

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 (or mental capacity) of spiritual intelligence, with support according to established criteria for intelligence. Evidence of cognitive operations and adaptive applications, including problem-solving, coping, and stress-reduction, is reviewed in detail. Personal meaning production appears to be highly adaptive in crises of an existential nature, as well as physical and psychological health problems. 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 component of spiritual intelligence, without which the portrait of human mentation is incomplete.

### Personal Meaning Production as a Component of Spiritual Intelligence

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 meta-analysis of the literature (King, 2008) has demonstrated that underlying human spirituality, there is in fact 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 more accurately conceptualize the construct, spiritual intelligence has been defined as a set of adaptive mental capacities which are based on nonmaterial and transcendent aspects of reality. When applied, these processes are adaptive in their ability to facilitate unique means of problem-solving, abstract-reasoning, and coping. Four core components are proposed to comprise spiritual intelligence: *critical existential thinking*, *personal meaning production*, *transcendental awareness*, and *conscious state expansion*. The current paper will explore 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 mental ability. 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. 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 the cognitive component which allows one to derive, create, and “endow with” meaning that ultimately must represent the capacity for personal meaning production. Wong (1989) also spoke of “creating” personal meaning, suggesting the presence of such a mental ability.

Reker (1997) highlighted the relationship between meaning and purpose, with a life purpose being an important 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, one may also define a purpose for his/her life, which involves more coherent and creative forms of meaning production. The *mastering* of a purpose refers to one’s ability to infer his/her purpose in all events and experiences. This is essentially another 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). An intense review of the literature leads one to conclude 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). Therefore, it is quite reasonable to suggest that a high capacity for personal meaning production would be extremely adaptive in dealing with such existential problems. In fact, if this ability were highly cultivated, it would likely prevent such a crisis or vacuum from ever fully developing.

Additional research suggests that the ability to construct or derive meaning from one’s environment is adaptive in a variety of situations. Longitudinal analyses have suggested that meaning plays a significant role in both the enhancement of hope and prevention of depression (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005). A year later, Mascaro and Rosen (2006) found that meaning moderated the relationship between daily stress and depression, leading them to conclude that spiritual meaning acts as “a buffer against the effects of stress on well-being” (p. 183). Studies of terminally ill cancer patients have revealed that the ability to maintain a sense of meaning also acts as a buffer against clinical depression, hopelessness, suicidal ideation, and desire for hastened death (Breitbart et al., 2000; Nelson, Rosenfeld, Breitbart, & Galietta, 2002). A number of studies have found significant relationships between personal meaning and both psychological and physical health in old age (e.g., Fry, 2000; Reker, 1997; Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987).

It is suggested that when faced with stress, personal meaning production acts as a coping method by allowing an individual to construct meaning and purpose within the stressful

situation, thereby transforming the stressor and reducing its negative impact. Once meaning is derived, further distress is likely averted. Similarly, when faced with a dilemma, personal meaning production can lead to a meaning-based solution and therefore act as a method of problem-solving as well. Assigning purpose to problems and decisions deepens their meaning and provides additional direction, increasing the likelihood that an individual will attain preset goals.

These adaptive applications – problem-solving, coping, and stress-reduction – are all critical prerequisites to the establishment of mental ability and intelligence (Gardner, 1983; Mayer et al., 2000; Sternberg, 1997). To date, preliminary analyses of the Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory (King, 2008) have revealed that the ability to construct meaning and purpose is actually distinct from the ability to simply contemplate these dimensions of experience, supporting its separation from existential thinking. Furthermore, there is little doubt as to the cognitive operations which enable one to construct meaning (Meddin, 1998; Wong, 1989). Personal meaning production represents a highly viable component of spiritual intelligence, without which the portrait of human mentation is incomplete.

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