

Personal Meaning Production as a Component of Spiritual Intelligence

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Abstract

Personal meaning production is defined as the ability to construct personal meaning and purpose in all physical and mental experiences, including the capacity to create and master a life purpose. The construct is explored as a component of spiritual intelligence (i.e., a mental capacity), offering support according to established criteria for intelligence. Evidence of cognitive operations and adaptive applications, including problem-solving and coping, is reviewed in detail. Personal meaning production appears to be highly adaptive in crises of an existential or spiritual nature, as well as problems related to physical and psychological health. Due to the seemingly infinite number of sources of personal meaning, it is argued that deriving meaning from *all* experiences represents the high end-state of this ability. It is further maintained that this capacity represents a highly viable and necessary component of spiritual intelligence, without which the portrait of human mentation is incomplete.

The past decade has witnessed an influx of publications on the topic of spiritual intelligence (e.g., Amram, 2007; Emmons, 2000; Gardner, 2000; Halama & Strizenec, 2004; Mayer, 2000; Nasel, 2004; Noble, 2000; Vaughan, 2002; Wolman, 2001; Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Many of these authors have proposed models and theories of spiritual intelligence (e.g., Amram, 2007; Emmons, 2000; Nasel, 2004) which are unsatisfactory in light of popular criteria for human intelligence (e.g., Gardner, 1983; Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2000; Sternberg, 1997). Nevertheless, a recent review of the extant literature (King, 2008) has demonstrated that underlying human spirituality, there is indeed evidence of a set of adaptive, cognitive capacities unique from other manifestations of human intelligence; and that these capacities constitute a *spiritual intelligence*.

In an attempt to accurately reconceptualize the construct, spiritual intelligence is currently defined as a set of adaptive mental capacities which contribute to the awareness, integration, and adaptive application of the nonmaterial and transcendent aspects of one's existence, leading to such outcomes as deep existential reflection, enhancement of meaning, recognition of a transcendent self, and mastery of spiritual states. Four core components are proposed: *critical existential thinking*, *personal meaning production*, *transcendental awareness*, and *conscious state expansion*. The current paper will focus on the capacity of personal meaning production, which is defined as the ability to construct personal meaning and purpose in all physical and mental experiences, including the capacity to create and master a life purpose.

Evidence of cognitive operations is vital to the establishment of this construct as a factor of human intelligence. Meddin (1998) described the cognitive component of personal meaning as “an integrative organizing principle (or set of principles) which enables one to make sense (cognition) of one's inner life and outer environment” (p. 164). This closely resembles Zohar and

Marshall's (2000) description of the brain's tertiary processes, which integrate linear and associative forms of cognition and facilitate moral and spiritual reasoning. A cognitive component was also suggested by Wong (1989), who defined personal meaning as "an individually constructed cognitive system, that is...capable of endowing life with personal significance and satisfaction" (p. 517). It is this cognitive component which allows one to derive, create, and "endow with" meaning that ultimately must represent the capacity of personal meaning production. Wong (1989) also spoke of "creating" personal meaning, further supporting the presence of such a mental ability.

Reker (1997) highlighted the relationship between meaning and purpose, with a life purpose being an intrinsic aspect of personal meaning. In fact, meaning is most simply defined as "a sense of purpose" (Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 559). In effect, it is critical that a capacity to create or derive meaning includes the ability to construct purpose as well. While one may be able to derive purpose from daily events and experiences (i.e., situational meaning), one may also define a purpose for his/her life (i.e., global meaning), the latter of which involves more coherent forms of meaning-making that integrate enduring beliefs and values (Park & Folkman, 1997). The *mastering* of a purpose refers to one's ability to infer his/her purpose in all events and experiences; essentially, a specialized form of meaning production.

A seemingly infinite number of sources of meaning have been described in the literature, including social roles (McCall & Simmons, 1966), relationships, meeting basic needs, personal growth, leisure activities, personal achievement (Reker & Wong, 1988), reminiscence, commitment, optimism, religiosity (Wong, 1989), work, leisure, grand-parenting in older adults (Thompson, 1992), dreams (States, 1992), and even coincidence (Jung, 1960/1973). A comprehensive review of the literature leads to the conclusion that there is no limit to the number

of sources available from which one can construct meaning. For this reason, the ability to create meaning in *all* mental and physical experiences occupies the highest end-state of this particular ability. Maslow (1964) himself stated that “people of all kinds tend to be able to ‘religionize’ [or to endow with spiritual meaning] *any* part of life, *any* day of the week, in *any* place, and under all sorts of circumstances” (p. 31).

One of the primary characteristics of an existential crisis or neurosis is a sense of meaninglessness (Frankl, 1969; Maddi, 1967). Frankl (1969) further described an existential vacuum as “the frustration of the will to meaning” (Frankl, 1969, p. 45). Given this, it seems reasonable to suggest that a high capacity for personal meaning production would be extremely adaptive in dealing with such existential angst. In fact, if this ability were highly cultivated, it would likely prevent such a crisis or vacuum from fully developing.

Research suggests that the ability to construct or derive meaning from one’s environment is adaptive in a variety of situations beyond those which are existential in nature. Longitudinal analyses have suggested that meaning plays a significant role in both the enhancement of hope and prevention of depression (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005). Mascaro and Rosen (2006) found that meaning moderated the relationship between daily stress and depression, suggesting that spiritual meaning acts as “a buffer against the effects of stress on well-being” (p. 183). A number of studies have reported significant associations between meaning-making and both psychological and physiological health across the lifespan (e.g., Fry, 2000; Reker, 1997; Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987; for a review, see Park & Folkman, 1997). For example, studies of terminally ill cancer patients have revealed that the ability to maintain a sense of meaning protects against clinical depression, hopelessness, suicidal ideation, and desire for hastened death (Breitbart et al., 2000; Nelson, Rosenfeld, Breitbart, & Galietta, 2002).

When confronted with a stressor, personal meaning production acts as a coping method by allowing an individual to construct meaning and purpose within the stressful situation (e.g., by positive reappraisal of the event), thereby transforming the stressor and reducing its negative impact. Once meaning is derived, further distress is likely averted (for further information on meaning-based coping, see Park & Folkman, 1997). Similarly, when faced with a dilemma, personal meaning production may lead to a meaning-based solution and therefore act as an effective method of problem-solving. Assigning purpose to problems and decisions deepens their meaning and provides additional direction in life, ultimately increasing one's motivation to attain preset goals (Klinger, 1998).

These adaptive applications – coping and problem-solving – are critical prerequisites to the establishment of mental ability and/or intelligence (Gardner, 1983; Mayer et al., 2000; Sternberg, 1997). To date, preliminary factor analyses of the Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory (King, 2008) have revealed that the ability to construct meaning and purpose is separate from the ability to simply *contemplate* these dimensions of experience, supporting its distinction from critical existential thinking. It can be inferred from this and other tests of meaning that people vary in terms of their capacity to derive or create meaning and purpose (e.g., Reker, 1997; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Furthermore, there is little doubt as to the cognitive operations which enable one to construct meaning (Meddin, 1998; Wong, 1989). Given the frequent inclusion of meaning-making in definitions of spirituality (e.g., Wink & Dillon, 2002; Worthington & Sandage, 2001), its consideration in a model of spiritual intelligence is both natural and necessary. It is currently suggested that personal meaning production represents a highly viable component of spiritual intelligence, without which the portrait of human mentation is incomplete.

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