference to contribute scholarly, written versions for inclusion. Our experience of editing this special issue, with challenges and delays triggered by the pandemic, seems to precisely echo the main lesson from the conference: there is no such thing as completely idiosyncratic fixated meaning as we are all influenced by our relationships with others and with our continuously changing world, a world which includes ongoing and pervasive crises such as the pandemic.

Questions that guided the IMEC conference organizers and the editors of this special issue include: How can we make sense of the changes and challenges in this world in crisis? How can we live meaningful lives in this dynamic context? How can we realize our personal dreams? What does the research tell us about these social and personal changes? How can mental health professionals empower clients and help them to make sense of their circumstances? How can relationships with practitioners help clients discover what is meaningful? How can research socially empower individuals? Finally, how can our professional expertise direct us toward positive transformation, not only with respect to individual lives but also with respect to the larger society?

This special issue builds on the emerging trend of research at the intersection of meaning and society. For example, many studies have shown how individuals can use meaning-oriented coping-styles to deal with chronic or life-threatening physical diseases (Vos, 2016b). Other research shows how meaning is relevant in our professional and socio-economic life (Dik et al., 2013; Vos, 2020). More in particular, when individuals

are confronted with a wide range of hazards, whether they be natural, technological, or otherwise person-made, meaning seems to be of the utmost importance. For example, in a range of studies conducted over a number of years, Schulenberg and colleagues demonstrate the importance of meaning for a range of disaster-related contexts, such as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, floods, tornadoes, and most recently the COVID-19 pandemic (Aiena et al., 2015; 2016; Boullion et al., 2020; Drescher et al., 2012; Dursun et al., 2016; McCutcheon et al., 2020; Schulenberg, 2016, 2020; Schulenberg et al., 2016; Weber et al., 2020). While no two disasters are alike, as each disaster occurs in its own unique socio-political-economic context (e.g., McCutcheon et al., 2020), it seems clear that meaning is an essential factor, one with promise and one we hope to continue studying using increasingly longitudinal methods. While Schulenberg and colleagues' research was originally couched in a Franklian/logotherapeutic context (e.g., Frankl, 1959/2006; McCutcheon et al., 2020; Schulenberg et al., 2008), the importance of meaning far exceeds any one perspective, anticipating such areas as meaning-enhanced cognitive-behavioral therapy, terror management theory, positive psychology, ACT, and motivational interviewing, to name a few others. Meaning is essential to human health, well-being, and valued living, in general and related to disaster mental health (Finkelstein-Fox et al., 2020; Melton & Schulenberg, 2008; Pavlacic et al., 2021; Schulenberg, 2016, 2020; Schulenberg et al., 2014; Weathers et al., 2016).

When we speak about the social power of meaning, we inevitably talk about cultural and subcultural differences in how individuals perceive and experience meaning in life. Empirical research has started to examine cultural differences related to meaning in life. For example, while the search for meaning was found to be negatively related to the presence of meaning among U.S. participants, it was positively related to the presence of meaning among Japanese individuals (Steger et al., 2008) and Israelis (e.g., Abu-Raiya et al., 2021; Russo-Netzer, 2019). This suggests that the presence and search for meaning may evoke different understandings in different cultures (Steger et al., 2008). More research is needed to understand these cultural variations and the psychometric properties of the instruments measuring these constructs. Similarly, individuals in collectivist cultures tend to prioritize goals in their lives that take the larger community into account and are attuned to others, while people in individualist societies tend to emphasize more personal goals and preferences (e.g., King & Watkins, 2012). Individuals in countries with dominantly neoliberal economic systems report a large functionalistic focus on materialistic, hedonistic and self-oriented types of meanings, whereas individuals in countries with less neoliberal systems more often report a traditional or phenomenological/critical-intuitive approach to social and larger types of meaning in life (Vos, 2020). Beyond specific cultural differences, the general socio-historical context that includes worldwide global processes and values also affects the individual search for meaning and the specific meaning in life that individuals adopt. Such a general cultural context is often referred to as "Zeitgeist," (the spirit or time of an age) and it provides a socio-cultural framework for the human and universal questions of meaning in life besides the effects of specific cultures. The unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic has created a devastating reality for many around the world.

However, this special issue does not merely describe the experience of meaning in different social contexts, as it also goes beyond describing meaning as a source of

personal resilience or of cultural differences. The construct of meaning seems inherently to go beyond any context, its transcendence defines it essence. Meaning offers an existential duality, like Heidegger traced the etymological roots of the word 'existence' to the Latin ex-sistere, which he explained as: standing somewhere at a particular time in a particular place ('sistere') but at the same time having the ability to step outside of this position and time ('ex') (Vos, 2015). We try to have a dual attitude toward meaning. As language exemplifies, meaning is beyond the thing in itself, it transcends it. The meaning of a word is not the sequence of letters or syllables, but what they stand for or what they refer to. Along the same lines, discovering meaning in life also involves transcendence. Only when we shift our focus from self-interest to something which is beyond ourselves can we experience meaning in life (Frankl terms this "self-transcendence," referring to a person or a cause). Yet, despite the burgeoning research and emerging understanding of meaning in life, its sources and its contribution to human functioning, knowledge is still to a large extent focused on the individual, from a psychological point of view. We need to extend our discussion and understanding of meaning in life as it dynamically unfolds and is experienced *in life*. This underscores the experience of meaning that emerges as a Gestalt (i.e., a third phenomenon that cannot be reduced to its constituting elements), in the interplay between individuals and the socio-cultural context in which they live and operate (Baumeister, 2005; Chao & Kesebir, 2013).

How can this new meaning of meaning, as a transcendent source of social power, help our world in crisis? We may learn invaluable lessons from this meaning-oriented approach for dealing with our current crises in the world such as COVID-19, racial/ethnic discrimination, natural and technological disasters, and the climate crisis. For instance, during the pandemic, about half of all frontline workers, those in hospitals and supermarkets – report psychological stress and symptoms of acute post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression (Vos, 2020). Almost one third of the general population report similar symptoms. Several studies suggest that this psychological stress is related to how individuals make sense of the existential threats of the virus and of the competing messages from politicians and scientists (Vos, 2020). Therefore, individuals, politicians and (mental) health care workers would benefit from training in meaning-oriented coping and education. As Viktor Frankl suggested when he coined the term 'tragic optimism', we may learn to both accept the 'tragic' influences and threats from society, as well helping individuals to recognize their opportunities of living a meaningful life in spite of our existential challenges.

Meaning in this special issue

The articles in this special issue reflect the new meaning of meaning. We discuss multidisciplinary perspectives on how meaning is experienced in different contexts and crises. This special issue starts with an article from Holli-Anne Passmore, Paul Lutz, and Andrew Howell on how we can cope with the existential threats posed by climate change. How can we cope with ecoanxiety? Louis Hoffman follows with an article on how we can make sense of living in a multicultural society and globalized world, and how we can cope with experiences of social injustice, like we have seen with the American

social movement of Black Lives Matter in response to the death of George Floyd and so many others. When we want to build a more meaning-oriented society, we may want to build meaningful foundations. Therefore, Pninit Russo-Netzer has reviewed the role of education in learning how to live a meaningful life, and vice versa how meaning can help education. Carol Ryff further underlines the importance of meaning-oriented education, integrating humanities and arts in teaching and living together; in her reflective piece, she advocates for a multidisciplinary approach to meaning. Finally, Joel Vos' review and survey takes an aerial view by examining how different societies and eras seem to focus on different types of meaning. Together, these articles show the personal and societal power of meaning, and stand for meaning in our globalized society.

'Every situation emits a call to which we have to listen' (Viktor Frankl, 1994)

'Because everybody deserves to live a meaningful life.' (Motto IMEC on meaning.org.uk)

ORCID

Joel Vos http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7961-2354
Pninit Russo-Netzer http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0633-1137
Stefan E. Schulenberg http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3235-7525

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