



# **The Psychology of Meaning**

*Edited by*

**Keith D. Markman, Travis Proulx, and Matthew J. Lindberg**



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American Psychological Association • Washington, DC

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION: THE NEW SCIENCE OF MEANING

TRAVIS PROULX, KEITH D. MARKMAN, AND MATTHEW J. LINDBERG

After reading the introductions to a number of books and volumes, it becomes apparent that authors will commonly begin by commenting on the diversity of the perspectives represented in the various chapters. This is especially true of the sort of volume that deals with a general topic (e.g., relationships) rather than a specific field (e.g., evolutionary psychology) or theoretical perspective (e.g., cognitive dissonance theory). In truth, there may be more variety in volumes that deal with a general topic in psychology, relative to other social sciences, given the natural diversity of research methodologies that characterize our science and the disparate manifestations of human mental life that these methodologies assess. For example, self-reports, scales, experimental outcomes, and EEG readings can all tell us something about “relationships” as this notion is commonly understood. However, when dealing with a notion that shares considerably less in terms of a common understanding (superficially, at least), one might expect this natural diversity to multiply further.

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This brings us to our current volume—dealing with the psychological study of meaning—and we will begin by commenting on the diversity of the perspectives represented in the various chapters. Like any volume in psychology that deals with a general topic, there is a great deal of variety in the research methodologies that are summarized and in the theoretical perspectives that frame these research efforts. However, even for those who make their way through these chapters with the expectation of diversity, the sheer scope of the diversity may nevertheless be surprising. Chapters describing anterior cingulate cortex activation in response to goal frustration (Tullett, Prentice, Teper, Nash, Inzlicht, & McGregor, Chapter 20) are included within the same volume as coping strategies following a cancer diagnosis (Park, Chapter 13). We have vascular constriction following expectancy violations (Townsend, Eliezer, & Major, Chapter 19) and the narratives we construct to imbue our lives with a sense of continuity and purpose (McAdams, Chapter 9). Taken together, it might not be clear to a reader from a different discipline (or even from the same discipline) why it is that these chapters should be taken together at all.

Perhaps this is because the *psychology of meaning*—as a distinct discipline—is just now beginning to coalesce. For the first time, psychologists working from different disciplines are comprehending themselves as working toward a common understanding of how it is that people come to understand themselves, their environment, and their relationship to their environment. Across numerous fields in psychology, there is growing recognition that however meaning is construed, all accounts of meaning converge at *sense making*, and psychologists that have explored sense making from a variety of perspectives are increasingly understanding these efforts in terms of meaning. Once the province of existential philosophy, existential psychology, and the related clinical literature, *meaning* is a word that appears with greater frequency within the social, cognitive, and cognitive neuroscience literatures.

*Meaning is now something measurable*—or perhaps more to the point, meaning is something that has been measured for decades in experimental psychology, along with the affective consequences of meaning loss and growth. These efforts have taken place in different eras using different nomenclatures, with a more recent recognition that something is to be gained by understanding these efforts in terms of a common psychological phenomenon.

In what follows, we summarize some of the classic theoretical underpinnings of the emerging psychology of meaning, with special emphasis on the existentialist perspective that understood meaning in a way that converges with our present understanding, and provides a blueprint for subsequent efforts. As we go on to describe, all of these perspectives intersect at a central understanding of meaning making: the ways that we *make sense* of ourselves and our environment, the feelings that are aroused when these understandings are

constructed or violated, and the common ways in which we respond to these violations. In particular, we focus on a general distinction within the notion of meaning that can often obscure what meaning always is—a sense of *what* is, and a sense of *why* this should be so. To a remarkable extent, the chapters that constitute this volume on meaning mirror this distinction, focusing on both the *what* and the *why* of sense making. In particular, these chapters also describe a strikingly analogous account of the feelings and behaviors that follow from violations of either the *whats* or the *whys* of sense making.

## MEANING: THE WHAT

Rene Descartes was looking for certainty. Presaging the existentialist movement by 2 centuries, his epistemic worldview was built on the rubble of what had been recently demolished—a diminished sense that life was something he could *understand*. In his *Meditations*, Descartes (1642/1988) begins by lamenting the “large number of falsehoods” he had previously accepted to be true and the “highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice [he] had subsequently based upon them” (p. 76). To rebuild this edifice, Descartes seeks out a foundation of absolute certainty, which he understands as his *Archimedian Point*: “Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable” (p. 80). So intent is Descartes on locating one suitable certainty that he is willing to “if nothing else . . . recognize for certain that there is no certainty” (p. 80).

Given the intellectual lengths that Descartes is willing to go in this quest for certainty—even accepting nihilism if it provides him one firm point—the alternative must have been something that he was especially keen to avoid. What was this alternative, which prompted him to rebuild his philosophy on the foundation of his own, seeking consciousness (i.e., “I think therefore I am”)? Descartes’ greatest fear was not ignorance but a kind of fear in itself. For Descartes, *anxiety* was the alternative to understanding, which he expresses with one of the most elegant metaphors in Western philosophy—the Cartesian *drowning* that “feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles around me so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim to the top” (1642/1988, p. 80).

Centuries later, Descartes’ fellow countryman—French pied-noir Albert Camus (1942/2004)—would present a similar psychological account: a fundamental impulse to make sense of our experiences, the ability of anomalous experiences to undermine these understandings, the subsequent feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, and the motivational role of these feelings in altering or adopting new understandings. Like Descartes, Camus laments

the seemingly arbitrary construction of our speculative models, along with their endless alteration, abandonment, and adoption in the face of endless disconfirmation (“Have I the time to become indignant? You have already changed theories” [p. 454]). He acknowledges the metaphorical nature of our descriptive knowledge structures, “that resolve uncertainty in a work of art” (p. 454), along with the irrationalities and paradoxes that become apparent when these models become objects of reflection. Our capacity for thoughtful reflection, more generally, is understood as a mixed blessing for Camus, insofar as “Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined” (p. 442).

### MEANING: THE WHY

Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But then the ‘why’ arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. (Camus, 1942/2004, p. 448).

These philosophical theorists describe an epistemic understanding of what *is*—our naïve (or not so naïve) scientist conception of what exists and how these existing things tend to interact with one another. While the violations of these understandings are associated with a “feeling of absurdity” (Camus, 1942/2004, p. 442), this feeling also arises when other understandings are brought into question: a sense of the *why* of any of what *is*, should be. According to Camus, every thinking person has reflected upon the daily activities that constitute their everyday life and asked this fundamental question: what is the *purpose* of these activities? Are these the goals that we should be pursuing? What are those goals, and what other, higher goals might they be instrumental in achieving? And what is the context that provides us with an answer to these questions?

What is perhaps most remarkable about Camus’ (1942/2004) understanding of *why*, is the relatively unprompted nature of the question. We don’t have to be trapped in an especially tortuous existence to have this question occur to us—it is understood to be innate, and we feel anxiety in the absence of an answer. Moreover, it is a sense of pointlessness that underlies the real “pain” of suffering; it is the “uselessness of suffering” (p. 443) that creates the most anxiety in the face of hardship. When describing his own experiences in a concentration camp, Victor Frankl (1946) confirms this contention with numerous concrete examples of pointless pain and punishment:

At such a moment it is not the physical pain which hurts the most (and this applies to adults as much as to punished children); it is the mental agony that is caused by the injustice, the unreasonableness of it all. (p. 24)