Understanding the Search for Meaning in Life: Personality, Cognitive Style, and the Dynamic Between Seeking and Experiencing Meaning

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ABSTRACT   Although several theories assert that understanding the search for meaning in life is important, empirical research on this construct is sparse. Three studies provide the first extensive effort to understand the correlates of the search for meaning in a multistudy research program. Assessed were relations between search for meaning and well-being, cognitive style, and the Big Five, Big Three, Approach/Avoidance, and Interest models of personality, with a particular emphasis on understanding the correlates of search for meaning that are independent of presence of meaning. Conceptual models of the relation between search and presence were tested. Findings suggest that people lacking meaning search for it; the search for meaning did not appear to lead to its presence. Study 3 found that basic motive dispositions moderated relations between search for meaning and its presence. Results highlight the importance of basic personality dispositions in understanding the search for meaning and its correlates.

Several investigations have recently reaffirmed the link between meaning in life and well-being (e.g., King, Hicks, Krull, & Del-Gaiso, 2006; Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Reker, 2005; Steger & Frazier,

2005; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; Urry et al., 2004). Despite this revitalization of meaning-related research, attention has narrowly focused on the presence of meaning relative to other important aspects of this larger construct. Given that the relevant examination of such variables can be traced back to Viktor Frankl's (1963) landmark work, *Man's Search for Meaning*, it is perhaps most surprising that the past 40 years of research has almost completely neglected search for meaning as an empirical construct. In the subsequent introductory sections, we describe the theoretical underpinnings of the present research. We discuss the first purpose of this investigation, which involved identifying the unique dispositional correlates of search for meaning, including correlates related to cognitive styles and trait variables. We then discuss the second purpose of this investigation, which involved clarifying potential dynamic relations between search for meaning and presence of meaning. Finally, we present three correlational studies focusing on these aims.

Meaning in Life

Human beings have a strong desire to understand themselves and the world around them, exhibiting cognitive and behavioral activity in support of such desires (e.g., Epstein, 1985; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Higgins, 2000; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Ryff & Singer, 1998). People theoretically experience the presence of meaning when they comprehend themselves and the world, understand their unique fit in the world, and identify what they are trying to accomplish in their lives (Steger, in press). Thus, people are thought to be motivated both to have and search for meaning in life. However, people vary in the degree to which they actively search for meaning. We define the search for meaning in life as the strength, intensity, and activity of people's desire and efforts *to establish and/or augment* their understanding of the meaning, significance, and purpose of their lives.

In some theories, the search for meaning is seen to be a positive sign of mental health; in other theories, quite the opposite perspective is proposed. Frankl (1963; see also Maddi, 1970) wrote that searching for meaning is "the primary motivational force in man [*sic*]" (p. 121). As such, the search for meaning should be a natural, healthy part of life, spurring people to seek out new opportunities and challenges, and fueling their desire to understand and organize

their experiences. In contrast, other accounts regard search for meaning as symptomatic of dysfunction. For example, Baumeister (1991) and Klinger (1998) have suggested that the search for meaning only occurs among individuals whose needs have been frustrated. A third perspective recognizes both possibilities—that search for meaning has both healthy (i.e., life-affirming) and unhealthy (i.e., deficit-based) motivational roots (Reker, 2000). Finally, we propose a previously unexplored possibility that search for meaning might arise from different underlying motivations in different people and thus have different correlations depending on those motivations.

Is the Search for Meaning in Life Distinct From Other Constructs?

Although the search for meaning commonly has been regarded as simply the absence of meaning (cf. Klinger, 1998), factor-analytic and multitrait-multimethod matrix (MTMM) evidence indicates they should be differentiated (Reker & Cousins, 1979; Steger et al., 2006). Beyond this differentiation, the psychological features specific to search for meaning have not been articulated. In the present investigation, we targeted well-being, cognitive style, and personality. Although one MTMM study has established the discriminant validity of the search for meaning from self-esteem, optimism, and life satisfaction (Steger et al., 2006), deficits in other psychological strengths could account for search for meaning. For example, search for meaning might be subsidiary to one's perceived inability to achieve personal growth, exert control over one's environment, or develop firmly held beliefs and self-acceptance.

Just as deficits in well-being might stimulate search for meaning, search for meaning might originate in people's cognitive styles. For example, the urge to understand and organize information about the world (Klinger, 1998; Maddi, 1998) may arise from preferences for the intellectual challenges inherent in "big questions" (i.e., need for cognition; Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Alternatively, people who characteristically question everything (i.e., low in dogmatism [Altemeyer, 2002] or right-wing authoritarianism [Altemeyer, 1988]) might simply question the meaning of their lives along with everything else. Similarly, search for meaning might reflect the tendency to seek out novelty (i.e., curiosity; Kashdan, Rose, & Fincham, 2004). The search for meaning might exemplify the pursuit of future goals (e.g., future time perspective, Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999), or, conversely, an

inability to let go of painful past experiences (Nolen-Hoeksema, McBride, & Larson, 1997; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999).

Existing conceptualizations of search for meaning also evoke distinct personality traits. Principally, people searching for meaning may question their values and ideas about life, similar to the Big Five trait Openness to Experience. Previous research using a brief omnibus measure has not indicated a significant relation with Openness (Steger et al., 2006). However, search for meaning may be more related to some facets (e.g., ideas) of the broader Openness trait than others (e.g., fantasy). The Big Three trait, Constraint—referring to tendencies to suppress impulses and risk taking (Tellegen, 1982)—appears antithetical to search for meaning. Of particular relevance to search for meaning may be Holland's (1985) circumplex model of interests—those things to which people are typically drawn. We might expect searchers to be drawn to many things and have high levels of interests.

The Relation Between the Search for Meaning and the Presence of Meaning

The search for meaning must be understood in relation to the presence of meaning. Given the absence of systematic research, the second purpose of this investigation was to articulate and evaluate two competing conceptual models of the relation between search and presence.

Presence-to-Search Model

The first model of this relation posits that meaning in life is a highly desired psychological quality; when people feel their lives have little meaning, or when they lose meaning, they will search for it. The predicted inverse relation has emerged in empirical work (Steger et al., 2006). The small to medium size of this effect suggests a more complex model, however. Other psychological strengths are relevant to meaning, and people may search for meaning when lacking these strengths (Baumeister, 1991). In addition, presence of meaning is just one component of overall well-being (e.g., Ryff & Singer, 1998), and strengths in other areas might offset deficits in meaning. We propose a model in which the relation between presence and search is affected by other strengths and vulnerabilities. Generally, people who possess psychological strengths (e.g., autonomy) will be more likely

to experience presence of meaning. Among such people, deficits in meaning might not spark a strong search for meaning because other qualities of life are satisfying. Among people lacking strengths or possessing vulnerabilities (e.g., ruminative tendencies), deficits in meaning might spark a stronger search for meaning.

Search-to-Presence Model

The second model posits that seeking meaning leads to experiencing greater meaning (e.g., Frankl, 1963). As such, search for meaning should be positively related to presence of meaning, typically inversely related. However, the likelihood that searching for meaning yields greater meaning may differ as a function of dispositional motivations. A healthy search is usually depicted as grounded in people's aspirations and insights they derive from engaging life's challenges (e.g., Maddi, 1970). In contrast, a dysfunctional search is usually said to be marked by people's inability to engage with and resolve negative or challenging experiences (e.g., Klinger, 1998). As such, basic tendencies either to seek out positive experiences or to seek to avoid negative experiences may influence the outcome of searching for meaning. This distinction maps onto basic approach (seeking positives) and avoidance (shunning negatives) motivational orientations (e.g., Carver, Sutton, & Scheier, 2000; Elliot & Thrash, 2002). Searching for meaning among more approach-oriented people may be positively related to presence of meaning; searching for meaning among more avoidance-oriented people may be negatively related to presence of meaning.

   Although correlational studies such as the present ones cannot establish causality, they can help sustain or refute theory-driven causal models. For example, searching for meaning theoretically leads to greater meaning rather than lesser meaning. Existing correlational findings, therefore, support the competing model that reverses the causal path—that lesser presence of meaning leads to greater search for meaning (presence-to-search model). If the relation between search and presence is positive among people reporting more Openness or Approach Orientation, this would support the search-to-presence model. Support for both models would indicate a bidirectional relationship. Thus, the results of the present study can help us consider the directionality of the relation between search for meaning and presence of meaning.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The first aim of this study was to identify the unique well-being, cognitive, and personality correlates of the search for meaning. The second aim was to test conceptual models of the relation between the search for meaning and its presence.

Of particular importance to the first aim is clarifying the distinctions between search for meaning and presence of meaning. Correlations between search and other variables often mirror correlations between presence and those variables. For example, Steger and colleagues (2006) reported that search correlated .36 with depression, and presence correlated $-.48$, implying that search and presence are opposites. There were also examples of convergent patterns (e.g., correlations with intrinsic religiosity of .11 and .30 for search and presence, respectively) and independent patterns (e.g., correlations with the emotion Love of $-.04$ and .40 for search and presence, respectively). Therefore, we categorized search and presence correlations with other variables using the following criteria: mirroring (coefficients of $|.10|$ or greater with opposite valence for both), independent (coefficient of $|.10|$ or greater for one, less than $|.10|$ for other, and a significant difference in magnitude), convergent (coefficients of $|.10|$ or greater with same valence for both), none (neither coefficient significant). Such comparisons reflect the degree to which search is distinct from presence.

Finally, we supplemented correlational analyses with partial correlations, which quantify the variance accounted for by the search for meaning that is unique from the relative presence of meaning. This procedure focuses on the heart of the search for meaning, which expresses the deep-seated human desire to understand, integrate, and synthesize experience.

STUDY 1

In this first study, we examined how the search for meaning and the presence of meaning differentially correlated with a broad measure of psychological well-being. According to previous findings, we expected that the search for meaning would be inversely related to well-being. To examine support for the presence-to-search conceptual model, we assessed whether psychological well-being moderated the relation between the presence of meaning and the search for meaning.

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 122$; 70% female, 84% Caucasian, all others $< 5\%$; M age = 19.8, $SD = 3.4$) were solicited from undergraduate psychology courses at a large, Midwestern university.

Procedure

Participants completed measures in large classroom settings. The meaning measure preceded the well-being measure, with measures of common life roles interspersed.

Measures

Meaning in life.   The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006) was used to assess the search for meaning and the presence of meaning. Five items comprising the search subscale (MLQ-S; e.g., "I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful," "I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life"; $\alpha = .87$) and five items comprising the presence subscale (MLQ-P; e.g., "I understand my life's meaning", "My life has no clear purpose"; $\alpha = .90$) were rated from 1 (*Absolutely Untrue*) to 7 (*Absolutely True*). Research has demonstrated that MLQ scores are reliable and stable and has supported the convergent and discriminant validity of the MLQ (see Steger et al., 2006).

Psychological well-being.   The Psychological Well-Being scale (PWB; Ryff, 1989) was used to assess overall well-being. The PWB consists of six 9-item subscales (alphas ranged from .74 to .85). Items (e.g., "When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out" [Self-Acceptance], "I am quite good at managing the many responsibilities of my daily life" [Environmental Mastery], "Most people see me as loving and affectionate" [Positive Relations with Others], "I have the sense that I have developed a lot as a person over the years" [Personal Growth], "I am an active person in carrying out the plans I set for myself" [Purpose in Life], "My decisions are not usually influenced by what everyone else is doing" [Autonomy]) were rated from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly Agree*).

Results

MLQ-S scores ($M = 23.5$, $SD = 6.4$) and MLQ-P ($M = 24.1$, $SD = 6.2$) scores were not significantly correlated ($r = -.16$,

$p > .10$). Searching for meaning demonstrated medium-sized inverse relations with environmental mastery, $r = -.23$, relatedness, $r = -.28$, and self-acceptance, $r = -.36$ (Table 1). These relations generally were significant even when MLQ-P scores were partialled out.

Correlations of search and presence with environmental mastery, relatedness, and self-acceptance fit a mirroring pattern; correlations with personal growth and purpose in life fit an independent pattern (Table 1).

Testing the Presence-to-Search Model

Though MLQ-P and MLQ-S were not significantly correlated, they were inversely correlated, supporting the presence-to-search conceptual model. To test whether this relation was stronger among people reporting low levels of psychological strengths, we used a moderator analytic approach (Baron & Kenny, 1986). We regressed MLQ-S scores onto standardized MLQ-P scores and standardized scores for PWB subscales (excluding Purpose in Life) in the first step, followed by their product in the second step. We then used simple slopes

Table 1
Relations With Well-Being, Study 1

Scale	Zero-Order Correlation with MLQ-Search	Zero-Order Correlation with MLQ-Presence	Correlation Pattern	Partial Correlation with MLQ-Search[a]
Psychological well-being				
Purpose in life[b]	− .09	**.53*****	I	− .00
Environmental mastery[b]	− .23*	**.39*****	M	− .18*
Relatedness[b]	**− .28*****	**.39*****	M	**− .24****
Personal growth[b]	− .05	**.29*****	I	.00
Autonomy	− .09	.08		− .09
Self-acceptance[b]	**− .36*****	**.54*****	M	**− .32*****

Notes: $N = 122$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. Coefficients in boldface are significant at corrected alpha of .008 (.05/6). I = Independent pattern; M = Mirroring pattern.
[a]MLQ-Presence scores were partialled out.
[b]Magnitude of zero-order correlations with MLQ-Search and MLQ-Presence differ significantly ($p < .05$).
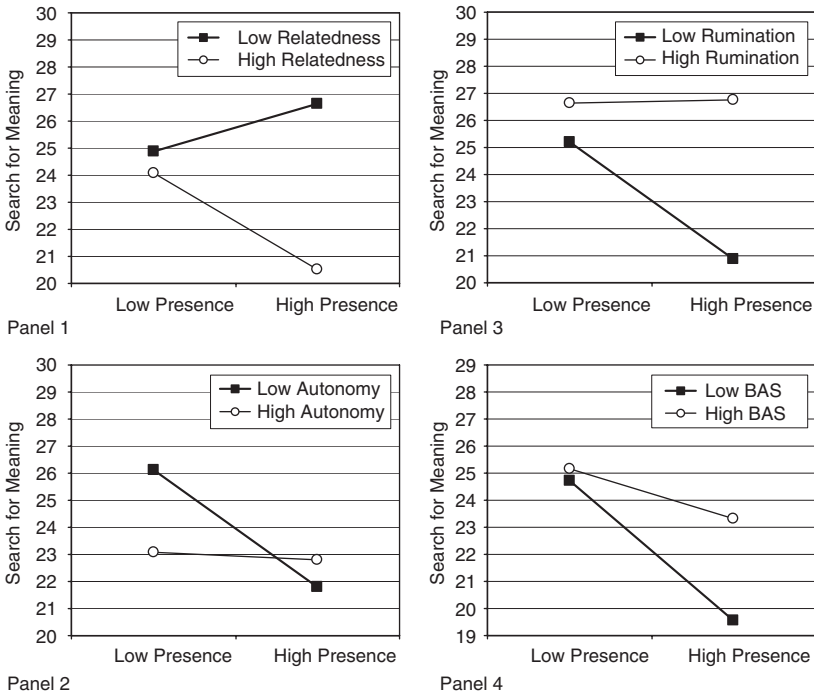
Figure 1
Interaction of the presence of meaning and psychological strengths and vulnerabilities to predict the search for meaning in life.

analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) to examine the nature of moderation for significant and marginally significant interaction terms. The interaction term was significant for relatedness (Adjusted $R^2 = .13$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $\Delta F = 4.27$, $\beta = .16$, $p < .05$) and autonomy (Adjusted $R^2 = .13$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $\Delta F = 4.27$, $\beta = .16$, $p < .05$). The inverse relation between presence of meaning and search for meaning was significantly stronger among people reporting more relatedness ($+1$ SD), $\beta = -.23$, $p < .05$, than among those reporting less relatedness (-1 SD), $\beta = .14$, $p < .10$, and stronger among those reporting less autonomy, $\beta = -.34$, $p < .05$, than among those reporting more autonomy, $\beta = -.02$, $p > .10$ (Figure 1, Panels 1 and 2). There was no significant moderation for environmental mastery (Adjusted $R^2 = .04$, $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $\Delta F = .46$, $\beta = -.06$, $p > .10$), personal growth (Adjusted $R^2 = .00$, $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $\Delta F = .08$, $\beta = -.03$, $p > .10$), or self-acceptance (Adjusted $R^2 = .11$, $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $\Delta F = .08$, $\beta = .02$, $p > .10$).

Discussion

People searching for meaning feel little control over their environment and feel dissatisfied with themselves and their relationships. These findings loosely parallel theory suggesting that people feel greater presence of meaning when they understand themselves (e.g., self-acceptance), the world around them (e.g., environmental mastery), and their fit within the world (e.g., positive relationships; Steger, in press). Conversely, people searching for meaning might be expected to report less autonomy, personal growth, and purpose. According to the present findings, people searching for meaning seem no more or less likely to hold firmly to their beliefs or to be influenced by others. In terms of personal growth, some people might feel compelled to search for meaning because they are frustrated in their personal growth; others might consider the search for meaning to be an important part of their personal growth. Ryff's (1989) purpose in life scale focuses heavily on planfulness and anticipation of the future, and it appears that people searching for meaning are no more or less likely to plan for and anticipate their future. Although it is not the focus here, future qualitative research may clarify how people view these factors in relation to their search for meaning.

Moderator analyses sustained the possibility that an absence of meaning may lead people to search for it. However, the pattern of slopes differed between autonomy and relatedness. The findings regarding autonomy fit the anticipated pattern; people lacking the psychological strength of autonomy appeared *more* likely to search for meaning when they experienced less meaning. In contrast, findings regarding relatedness suggest that people lacking the psychological strength of positive relationships appeared *less* likely to search for meaning when they experienced less meaning. These divergent findings suggest that because (a) positive relationships involve resources external to the self and (b) autonomy is an internal strength autonomy may be more relevant to experiencing and seeking meaning.

STUDY 2

The purpose of Study 2 was to examine cognitive factors that may explain why people search for meaning. Based on theoretical accounts, we expected that search for meaning would be related

both to inquisitive cognitive styles, such as low dogmatism, and to cognitive styles associated with unhappiness, such as rumination. We further tested the presence-to-search conceptual model by looking at the interaction of presence of meaning with a psychological vulnerability—rumination—in relation to search for meaning. We predicted that the relation between MLQ-P and MLQ-S scores would be stronger among those reporting more rumination.

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 149$; 66% female, 74% Caucasian, 9% Asian-American, 8% Asian, all others $< 5\%$; M age $= 19.5$, $SD = 2.2$) were solicited from undergraduate psychology courses at a large, Midwestern university.

Procedures

Participants completed measures in large classroom settings. The measures appeared in the order they are listed below, with spirituality measures interspersed.

Measures

Curiosity.   The Curiosity and Exploration Inventory (CEI; Kashdan et al., 2004) was used to assess participant levels of curiosity. The CEI scale consists of seven items ($\alpha = .76$; e.g., "Everywhere I go, I am out looking for new things or experiences") which were rated from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*).

Dogmatism.   The Dogmatism Scale (DOG; Altemeyer, 2002) was used to assess levels of dogmatic beliefs. The DOG scale consists of 20 items ($\alpha = .89$; "The things I believe in are so completely true, I could never doubt them," "No one knows all the essential truths about the central issues in life" [reversed]) which were rated from 1 (*Very Strongly Disagree*) to 9 (*Very Strongly Agree*).

Meaning in life.   The MLQ-S ($\alpha = .87$) and MLQ-P ($\alpha = .87$) subscales were used again.

Need for cognition.   The Need for Cognition Scale (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982) was used to assess interest in and enjoyment derived from thinking.

The scale consists of 34 items ($\alpha = .90$; e.g., "I am not satisfied unless I am thinking," "I take pride in the products of my reasoning") which were rated from -4 (*Very Strong Disagreement*) to $+4$ (*Very Strong Agreement*).

Ruminative Styles Questionnaire.   The Rumination Styles Questionnaire (RSQ; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1997) was used to assess an individual's tendency to repetitively focus on negative and distressing feelings. The 10 RSQ items comprise two 5-item subscales, Brooding ($\alpha = .76$; e.g., "think 'What am I doing to deserve this?'") and Reflection ($\alpha = .75$; e.g., "write down what you are thinking and analyze it") subscales, as well as a total RSQ score ($\alpha = .80$). Items are rated from 1 (*Never*) to 4 (*Always*).

Right-wing authoritarianism.   The Right Wing Authoritarianism Scale (RWA; Altemeyer, 1988) was used to assess individual differences concerning conventionalism, aggression, and submission. The scale consists of 30 items ($\alpha = .91$; e.g., "Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn," "It is important to protect fully the rights of radicals and deviants" [reversed]), which were rated from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 9 (*Strongly Agree*).

Time perspective.   The Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory (ZTPI; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999) was used to assess how individuals orient to time. The 56 items comprise five subscales (αs ranged from .70 to .81). Items (e.g., "I've made mistakes in the past that I wish I could undo" [Past Negative], "I get nostalgic about my childhood" [Past Positive], "I complete projects on time by making steady progress" [Future], "Since whatever will be will be, it doesn't really matter what I do" [Present-Fatalistic], "I take risks to put excitement in my life" [Present Hedonistic]) were rated from 1 (*Very Uncharacteristic*) to 5 (*Very Characteristic*).

Results

MLQ-S scores ($M = 24.7$, $SD = 6.0$) and MLQ-P ($M = 25.0$, $SD = 5.6$) scores were inversely correlated ($r = -.20$, $p < .05$). The search for meaning was related to particular cognitive styles (see Table 2). Searchers appeared less dogmatic, $r = -.21$, and somewhat more curious, $r = .17$; however, they were also more ruminative, $r = .31$, negatively oriented to their past, $r = .33$, and fatalistic about their present, $r = .26$. None of these correlations is high enough to suggest that the search for meaning is redundant with

Table 2
Relations With Cognitive Style, Study 2

Scale	Zero-Order Correlation With MLQ-Search	Zero-Order Correlation With MLQ-Presence	Correlation Pattern	Partial Correlation With MLQ-Search[a]
Need for cognition	.06	**.26*****	C	.10
Dogmatism[b]	− **.21****	**.43*****	M	− .18**
Right-wing authoritarianism[b]	− .14	**.35*****	M	− .14
Curiosity	.17*	.22**	C	.21*
Rumination[b]	**.31*****	− .14	M	**.31*****
Rumination-brooding[b]	**.27****	− .20*	M	**.27****
Rumination-reflection[b]	**.41*****	− .05	I	**.27*****
Time Perspective				
Past positive[b]	− .10	**.27*****	M	− .05
Past negative[b]	**.33*****	− **.26*****	M	**.29*****
Future[b]	− .09	.20*	I	− .08
Present fatalistic[b]	**.26*****	− .16	M	.21*
Pres. hedonic	.11	.07*		.06

Notes: $N = 149$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. Coefficients in boldface are significant at corrected alpha of .0042 (.05/12). I = Independent pattern; M = Mirroring pattern; C = Convergent pattern.
[a]MLQ-Presence scores were partialled out.
[b]Magnitude of zero-order correlations with MLQ-Search and MLQ-Presence differ significantly ($p < .05$).

cognitive style variables, but they do suggest that meaning searchers are actively discontent with both past and present and are open-minded in seeking their own understanding of the world around them. Partial correlations suggested that the portion of search variance that is distinct from meaning's presence or absence is particularly related to negative feelings about the past.

Presence and search correlations with cognitive style fit the mirroring pattern; correlations with need for cognition and curiosity fit the convergent pattern; and correlations with future time perspective and the rumination subscale-reflection fit the independent pattern.

Testing a Presence-to-Search Model

As in Study 1, the correlation between MLQ-S and MLQ-P supported a presence-to-search conceptual model. To further test this possibility, we regressed MLQ-S scores onto standardized MLQ-P scores and standardized RSQ scores in the first step, followed by their product in the second step. The interaction term was significant (Adjusted $R^2 = .13$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $\Delta F = 4.27$, $\beta = .16$, $p < .05$). As anticipated, simple slopes analysis indicated that the inverse relation between presence of meaning and search for meaning was significantly stronger among people reporting more rumination, $\beta = -.36$, $p < .005$, than among people reporting less rumination, $\beta = .01$, $p > .10$ (Figure 1, Panel 3).

Discussion

Consistent with theory (Maddi, 1970), the search for meaning was associated with distinct cognitive styles, primarily tendencies toward questioning the status quo and persistent, negative thinking about the past and present. Searchers seem to consider new avenues toward fulfillment in their lives, ruminate over disappointing past experiences, and feel helpless to influence their current circumstances. This duality of experience suggests that the search for meaning might differ among people who are positive and approach oriented and those who are more negative and avoidance oriented.

It was somewhat surprising that people searching for meaning did not endorse a future time perspective. Similar to Ryff's (1989) purpose scale, future time perspective items focus substantially on planning; perhaps, people searching for meaning are not especially likely to do so in an organized manner. Alternatively, people searching for meaning may be more focused on the past and present than particularly concerned about the future.

Additional support was found for the presence-to-search conceptual model. People who ruminate more demonstrated a stronger relation between presence of meaning and search for meaning. This result matches Study 1's finding for those low in autonomy.

STUDY 3

Studies 1 and 2 indicated that the search for meaning in life is marked by lower psychological well-being and by both open-minded

and ruminative thought patterns. These findings fit theories of both healthy and unhealthy search for meaning. Study 3 examined more thoroughly the personality characteristics associated with search and tested the search-to-presence conceptual model. We administered comprehensive measures from four different traditions: the Big Five (Costa & McCrae, 1992), the Big Three (Tellegen, 1982), the circumplex model of interests (Holland, 1985), and approach and avoidance orientations (Carver & White, 1994). We hypothesized that search for meaning in life would be related to some of these basic personality dimensions, particularly those related to the propensity toward exploration (e.g., Openness, Low Constraint, Investigative or Artistic Interests, Approach Orientation) and dissatisfaction with the current state of things (e.g., Neuroticism, Harm Avoidance, Avoidance Orientation).

We also tested the search-to-presence conceptual model by examining whether basic motive dispositions (i.e., Openness to Experience, Approach and Avoidance Orientation) moderated the relation between search and presence. We hypothesized that among people reporting more Openness there would be a positive relation between search for meaning and presence of meaning. For people reporting less Openness, we expected an inverse relation between search for meaning and presence of meaning. We further hypothesized that among people reporting more Approach Orientation (and less Avoidance Orientation) there would be a positive relation between search for meaning and presence of meaning. For people reporting less Approach Orientation (and more Avoidance Orientation) there would be an inverse relation between search for meaning and presence of meaning.

We conducted two more tests of the presence-to-search conceptual model. Avoidance is a psychological vulnerability indicating greater sensitivity and reactivity to punishment (Carver & White, 1994). Approach is a psychological strength indicating greater sensitivity and responsiveness to reward. Therefore, we hypothesized that there would be a stronger relation between presence of meaning and search for meaning among people reporting more Avoidance (and less Approach).

Participants

Participants ($N = 275$; 53% female; 80% Caucasian, 13% Asian, all others $< 5\%$; M age = 19.7, $SD = 2.7$) were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses at a large Midwestern university.

Procedure

Participants completed all measures in large classroom settings, presented in the order in which they are listed below.

Measures

Big Five personality.   The NEO-PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992) was used to assess the Big Five personality traits, as well as the six facets for each higher-order trait. The five major personality dimensions scores, as well as the 30 facet scores, have demonstrated good reliability and validity (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1992).

Big Three personality.   The Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (MPQ; Tellegen, 1982; Tellegen &Waller, in press) was used to assess the Big Three dimensions of Positive Emotionality, Negative Emotionality, and Constraint, as well as 11 subscales: Wellbeing, Social Potency, Achievement, Social Closeness, Stress Reaction, Alienation, Aggression, Control, Harm Avoidance, Traditionalism, and Absorption (alphas from .81 to .91). The subscale scores have demonstrated good reliability and additional validity (Patrick, Curtin, & Tellegen, 2002).

RIASEC model of personality.   The Strong Interest Inventory (SII; Harmon, Hansen, Borgen, & Hammer, 1994) was used to assess the six dimensions of Holland's interests model of personality. Holland's model posits that people's interests differ according to six personality types arranged in a circumplex: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional (RIASEC; alphas > .90; Harmon et al., 1994). The SII consists of 317 items, which are rated either *Like, Dislike*, or *Indifferent*.

Approach and Avoidance Orientation.   The Behavioral Inhibition Scale (BIS; α = .86; e.g., "I worry about making mistakes") and the Behavioral Activation Scale (BAS; α = .82; e.g., "It would excite me to win a contest") were used to assess Avoidance and Approach Orientation, which describe individual differences concerning sensitivity to reward and punishment (Carver & White, 1994). The BAS is composed of three subscales: BAS-RR (reward-responsiveness), BAS-DR (drive), and BAS-FS (fun-seeking). The scale consists of

20 items, which were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Agree*) to 4 (*Strongly Disagree*).

Meaning in life. The MLQ-S ($\alpha = .88$) and MLQ-P ($\alpha = .85$) subscales were used again.

Results

MLQ-S scores ($M = 23.3$, $SD = 6.3$) and MLQ-P ($M = 23.8$, $SD = 5.7$) scores were inversely correlated ($r = -.18$, $p < .05$). People searching for meaning scored higher on Neuroticism, especially the Anxiety facet, Openness, both the Aesthetics and Ideas facets, and the Tendermindedness facet of Agreeableness (Table 3). Relations with Openness ($r_{partial} = .28$), the Ideas facet ($r_{partial} = .28$), and Tendermindedness ($r_{partial} = .21$) existed independently of presence of meaning. Correlations of MLQ-S and MLQ-P fit a mirroring pattern for Neuroticism, a convergent pattern for Openness, and an independent pattern for Conscientiousness.

There were no significant relations with search for meaning and the Big Three personality indicators (Table 4), although search was significantly related to Absorption. This relation existed independently of presence of meaning ($r_{partial} = .29$). Several correlations with MLQ-P were significant, and an independent pattern of correlations was most prevalent, with a mirroring pattern for Stress

Table 3
Relations With NEO-PI-R, Study 3

Scale/Facet Name	Zero-Order Correlation With MLQ-Search	Zero-Order Correlation With MLQ-Presence	Correlation Pattern	Partial Correlation With MLQ-Search[a]
Neuroticism[b]	**.18*****	**−.35*****	M	.05
Anxiety[b]	**.20*****	−.18**	M	.17**
Angry hostility[b]	.01	**−.21*****	I	−.08
Depression[b]	.18**	**−.21*****	M	.11
Self-conscious[b]	.18**	**−.29*****	M	.09
Impulsiveness[b]	.07	**−.26*****	I	−.03

(*Continued*)

Table 3. (Contd.)

Scale/Facet Name	Zero-Order Correlation With MLQ-Search	Zero-Order Correlation With MLQ-Presence	Correlation Pattern	Partial Correlation With MLQ-Search[a]
Vulnerable[b]	.10	− **.26*****	M	.01
Extraversion[b]	.00	**.25*****	I	.09
Warmth[b]	.03	**.22*****	I	.13*
Gregarious	.00	.15*	I	.06
Assertiveness[b]	− .12	.14*	M	− .07
Activity	.02	.15*	C	.10
Excitement-seeking	.04	.05		.04
Positive emotions[b]	− .03	**.31*****	I	.06
Openness[b]	**.20*****	.02	I	**.28*****
Fantasy	.07	− .02		.07
Aesthetics	.16**	.04	C	.18**
Feelings	.11	.12		.17**
Actions	.11	.03		.13
Ideas	**.22*****	.06	C	**.28*****
Values[b]	.10	− .15*	M	.06
Agreeableness	.10	**.21*****	I	.20**
Trust[b]	− .01	.16**	I	.04
Straight-forward	.03	.15*	I	.11
Altruism[b]	.05	**.27*****	I	.15*
Compliance	.04	.10		.08
Modesty	.11+	.00		.10
Tender-minded	.17**	.11	C	**.21*****
Conscientiousness[b]	.00	**.34*****	I	.13*
Competence[b]	− .04	**.25*****	I	− .04
Order[b]	− .01	**.27*****	I	− .01
Dutiful[b]	.02	**.28*****	I	.02
Achievement striving[b]	− .01	**.33*****	I	− .01
Self-discipline[b]	.02	**.21*****	I	.02
Deliberate[b]	− .04	.16**	I	.00

Notes: $N = 275$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. Coefficients in boldface are significant at corrected alpha of .0014 (.05/35). I = Independent pattern; M = Mirroring pattern; C = Convergent pattern.
[a]MLQ-Presence scores were partialled out.
[b]Magnitude of zero-order correlations with MLQ-Search and MLQ-Presence differ significantly ($p < .05$).

Scale	Zero-Order Correlation With MLQ-Search	Zero-Order Correlation With MLQ-Presence	Correlation Pattern	Partial Correlation With MLQ-Search[a]
Positive emotionality[b]	−.01	**.31*****	I	.11
Well-being[b]	−.01	**.38*****	I	.09
Social potency	−.02	.11		.02
Achievement	.11	**.20*****	C	.18**
Social closeness[b]	−.07	**.28*****	I	.02
Negative emotionality[b]	.07	**−.26*****	I	−.03
Stress reaction[b]	.18**	**−.25*****	M	.12
Alienation[b]	.10	**−.24*****	M	.04
Aggression[b]	−.03	**−.20****	I	−.09
Constraint[b]	−.08	**.19****	I	−.02
Control	−.01	.12		.03
Harmavoidance[b]	−.14*	.17**	M	−.10
Traditionalism[b]	−.01	.18**	I	.04
Absorption[b,c]	**.29*****	−.04	I	**.29*****

Notes. $N = 275$. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$. Coefficients in boldface are significant at corrected alpha of .0036 (.05/14). I = Independent pattern; M = Mirroring pattern; C = Convergent pattern.
[a]MLQ-Presence scores were partialled out.
[b]Magnitude of zero-order correlations with MLQ-Search and MLQ-Presence differ significantly ($p < .05$).
[c]Absorption does not load onto a higher-order factor.

Reaction, Alienation, and Harm Avoidance, and a convergence pattern for Achievement.

There were significant relations with search for meaning and Artistic (valuing imagination and creating original work) and Investigative (solving complex problems) personality types, both in terms of zero-order and partial correlations (Table 5). This fits with our sense that the search for meaning describes a struggle to create and understand. The fact that both personality types are known to prefer to work with ideas echoes the correlation with Openness to ideas (Table 3). MLQ-S and MLQ-P demonstrated mixed patterns of correlations.

Search for meaning generally was unrelated to BIS and BAS dimensions (Table 5). The significant zero-order and partial correla-

Table 5
Relations With Interests and BIS/BAS, Study 3

Scale	Zero-Order Correlation With MLQ-Search	Zero-Order Correlation With MLQ-Presence	Correlation Pattern	Partial Correlation With MLQ-Search[a]
Realistic	.14*	− .01	C	.14*
Investigative[b]	**.20*****	.02	I	**.25*****
Artistic[b]	**.19*****	− .00	I	**.23*****
Social	.10	.12*	C	.13
Enterprising	.09	.02		.06
Conventional	.05	.07		.06
BIS[b]	.15*	− .08	I	.13*
BAS[b]	.15*	.08	C	.15*
BAS-reward responsiveness	.11	.15*	C	.16**
BAS-drive	**.17****	.02	C	**.19****
BAS-fun seeking	.03	− .01		.03

Notes. $N = 275$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. Coefficients in boldface are significant at corrected alpha of .0045 (.05/11). I = Independent pattern; M = Mirroring pattern; C = Convergent pattern.
[a]MLQ-Presence scores were partialled out.
[b]Magnitude of zero-order correlations with MLQ-Search and MLQ-Presence differ significantly ($p < .05$).

tions with the BAS-DR suggests that those searching for meaning are motivated to pursue things that are important to them. The pattern of correlations was mixed, but mostly notable for the low magnitude of relations for both MLQ-S and MLQ-P.

Testing a Presence-to-Search Model

As in Studies 1 and 2, the correlation between MLQ-S and MLQ-P supported a presence-to-search conceptual model. We regressed MLQ-S scores onto standardized MLQ-P scores and standardized BIS and BAS scores in the first step, followed by their product in the second step. The anticipated moderation by BIS was not significant (Adjusted $R^2 = .07$, $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $\Delta F = .39$, $\beta = -.04$, $p > .10$). The anticipated moderation by BAS was significant (Adjusted $R^2 = .12$, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $\Delta F = 5.70$, $\beta = .14$, $p < .05$). As predicted by this model, simple slopes analysis indicated that the inverse relation between presence of meaning and search for meaning was significantly stronger among people scoring low on the BAS, $\beta = -.41$, $p < .001$, than among people scoring high on the BAS, $\beta = -.15$, $p < .10$ (Figure 1, Panel 4).

Testing a Search-to-Presence Model

We next tested the moderating role of basic motive dispositions in support of a search-to-presence model by regressing MLQ-P scores onto standardized MLQ-S scores and standardized scores for each personality variable in the first step, followed by their product in the second step. As predicted, the interaction terms were significant for Openness (Adjusted $R^2 = .07$, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $\Delta F = 4.63$, $\beta = .13$, $p < .05$), and BAS (Adjusted $R^2 = .09$, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $\Delta F = 4.25$, $\beta = .12$, $p < .05$), and trended toward significance for BIS (Adjusted $R^2 = .07$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $\Delta F = 3.39$, $\beta = -.11$, $p < .10$). Simple slopes analysis indicated that the inverse relation between presence of meaning and search for meaning was significantly stronger among people reporting less Openness, $\beta = -.37$, $p < .001$, than among people reporting more Openness, $\beta = -.13$, $p > .10$ (Figure 2, panel 1).

The inverse relation between presence of meaning and search for meaning also was significantly stronger among people scoring lower on the BAS, $\beta = -.39$, $p < .001$, than among people scoring higher on the BAS, $\beta = -.16$, $p < .05$ (Figure 2, Panel 2). Conversely, the
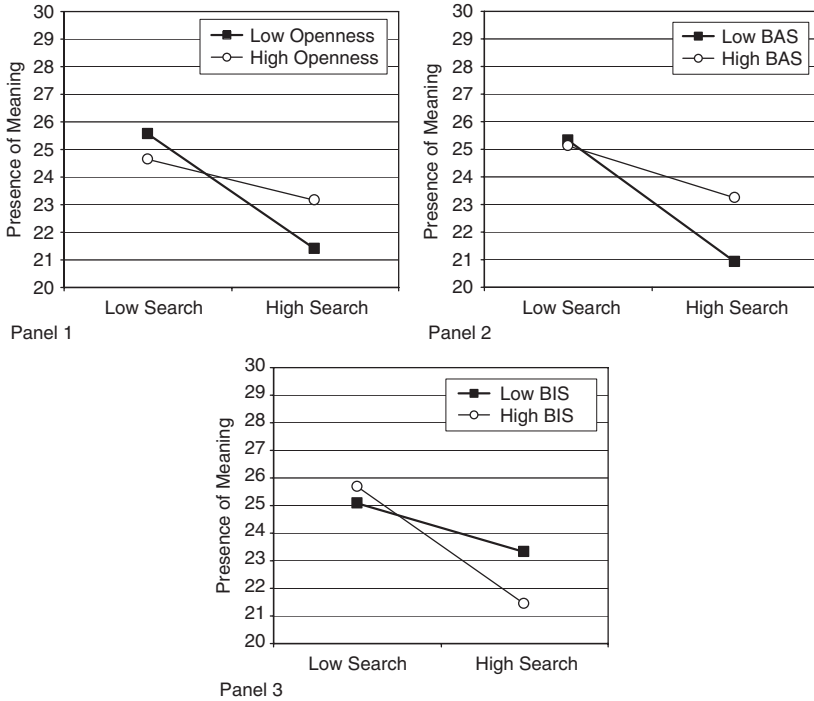
Figure 2
Interaction of the search for meaning and openness and approach-avoid dimensions to predict the presence of meaning in life.

inverse relation between presence of meaning and search for meaning was significantly weaker among people scoring lower on the BIS, $\beta = -.37$, $p < .001$, than among people scoring higher on the BIS, $\beta = -.15$, $p < .10$ (Figure 2, panel 3). Overall, people searching for meaning report less presence of meaning than people who are not searching for meaning; however, this gap is narrowed among those searching in an open or approach-oriented fashion and widened among those searching in an avoidance-oriented fashion.

DISCUSSION

Study 3 was conducted to illuminate the personality profile of people searching for meaning. Search was related most strongly to Openness (particularly to ideas), Tendermindedness, Absorption, Drive,

and Artistic and Investigative interests. Both the prevailing independent pattern of correlations and numerous significant partial correlations added to previous work (i.e., Steger et al., 2006) identifying the search for meaning as a unique variable.

This study further tested the viability of two conceptual models of the relation between search for meaning and presence of meaning with the presence-to-search model again receiving support. The correlation between presence and search was negative. The moderation analyses indicated that less approach-oriented people reported a stronger negative correlation between presence and search. The search-to-presence model received mixed support. Evidence suggested that the relation between search for meaning and presence of meaning differed among people reporting greater Openness and Approach Orientation (and lesser Avoidance Orientation). We anticipated that more approach-oriented people would report a positive relation between search and presence. This prediction was not supported. Rather, the evidence from this study suggests that search for meaning is inversely related to presence of meaning, but less so among people who are higher in Openness and more approach oriented.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The search for meaning has long been thought to express a core psychological need to comprehend one's existence (e.g., Frankl, 1963; Maddi, 1970). However, there has been little previous empirical scrutiny of the search for meaning. Thus, the present investigation sought to clarify its nature as a psychological trait and evaluate whether it is unique from other variables. The present findings indicate that the search for meaning is important to human functioning, as it was related to less psychological well-being. Moreover, correlations with an extensive array of cognitive and personality measures strongly suggested that the search for meaning in life is distinct from these variables.

The present study also attempted to clarify the relation between search for meaning and its presence, in part by examining the patterns of correlations of search and presence with other variables. Critically, little support existed for the contention that search for meaning merely indicates absence of meaning (only 22/88 total correlation pairs matched the mirroring pattern). Our studies revealed

greater support for independence between the two dimensions of meaning in life (33/88), along with some support for their convergence (12/88). We also used partial correlations to look at the heart of the search for meaning, namely the deep-seated human desire to understand, integrate, and synthesize experience. In almost all cases, significant zero-order correlations between search for meaning and other variables remained significant with presence of meaning variance partialled out. The present investigation thus has extended previous findings (e.g., Steger et al., 2006), building our understanding of this unique variable.

Our results suggest a somewhat dual nature underlying the search for meaning. On the one hand, searchers report worse relationships and less self-acceptance and seem more anxious, ruminative, and unhappy about their past experiences and present circumstances. On the other hand, searchers appear more curious and receptive and tend to question, investigate, and become absorbed in their experiences. In some ways this suggests an abiding uncertainty about whether life has proceeded in a desirable manner, accompanied by an investment in uncovering a better path. Perhaps it is this sense of hanging between an unhappy past and an unknown future that accounts for the lower well-being of people searching for meaning.

The Relation Between Experiencing and Seeking Meaning in Life

A major part of this investigation concerned testing the viability of conceptual models of the relation between the search for and the presence of meaning. We acknowledge that correlational data cannot provide conclusive tests of any causal models. Nonetheless, correlational data provide information regarding the potential nature of causal relations. Uncorrelated variables are probably not causally linked, inverse correlations imply different causal relations than positive correlations, and moderated relations suggest important influences on causal relations. The presence-to-search model we examined posited that decreases in presence of meaning would lead to increases in search for meaning. Inverse correlations between MLQ-P and MLQ-S were consistent with this idea. This model was tested further by examining the interaction of presence of meaning with psychological strengths and vulnerabilities. We hypothesized that among people lacking other psychological strengths (or possessing vulnerabilities), the inverse relation between MLQ-P and

MLQ-S would be stronger. This was borne out for autonomy and rumination. Interestingly, people who reported greater relatedness reported a stronger relation between MLQ-P and MLQ-S. We speculate that this deviation from our predictions might be rooted in a distinction between external and internal strengths. The quality of relationships is dependent on external resources to a greater degree than the other strengths and vulnerabilities assessed in these studies. Perhaps if people feel their psychological strengths are subject to external influence, and hence are more uncertain, deficits in meaning are felt more acutely. This speculation obviously needs to be investigated using other indicators of internal and external strengths and vulnerabilities and methods that allow for better identification of causality.

The search-to-presence model posited that increased searching for meaning would lead to increased presence of meaning. We further suggested that people reporting more Openness or Approach Orientation (and less Avoidance Orientation) would report a positive relation between search and presence, whereas others would report an inverse relation. Correlational analyses did not support the search-to-presence model as described, and, contrary to our expectations, Openness and the other variables appeared to moderate the inverse relation between search and presence without suggesting a positive relation. In terms of the search-to-presence model these results would suggest that increases in searching normally lead to decreases in presence of meaning with less of an effect for some people (e.g., high openness). This is simply the flip side of what would be expected from the presence-to-search model. Thus, across our studies, the presence-to-search conceptual model received greater support, with little clear support for a bidirectional or search-to-presence model.

Future Directions

The findings presented here must be interpreted in light of several limitations. As noted previously, this research used cross-sectional, self-report methods. This severely curtails inferences about causal relations between the search for meaning, well-being, cognitive style, and personality. We certainly are not suggesting that the search for meaning causes personality, so this limitation is not critical to our improved understanding of search. However, longitudinal and

experimental work would shed considerable light on the developmental trajectory of search. Experimental methods might examine whether people searching for meaning respond differently to threatening or challenging situations. For example, reminding people of their mortality creates an acute existential threat (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004), and those searching for meaning might suffer more from such threats.

Second, our samples consisted of undergraduate students. Scores on the MLQ-S subscale are consistently above the midpoint for this population, and it might be that young adults are particularly concerned with trying to understand their lives. Therefore, it would be important to investigate how the search for meaning unfolds across the life span, as well as whether it correlates with different variables at earlier and later ages. One possibility is that the search for meaning is more prevalent during earlier developmental stages. Searching might be a natural part of how adolescents and young adults develop their identities and worldviews. Among older adults it might signal substantial difficulty or failure to integrate one's life into a coherent experience. Along these lines, the relation between search for meaning and well-being appears positive among adolescents and increasingly negative in later life stages (Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2007). Factors related to presence of meaning, search for meaning, and their interrelation, in age-diverse populations deserve considerable attention.

The present studies help establish that the search for meaning in life is not simply an offshoot of broader dimensions of personality. The personality traits and cognitive style measures to which it was related shared some common threads, particularly openness to ideas and a tendency to ruminate over past experiences. However, there were many potentially related variables that were not included in the present study, such as people's tolerance for uncertainty (e.g., Deschesne & Kruglanski, 2004).

As our understanding of the search for meaning improves, future research should investigate how the construct might apply to other realms of human functioning. For example, an abundant literature exists demonstrating that searching for satisfying interpretations or meanings for stressful life events is a common reaction to such events (Janoff-Bulman & Yopyk, 2004). Some theoretical accounts have described the potential interplay between such event-related meanings and broader meaning in life variables (Janoff-Bulman &

Yopyk, 2004; Park & Folkman, 1997; Thompson & Janigian, 1988).
However, we are unaware of any empirical work that has studied the
interplay between searching for event-related meaning and the
broader search for meaning in life. Are those who are disposition-
ally inclined toward searching for meaning in life more or less likely
to find positive meaning in stressful events? Do stressful life events
stimulate people to search for meaning in life? In one small study of
residents of southern Spain, people searching for meaning in life re-
ported fewer post-traumatic stress symptoms 3 months after the
Madrid train bombings (Steger, Frazier, & Zacchanini, in press).
From this finding, we speculate that search for meaning is a stable
individual difference variable (cf. 1-year, test-retest correlation = .50;
Steger & Kashdan, in press), rather than a symptom of adverse life
events.

The search for meaning is a unique and underappreciated dimen-
sion of human personality, distinct from more broadband measures
of personality and cognitive style. The search for meaning is related
to negative perceptions of self and circumstances yet also marked by
a thoughtful openness to ideas about life, suggesting that it might
emerge in more or less healthy or unhealthy forms depending on who
is searching. It also appears that people might be stimulated to
search for meaning when their sense of life's meaningfulness erodes.
Understanding the complexity of this relationship, as well as the
mechanisms by which the search for meaning affects and is affected
by a person's functioning, awaits future research.

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