MEANINGLESSNESS:
PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Ultimate concerns are those timeless issues of death, free will, meaning and its absence, and others that have from the beginning formed the psychosophical framework of all human civilizations. Through the evolution of philosophy, religious thought, science, technology, and psychology, conceptualization of ultimate concerns has varied across history and culture. In the West this has reached a sophisticated, articulate, and scientifically useful form in existential-phenomenological psychology and research, through which some of these ultimate concerns are beginning to be illuminated.

The present work addressed one such concern: meaninglessness. Positive meaning in life has produced a substantial literature (including recent empirical studies) revolving around sources of personal meaning, but little work has directly addressed meaninglessness. Goals of the present study were to examine (1) variations in the experience of meaninglessness, (2) the phenomenology of the experience of meaninglessness, and (3) dimensions and structural components of meaninglessness. In addition, goal (4) was to assess the validity of the construct of meaninglessness in light of the findings.

A sample of university students consisting of 204 females and 68 males, aged 18 to 57, from different ethnicities, completed a short questionnaire packet. Besides demographics items, this included brief screening exercises for depression and trauma, a word-association exercise, a shortened Avoidance of Existential Confrontation scale, and a small number of open-ended questions regarding experiences of meaninglessness. From this group of participants, ten females and one male were interviewed in depth. Narrative accounts were evaluated using iterative, empirical methods.
Phenomenology, dimensions, and structural components were revealed for the generic meaninglessness experience. This appears to begin as a complex dialectic of external experience juxtaposed against internal representation, along the lines of one's relationships to several possible components of one's world. The untenable nature of this dialectical tension results in a disintegration or collapse of the worldview with repercussions on cognitive, affective, behavioral, and existential dimensions.

Variations within this model were examined qualitatively with respect to situations, cognitive styles, affect, and gender where possible. Recognizable cognitive aspects of meaninglessness appeared to be the disintegration of the existing inner representation, a sense of disorientation, and a simultaneous tendency to generalize. The affective dimension was most prominently characterized by sadness and anger; and behavioral responses involved approach/avoidance to specific people or experiences, and/or changes in motivation or more general behavioral styles. Existential insights, as potentially permanent changes in viewpoint, most prominently involved death awareness, uncertainty of life, and changes in self-concept. Depression appears to be a possibly significant coexisting complex of similar dimensions whose relationship remains unclear. Gender differentials were tentatively visible in situational types and cognitive styles as reflected in word associations.

The use of the meaninglessness construct appears to have been validated in that these results broadly support principles which had previously been proposed regarding sources of positive meaning. The implications of this and other conclusions are discussed in terms of the dimensions and structural components that were uncovered.
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INTRODUCTION

Two old Jewish friends meet again after many years. A asks B what kind of life he has had.
B: "A very happy one. On the whole, life has been good to me. And you?"
A: "Not bad. I've nothing to complain about. But to tell the truth, if I had it all to do over again, I'd just as soon not have been born at all."
B: "Ah, yes (sigh).... But who can be so lucky?"
---Singer (1992, p. 76)

"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose," goes the famous quotation. With respect to the challenges inherent in life, it seems that they surely do ever remain the same. It seems equally true that humankind has always psychologically grappled with these problems; our pondering on death, life-meaning, freedom of choice, and the like—the ultimate concerns—is timeless. What does appear to have changed is how people have thought about these problems. Our way of conceptualizing these abstractions have changed dramatically over the course of the millennia, as far back as archeology has been able to pick up tangible evidence. It is somehow difficult to realize that people of several millennia ago appear to have thought in ways that are different than how we think today.

But thoughts are revealed in works. The Pyramid Texts of Egypt and the Indian Vedas are the oldest written records available. The polytheism they reflect gradually gave way to monotheism, and in the past couple of millennia, it has evolved into "science," or variants thereof. Is it coincidental, as humans now begins to explore realms of space beyond the limits of their own planet, that their cosmological pondering have taken on a stripped-bare existential austerity?
Nevertheless, the primal cry for understanding, within every human consciousness, has always been the same. We sense the brevity of life in the cycle of the sun each day, and in the nostalgia of the seasons; the beauty of a spring morning can be a poignant source of perplexity as well as joy. Long before humanity was civilized enough to have invented socioreligious systems, the imponderable mysteries lurking among the comings and goings of everyday life have stimulated questions, speculation, wonder, and anguish. And since humans began to scratch scenes from their lives on cave walls, these perpetual questions have been visible in every form of creative art and "culture," and continue to be so, for example in mass-entertainment venues such as the cinema.

As children we sought to establish structure and meaning in life by testing our parents' patience, and as adolescents by stretching social tolerance to the breaking point. As humankind ventures out into the solar system, it is still engaged in the quest to know, to find answers, to understand, to make sense of what it perceives. Meaning, morality, freedom, spirit, consciousness, reason, being, isolation, and of course, death.... Enduring topics, there is nothing new, revolutionary, timely, or fashionable about any of them. It seems that they have been here, as so many creation-tales put it, "from the beginning."

There has evolved a substantial psychological literature on ultimate concerns. This dissertation focuses on one of these topics. It is an exploratory investigation, among college-age Americans, of the experience of one specific ultimate concern: meaningless. Since the fundamental ontological question—why?, the question of meaning—was illuminated by human consciousness, it has never been far from its dark shadow, meaningless. Two recent books provide excellent overviews of that particular ultimate concern, Wong and Fry's The Human Quest for Meaning (1998), and Reker and Chamberlain's Exploring Existential Meaning (2000). Topics range from general personality and motivational theory to more idiographic conceptualizations of
personal meaning; research methodologies extending across a wide array of personal components of meaning and other personality and motivational dimensions; and broad reviews of clinical applications stemming from these concepts. Yet in this entire coverage, there is hardly a mention of the converse concept of meaninglessness. This omission reflects a similarly painful lack of consideration in the general literature. Remedy in the form of an in-depth look at this concept is clearly indicated.

There are quite a number of potential issues that we can call ultimate concerns. "Ultimate" has a nicely alarming resonance to it; it reminds us that there is an end to all things. Ultimate concerns are those from which humanity cannot escape. And as Tillich (1952) has pointed out, it is our mortality that creates the urgency and the vitality of any such inquiry.

A perusal, for example, of the index of Solomon's compact but comprehensive From Rationalism to Existentialism (1972), starts the reader with the following list of items (among others): Absolute truth, the Absurd, Atheism, Being, Choice, Cogito (I think), Consciousness, Contradiction, Death, Dread (angst)... and so on. Other closely related areas that have captured attention from several millennia of philosophers could have been included, such as morality, the transcendent, the existence of God, absolute truth, consciousness, even being itself. More will be said on these topics later as they became elaborated in Western philosophy around the 19th century.

It is tempting to lump these issues under some rubric as existential or ontological issues, but for the present let us resist this in order to avoid pre-existing connotations. For the present let us call them ultimate concerns. This term comes from Tillich (1952) and, although sometimes with a somewhat different emphasis (as in a more directly theological direction), has been used liberally by other writers (Emmons, 1999; Green, 1973; Tillich, 1952; Yalom, 1980). Some (Tillich, 1952), however, feel that they can all be subsumed
under the dialectic of being versus not-being. From this domain, four ultimate challenges have been elevated to the forefront in more recent literature by Yalom's seminal *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980): Death, Freedom, Isolation, and Meaninglessness. Of these, Meaninglessness has been chosen as the focus.

Fromm and Xirau (1968) point out that one essential attribute of the human being is its symbol-making ability, the most obvious expression of which, of course, is the word. The ability to make an internal symbol stand for, represent, or *mean* something else, something external, seems to be a core attribute of the basic functioning of our species.

It is not a great extension to suppose that where this basic operation of meaning-making or any of its many ramifications is thwarted, the resulting *meaninglessness* poses as much an organic threat to our existence as any other vital biological disruption. "The pathway to the fulfillment of meaning is never smooth. The human situation is such that mankind is always threatened by forces that destroy meaning. Values, purposes, and understandings are fragile achievements and give way all too readily to attitudes of futility, frustration, and doubt. Meaning is thus lost in an abyss of *meaninglessness*" (Phenix, 1964, p. 5).

Frankl (1969) defines meaning of life in terms of a set of *values*. Yalom (1980) continues this thought, noting that in a clinical context, meaninglessness has largely to do with peoples' feelings of purposelessness, aimlessness or pointlessness, not only regarding goal-directed behavior but also with respect to internalized values. This will be elaborated later on, but for the present, *meaninglessness* may be taken to be a failure or deficiency of these values and their subjective consequences. Since the mid-1900's, generations of young people worldwide have, probably unknowingly, provided one of the most effective portrayals of meaninglessness. With respect to the parental generation, unconventional standards of speech, conduct, or dress are not at all remarkable; in fact
they are a timeless theme in literature and drama. What is rather unique in recent history is that the extreme length to which these idiosyncrasies have gone have now made them recognizable as an agonized expression of meaninglessness. Popular music (always a good barometer of social mood), between its atonal cacophony and near-schizophrenic lyrics, conveys a terrified sense of groundlessness, disorientation, of being lost with respect to the usual social landmarks of meaning.

It is important to have a historical sense of the place of ultimate concerns in the development of humankind, and the extent to which they have survived and permutated throughout a changing world. Therefore the first aim of Chapter 1 will be to set the background for the current research by outlining in cursory fashion the following salient features of the developmental history of humanity's ultimate concerns: (1) The roots of ultimate concerns in the nature of human consciousness; (2) the expression of ultimate concerns in earlier philosophy, both Eastern and Western; (3) the formalization and articulation of ultimate concerns in Existential Philosophy or Existentialism; and (4) the adoption of ultimate concerns by scientific psychology, i.e., the appearance of Existential Psychology (and psychotherapy) and the contributions of other branches of psychology (such as the psychodynamic and humanistic schools) that differentiated along other lines. Finally, in Chapter 2, phenomenological psychology will be discussed, since it is that discipline which is inevitably involved in a systematic examination of ultimate considerations. This perspective we then provide a better orientation to survey the literature pertinent to the field.

"It is my belief that the psychological sciences are on the verge of a spiritual revolution," writes Emmons (1999, p. 8). Let us hope it is a positive and constructive revolution, not merely "spiritual" as in "religious," but spiritual as in ultimate concern. For not only are there great "opportunities to advance scientific research on spirituality," there
are also disturbing cracks in the social foundation along psychological fault lines previously unseen in history (Stace, 2000). It needs no elaboration that there is a sobering need to attend to a monolithic social mentality, and institutions that have been reluctant to face the realities of the nuclear age and approaching global overpopulation.
PART I


CHAPTER 1

HISTORY

But Mousie, thou art no thy-lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men,
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promis'd joy!

Still, thou art blest, compar'd wi' me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But Och! I backward cast my e'e,
On prospects drear!
An' forward, tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear!

—Robert Burns
(1785/1968)

Roots of Ultimate Concerns: the Nature of Human Consciousness

Consciousness of ultimate concerns seems to be rooted in the very condition of man. May has concisely stated that "the human dilemma...[is] that which arises out of a man's capacity to experience himself as both subject and object at the same time" (1979, p. 8). Hegel labeled it the paradox of "master and slave" (Solomon, 1972). Specifically, we see in homo sapiens a consciousness that appears to be unique among creatures (Kenyon, 2000).

What Is Consciousness?

During all the ages, human consciousness has managed to elude precise description, despite the efforts of philosophers, and later scientists. Commentators such
as Jaynes (1976) and Joseph (1992) are quick to point out how little of our daily life—concepts, thinking, learning, reason, and the vast spatial and temporal tracts of which we are continuously not aware—actually seems to involve the participation of consciousness. Tart (1975) proposes a continuum of consciousness; at one end, where we spend most of our time, awareness and the content of awareness are closely merged. At the other end, the content of awareness and our awareness are sufficiently distinct that one can say, "I know I am aware of such-and-such." But the basic nature of what this awareness is remains unclear. Theories resulting from centuries of speculation regarding the origins of this human consciousness range from extremely intrinsic points of view (consciousness as a property of matter, protoplasm, the reticular formation) through views that suggest consciousness is a result of learning or merely a mirage of behavior, to extremely extrinsic points of view: consciousness comes from the outside, a "metaphysical imposition" (Jaynes, 1976). But the fundamental nature of it eludes objective understanding.

What Is Unique about Human Consciousness?

Despite the anthropocentric assumption by psychology that only man has consciousness (see Tart, 1992), science must take the least-complex position that the behavior of other animals can be explained without the presence of human-style self-awareness. Perhaps the more serious anthropocentrism is our continuous self-deceptive propensity to project our own mental processes upon everything around us. Comic-strip animal characters make us laugh for this very paradox of projection; it is reflected in the everyday language people use to describe the behavior of their pets, "He knows he's going to be fed"; "He knows if he doesn't come over here he's going to get spanked." Were this projective tendency not universal, ethology might long ago have given
us a better appreciation of the momentous evolutionary leap that occurred when man became man. The transition from unawareness to that of conceiving past, present, future, and the causal linkage between them, must have been of the same order of magnitude characterizing contemporary accounts of mystical experiences. These are often reported as *expansions* of consciousness to ineffable dimensions (Bucke, 1901; James, 1902). If evolutionary theory is correct, a transition of stupendous, even cosmic, proportions took place from our animal predecessors. Various world mythologies have portrayed this effectively in allegorical form in creation tales with a dramatic ability to convey the hugeness of what happened when *homo* became human. That this impact is now largely gone is perhaps a loss to humanity's better understanding of its own nature.

At least two capabilities define the uniqueness of human consciousness: its propensity to form internal representations of the outer world, and its ability to comprehend cause and effect. These two characteristics may actually be the same thing, but they will be considered separately here. And this is not a claim that humans are meaning-seeking creatures because of these characteristics; in fact, these characteristics may exist because humans seek meaning.

**Symbol-making (Symbolic Representation).** It is probably safe to speculate that before human language, as it still exists today, there was nonverbal communication among individuals. As with other animal forms, this served to communicate survival information regarding food, predators, the dispositions of other individuals, and so forth. These nondiscursive symbols could be quickly converted, presumably in the right cerebral hemisphere, into survival-enhancing behavior, without the need for cerebral analysis.

But as humankind's left-hemispheric cerebral and linguistic abilities evolved and became specialized, the language-processing system intervened between information and action. As some have pointed out (e.g., Barkley, 1997 in connection with disorders of
behavioral inhibition), insertion of this interpretive process also introduces the possibility of alternative paths of action. Hence language, involving interpretation of symbols, pushed interpretation of meaning into conscious awareness; *homo erectus* became a consciously meaning-seeking creature. It also began to become consciously attuned to perceptions of its right cerebral hemisphere (e.g., Fromm & Xirau, 1968; Jaynes, 1976; Joseph, 1992; Phenix, 1964).

Symbolization and imagination (appearing in mythology the world over) represent the uniqueness of the human nervous system. Maddi argues that they also can be seen as needs, in the sense that these capabilities must be used in order to flourish. “The human needs to symbolize, imagine, and judge because that is what the central nervous system is designed to do. And since symbolizing, imagining, and judging all create meaning, it would seem that the search for meaning is an inherent, unlearned aspect of human nature” (Maddi, 1989, p. 143; also Fromm & Xirau, 1968; Maddi, 1998).

**Cause and Effect.** Human consciousness involves conscious awareness of self. The celebrated French phenomenologist-philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1942/1963) asserted that human consciousness is more than simply "transparence to itself"; it also involves action. Before Merleau-Ponty, Husserl had observed that "consciousness is always 'of something'" (Carr, 1998; von Eckartsberg, 1998b). Conceding that awareness of action may be only an internal representation of motor behavior, Merleau-Ponty (1942/1963) noted that human consciousness is nevertheless intentional, and asserted that it is humankind’s intentionality that defines its humanity. What binds what exists to the fact of existence, is the "network of significant intentions" (p. 173), "the capacity of going beyond created structures to create others" (p. 175). The dialectic of action-work involves means of achieving ends, and this embodies the unique human "capacity of orienting
oneself in relation to the possible" (p. 176) that defines humanity: the awareness of cause and effect.

Everything flows from this. Cause and effect describe life and death. Humans became able to realize the connection between actions and subsequent experiences, and also the nature of actions as they appear to other creatures observing them. But at some point the fledgling human comprehension of causation must have led to the realization that an event will happen with absolute certainty, but an event that the individual could not, despite all efforts, understand: one's own death. There is a tale of how the young Prince Gautama, later to become the Buddha, was thrown into unfamiliar despair when, escaping for the first time from the shelter of his palace, he learns that there is suffering and death in the world. So also, not just allegorically, for consciousness to become human, it must emerge from blissful ignorance to awareness of self, future, and mortality. Hence, Philosophy....

Expression of Ultimate Concerns in Early Systems of Philosophy

"The pursuit of knowledge through the exchange of ideas is something that we must assume we have been about since we were talking beasts.... The philosophic temperament, on the available evidence, is found throughout the world and may be assumed to have been present throughout the hundred thousand years of human being, whether or not particular tribes admired it...." (Clark, 1994 p. 4) The exercise of philosophizing is as timeless as the conundrums with which it grapples. However, over time, the methods and formulations of responses to those conundrums have been more changeable. Emphases have changed from continent to continent and millennium to millennium. As a matter of historical record, humanity's ultimate concerns have been the
stuff of religion, and to talk about the early history of one is to talk about the history of the other.

But ontological concerns may exist in other forms besides the institutional; generically they are still ultimate concerns. Anthropologically, ultimate concerns are likely to be most effectively inferred from the flotsam and jetsam of daily life; they are embedded in the comings and goings of everyman. In their raw, elemental form they cannot be expected to be bluntly expressed in surviving texts, because they were not addressed directly. They are circumvented, disguised, sublimated in a thousand and one ways, woven into the fabric of daily behavior.

In addition, there exists the possibility of an actual change in human cerebration occurring over the span of millennia, as hinted at above (Jaynes, 1976; Joseph, 1992). Biologically unable to sustain a cognitive struggle with the abstract subtleties of philosophy—an ability that humans in the present age take for granted—people of earlier times and cultures did not talk and write about such matters in the same way. Instead, primitively repressing, denying, or transmuting them, they generally avoiding facing them in one way or another. This was then quite distinct from the forms of cogitation and expression that began to be articulated in the centuries before and surrounding the time of Christ, and of course has continued to become more refined since.

Perhaps due in part to the rougher, more physical demands of survival that existed in earlier times, early philosophizing in both East and West reveals a closer focus on the claims of the immediate. The most salient ultimate concern, death, was obviously ever present, but refinement of that ultimate threat to the more delicate subtleties of meaning, ontological isolation, and the like, may have simply not occurred to the extent visible later. Except in the cases of a few exceptional thinkers, higher concepts were more likely to be passed over, simply because filling one's belly was paramount. It may have been that
death simply *subsumed* all other existential conundrums because, in the last analysis, they are all resolved by the same demise.

Deification of ultimate concerns, the projection outward of inmost instinctive fears, drives, motivations, and needs, represents perhaps the first creation of religions. C. G. Jung (1969a,b) maintained that these *archetypal* needs have been forever embedded in the human psyche. Freud had a slightly different, but firm, opinion: “Religion arises out of the anxiety and helplessness of childhood and early manhood. Indisputably” (quoted in Binswanger, 1963, p. 2).

From existing historical evidence, various chronological and cultural phases can be detected, through which humankind’s conscious preoccupation with ultimate concerns have wandered. (1) They seem to have been submerged in ancient Asia; (Egypt, India, China); (2) they were trivialized and/or intellectualized by ancient Greeks; (3) they were rejuvenated by Judaism, only to be immobilized and frozen by the medieval Church; (4) and then finally they were liberated by the European Renaissance.

**Early Oriental**

*Egyptian.* Egyptologist J. H. Breasted, speaking of the progression of Egyptian thought, describes it as “a religious development of three thousand years analogous in the main points to that of the Hebrews” (Breasted, 1959, p. xx). Thus, Breasted describes the earliest Egyptian religious imaginings as residing in Nature, birds and beasts. Quite early in this development the world of the gods acquired the social and national characteristics of the human world; then the realm of divine activities was seen as extending to and merging with the human world.

Scholars conclude from the earliest archeological material that even in the midst of worldly enjoyments, the Egyptian was peculiarly conscious of death, and the uniquely
Egyptian worldview seems to explain this. Frankfort (1948) explains that Egyptians viewed the universe in terms of endless change within a universal equilibrium. Morenz (1960) describes this as really a dual sense of time, the fluctuations of the present superimposed on a serenely linear infinitude. Hence the floods of the Nile, the passing of the seasons, or of human lives, were not unduly upsetting, for the continuing equilibrium remained. Time was also embedded in events. It seems that when events were felt to be fortuitous, they were "in their time," in the sense that some sort of temporal harmony was being fulfilled and expressed "correctly" (Breasted, 1959; Frankfort, 1948; Morenz, 1960). Thus their acceptance of immortality and the assurance that dead relatives were not lost forever.

But as the Egypt on earth became an international influence, and the "world" concept expanded in mens' minds, religious and next-world concepts underwent changes. The afterlife, at first reserved for nobility (kings being divine), became democratized in parallel with the common growth of social awareness and skepticism regarding social inequality. In the religious sphere, there was a corresponding development of monism, along with the important development of individual religiousness. Eventually, the growth of the priestly caste resulted in cultural stagnation and decline.

Expression of more subtle ontological considerations as freedom and meaning, are difficult to deduce. If meaning-seeking is an inherent human characteristic visible in the entirety of culture, then the richness and complexity of the Egyptian culture which has awed the world for millennia, testifies to a robust need for inquiry. That need for meaning expresses on earth as science, magic, learning; then it is projected into the heavenly realms as divine interventions, mythology.

Concern for ontological or personal freedom may manifest as sentiments toward both social democracy and divine hierarchies. Its gross expression is to be deduced from political and social configurations. Frankfort (1948) describes the Egyptian "nation" or
"state" as a people unified under a divine being, the pharaoh, whose affairs were thus dictated from heaven; "they viewed their state as but the sphere of action of their king" (p. 124). The entire social, public, and governmental identity was centered in the king. Yet the people possessed (at least, until later periods) no direct spiritual life, or personal sense of divine guidance from a trusted Omnipotence. Religious life there was, and a plethora of gods and divine creatures, but to them were attributed whimsical human qualities that apparently did little to channel popular behavior into a "faith."

The fear of ultimate isolation on earth creates family and society; projected outward it becomes families of gods. Mythological divine social relationships eventually merge with human relationships; the gods become accessible and involved in human life, and become directly addressable through incantation or prayer.

As circumstances of social and physical necessity permitted, ultimate concerns, meaning, individual choice and freedom, and so forth, were propelled outward and expressed in the forms of a social religion, depending on the level of popular awareness. In the early stages of Egyptian history as it is known, for whatever societal or physical survival reasons, popular awareness of philosophical issues was at a low point. Gradually, as society changed in response to both physical conditions and forces within itself (war, tyranny, economy, education, etc.) the way was opened for a more acute appreciation of moral and personal-devotional needs. This also opened the way for heightened awareness of life's absolutes in a personal sense.

Asian. Indian philosophers claim a philosophical heritage predating the West by millennia. Estimates of the origins of the Vedas, beginning as an oral tradition, go back as far as perhaps 6000 B.C. (Chowdhury, 1952). Although the pride that Indian scholars have in their ancient heritage may inflate estimates somewhat, there can be little doubt that
these are among the most ancient records of philosophical thought presently available to humanity.

Early Vedic Indian tradition was heavily involved with ritual; it was public and private, and it was continuous. Scholars agree that early deities were natural forces. Vedic verses described nature; Indra was the sun, the Maruts were storm gods, and so on. Nature was personified and endowed with supernatural powers. As in Egypt, popular daily life in India was occupied with the usual endeavors: food, children, health, and wealth if possible. But the extent of ritualization suggests an elaborate system for organizing meaning in life events.

Fear motivated attitudes towards the inscrutable sky; death was a universal daily reality for people, even if not articulated in texts that can be referred to. Later Vedas begin to introduce monistic concepts, and it was in the Upanishads that the concept of karma was developed most eloquently. This is widely admired in the West today, but probably little recognized for its real nature, a broad expression of the doctrine of and constraints on human freedom and responsibility (Raja, 1952).

But early expressions of such concerns were inarticulate; refinement of concepts had not yet taken place, beyond the tangibles of the natural world.

In East Asia, the earliest written records of the Shang dynasty (1751-1112 B.C.) reveal a life in which creature comforts were again the primary concern. Transpersonal concerns seem to have been dominated by an unsophisticated spiritualism. Gradually, philosophy was refined until it evolved into the eloquent and now-familiar expressions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Although it is difficult to formulate earlier understanding of ultimate concerns, this can be extrapolated to some extent from what is now known about early Confucian teachings.
Although Chinese culture long acknowledged the presence and importance of Heaven and divinity of one form or another, it has always been primarily humanistic. During the era of Confucius and his follower, Mencius, the nature of humankind was seen as fundamentally good (love, righteousness, propriety, wisdom), or some combination of fundamental good and contaminating evil. Emphasis was put upon how nurture could influence this basic nature to produce not only a rewarding life but rewards in the hereafter. Hence morality—most notably improvement of self—was ever a high priority, and evil in the world was seen as failure to nurture the good. It goes almost without saying that death was present as an undesirable threat; a central Taoist theme also is avoidance of harm and danger. And even today in Chinese culture, the prominence of longevity as a particularly desirable achievement likely evolved as a "substitute" for immortality. At a deeper level, implicit in the emphasis on one's ability to transform one's nature in the direction of perfection, is the issue of one's ultimate freedom, will, and responsibility. And, of course, in the sense of humanity's logical and purposive place in the cosmic order, meaning is embodied in the Tao. Hence, there is observable a full array of ultimate concerns in Chinese culture, from earliest times. And they encompass God or divinity, understood with varying degrees of sophistication, down to everyday social-moral behavior (Chan, 1960; Fung, 1952).

Western Philosophy

In Western cultures it is typical to think of our philosophical forebears as solely the Greeks whose myths are familiar to us, but evidence indicates that they were in turn influenced by other neighboring and preceding cultures, the Hebrews, Egyptians, and south Asians (Phoenicia, Babylonia, Sumeria, Persia). "Plato was just Moses talking Greek," this observation curiously offered by a contemporary of Jesus (Robinson, 1999, p.
is not only probably an accurate rendering, but full of broader implications. The interface of Hellenic and Judaic cultures produced inevitable accommodation extending in all directions, notwithstanding Alexander's ambitions. In any event, what remains as our legacy are tales reflecting everyday behavior and thinking and profound insights into psychology and ultimate concerns, not only the more readily accessible topics such as death, but in subtle form as well, more intangible ones such as freedom of action, and problems of meaning.

Greek. The Greek mythology that predated classical rational philosophizing embodied much philosophy, although in highly inventive ways. Heroes lived, anguished, and died as did their narrators, and suffered the same uncertainties as their human audience. Prior to the Socratic age, systematic explications of humanity and nature were undertaken by an array of figures from about the 7th century B.C., including such notables as Thales, Pythagoras, Parmenides, and the Sophists. Although largely anthropomorphic, themes nevertheless concerned humanity's place relative to heaven and divinity, the nature of the human species, the real and the unreal. As in Asian cultures, ontological themes seem to be addressed with less desperation than in modern centuries. But immortality (death), power and free will (freedom), and meaning are visible as underlying substrata. Democritus (c.460-357 B.C.) was supposed to have found graveyards well-suited places for contemplation, presumably on the brevity of life (Clark, 1994). He also struggled with the nature of truth, and is said to have concluded that in the end, all we think we know is merely human convention (Clark, 1994). Both Socrates and his disciple Plato remain unforgettable historical figures largely due to their similar influence in undermining the substantiality of "Truth," and revealing an ontological dilemma that was later seized upon by European thinkers (Clark, 1994; O'Connor, 1999; Robinson, 1999).
Yet, with emphasis on rhetoric, politics, mathematics, and the like, the general tone of Hellenistic philosophy in its heyday was more akin to what is now regarded simply as education. Political expositions by both Socrates and Plato and digressions into logic and science by Aristotle (philosophy as mere epistemology) appear more like exercises in intellectual amusement for the privileged classes rather than stepping-stones to profound personal discovery and transformation. The whole view of humanity's place on earth seems to have been trivialized to a sort of pragmatic acceptance of its brevity and a corresponding hedonic desire to simply enjoy it to the extent one could; at least this is the impression that has remained (Bodéüs, 1999; Long, 1999; Press, 1999).

For the common person in those times, however, facing greater immediate demands of survival, this picture appears inconsistent. Tillich finds that the end of the classical period in Western civilization was dominated by ontological anxiety, the fear of death, as evidenced, for example, in the mystery religions, and in Christianity, by the preoccupation with immortality and resurrection (Phenix, 1964). Although it is generally assumed that the schools of Greek philosophy were the greater influence on subsequent European thought, the Greek cults served a different function for the masses. More emotional, more mystical, they addressed life's experiential problems with suggestions for coping now and hereafter.

It has been proposed (Singer, 1992) that it was actually Platonic idealism that provided the emotional impetus and model for later religious mysticism, by providing a model for the creation and elevation of ideals. Whether this was a cultural outcome or also something more deeply rooted in racial temperament is not clear. Perhaps the Caucasian tendency to intellectualize had gone too far, leaving the visceral needs of the many unsatisfied. Somehow, ultimate concerns remained trivialized.
Hebrew. Juxtaposed against this was the sociocultural philosophic mindset that had been tempered in the deserts to the east: a Semitic tendency to get involved in a vital, emotional way. The resulting collision between epistemology and ontology forever changed the mindset of the Western world. In early encounters with the Greeks, Judaic life presented both a philosophy in the reasoned, lawful, Greek sense, and a religion, in the devotional sense.

There was a certain appealing balance of the two, but little room was allowed for mere intellectual speculation. A spirit of commitment was required (later reflected in the tale of Jesus' denunciation of the Pharisees and the way of life they represented), because the new Judeo-Christian orientation introduced a characteristic personal relationship with divinity. Moreover, it was rooted in Mosaic law and a special covenant with one supreme God. Humanity as "the image and likeness" of God embodies a host of ultimate concerns directly and vitally. This was Judaism's answer to the questions of existential freedom and isolation, meaning and dignity, death, and choice and moral obligation. Indeed, the influence of Judaism and Christianity seems to have forever altered the meaning of the term "philosophy", for it now came to mean way of life, as thought, word, and deed (Heschel, 1960; Mason, 1999).

Medieval Western Philosophy

Medieval philosophy, generally designating that period following "Ancient Philosophy," was in fact introduced by the beginning of the Christian Era. It signified the combining of two streams of inquiry into ultimate concerns; both streams, spiritual and scholastic, sought to assuage humanity's nagging thirst for answers to the ultimate mysteries.
Given the sociopolitical tenor of the times, it was inevitable that this combined stream of inquiry would be circumscribed and swallowed by an institution that could claim to possess the answers. It was also inevitable that the forces of power within institutionalized Christianity should attempt to consolidate and freeze any energies of dissent, to ensure control by establishing that they alone possessed the keys to all ontological answers. Ironically, the dogma of that institution, the Christian Church, was to be later questioned in what would mark the beginning of the "Modern" period.

The result was of course that both intellectual-scholastic and existential-spiritual inquiry were frozen into propaganda, into "religion." Unfortunately, the scientific inquiry, such as it was, that had historically been an inherent part of western philosophy, was also frozen. The whole discipline of philosophy was now identified with religion or "theology." And theology also assumed the role previously occupied by "religious cults," by purporting to ease the uncertainties inherent in the milestone events of human life: birth, marriage, suffering, death, and life in the next world. The legacy of Judaism, the incorporation of one's faith into daily thought, word, and deed, was fertile ground for the power-hungry; the institution thus now controlled both this world and the next.

Ontological issues of free choice, death, meaning, and so forth became largely involved with morality and sin. Christianity displayed a characteristically morbid preoccupation with death and what follows, with avoiding a bad judgment after death, and most certainly, with not questioning the authority of the Institution itself. This penitential mentality served well to ensure continuing control by the authorities.

Spade (1994) has compared the stultifying relationship of religion to philosophy in that period, to that of ontological investigations that rest on an underlying substratum of objectivist scientific theory in our own age. "There is almost always some 'given' to be preserved—a theological doctrine, a scientific theory that gets the right experimental
results no matter what real conceptual difficulties are involved, or some other factor” (Spade, 1994 p. 55). Augustine (354-430 A.D.), regarded indisputably as one of the most influential figures of this period, grasped the elementally existential core of philosophical issues; noteworthy are his observations on what can only be called psychology (i.e., theological psychology) which appear in his “theory of illumination,” dealing with human knowledge and what he believed to be its divine origins and more ontologically fundamental topics like being and the nature of creation. His famous work was On Free Choice of the Will (Spade, 1994); but it was disputed even then whether this designated God's grace or human choice and responsibility. His obsessive preoccupation with matters of good and evil has been a legacy that has characterized the thinking of those that followed him during that age and an onus borne by philosophy ever since (Brown, 1994; Spade, 1994).

Western Philosophy and The Renaissance

Just as theology had subsumed the philosophy of the medieval period, science was intimately intertwined with the new thinking during and following the Renaissance. Increasing faith in the powers of mathematics, science, and learning gave impetus to the hope that philosophical meaning as well could be found at the end of that path. These secular disciplines gradually usurped authority from the Church and from rule by tyranny. France's role was particularly important; heavily Catholic, dissension against the forced belief systems of the Church in favor of genuine inquiry by such figures as Montaigne and Descartes was all the more revolutionary.

A generally increased level of energy accompanied the Renaissance, physical (from dietary and lifestyle improvements) as well as mental. Mortality was undoubtedly a more real presence than is now imaginable, for life remained comparatively short, and
religion remained important if only for that reason. But a more positive view of earthly life developed.

The shift of attention to the here and now no doubt nourished the growth of what would later be known as denial of death. The demeaning of death was not a subversion of the authority of the established Church and the individual-centered reforms of Luther and Protestantism. It was rather the increased regard and faith in human reason, new advances and confidence and admiration for science, and the concomitant belief that death could at least be delayed by the application of right efforts.

The secular-humanist leaning helped a popular understanding of the quest for meaning in Europe. The great works of this period were no longer written in Latin by clerical scholars for scholars. Bacon and Descartes, for example, were lay people; they wrote in the vernacular (English, French, German, Italian). Accessibility to a much broader audience could only provoke more widespread cogitation on ontological profundities. Meaning in life, as dictated by Church canon, shifted to meaning brought alive in interpersonal moral relationships. Individual ontological conceptions were gradually remodeled. Although existential abstractions of freedom and will no doubt lay beyond the compass of most minds, an increased admiration for civil freedom, accompanied by a parallel decline in fear of heavenly retribution for the sins of worldly life, and increased understanding of personal responsibility and control of individual destiny illuminated the mental horizons of humanity (Popkin, 1966).
Articulation of Ultimate Concerns in Later and Existential Philosophy

From 18th Century Philosophy to Existentialism

Cartesian duality (humankind and nature; homo sapiens being conscious and sentient, nature being driven by mechanical non-conscious laws) is said to have been the quintessence of the Rationalist period of philosophy. The universe operated as a mostly-efficient machine. God, the supreme conscious entity, essentially supervised the machine of nature, but was usually not required to intervene unless serious calamity necessitated repairs; God remained above it all; and this detachment also applied to the human soul, which enjoyed a special filial similarity to God. All in all, this described a very efficient world-system, whose efficiency appeared to be verified by the rapid development of scientific discovery and commerce during the 18th century in Europe and the New World. "Reason and Progress" did indeed sound as if it correctly described the world.

But this philosophy was to yield to both external and internal forces. Outwardly, there were great political, economic and social changes taking place. Though it was perhaps inevitable that improving world prosperity and learning would give men more ability to address questions of meaning about themselves, more important were internal weaknesses that caused the Cartesian foundation to crumble. Binswanger (1958b) notes that prior to Heidegger and other philosophers, the "fatal defect of all psychology... being the theory of a dichotomy of world into subject and object" (p. 193; see also Binswanger & Boss, 1973) prevented a human life, human existence, from being regarded as anything other than an object basically responding to the laws of physics. Against the backdrop of the influences of Darwin, the earlier existential philosophers such as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, accompanied by revelations in science, whose expansion included both
experimental psychology and the "medical" psychology of Freud, the weight of ultimate questions could no longer be sustained by prior world-views.

Transformations eventually gave rise to the kind of rejectionist thinking seen in the writings of Immanuel Kant, and marking an important shift in philosophical thinking. A departure from the glorification of Reason, the introduction of skepticism that human reason could provide access to Absolute Truth, and a human-centered (as opposed to God-centered) phenomenological view of creation as elaborated by Hegel: all of these were foundational elements in the growth of what is now known as Existentialism or existential philosophy (Copenhaver & Schmitt, 1992; Solomon, 1972).

Although some disliked the term, and rejected the entire notion of an existential "movement," it is nevertheless easy to name individuals who are considered to be "Existentialists." But it is almost impossible to identify a line of demarcation between earlier rationalist philosophers and existentialism, both with respect to the individuals who are to be included or excluded, and to the fundamental principles, because descriptors like "individualism," "antirationalism," and the like are problematic, in that so many exceptions exist among the "founders."

It is known that there was movement away from the rationalist notion that human mental capacities provided the keys to the universe, towards the more cautious view that emphasized the frailty of human knowing. Notwithstanding the widespread notion that existentialism represented a radical break from earlier philosophy, Solomon (1972) emphasizes that this school began as a logical extension of traditional thought, gradually evolving an identity of its own, as individuals contributed their views. Kant, rather than being the exemplary Enlightenment philosopher that he is often supposed to be, actually initiated the break from the prevailing rationalist view of that period. He did so primarily by demonstrating the importance of a subjective orientation in philosophy, as distinguished
from the glorified but misguided illusion of "objectivity" in rationalism. And thus he also played a founding role in the birth of what later came to be known as Existentialism (Ameriks, 1999; Kenny, 1994a,b; Solomon, 1972).

The Fundamentals of Existentialism

Existentialism places a person's responsibility for fortune and fate—existence—squarely upon the person. This is a frightening stance to take, and the negativity which is commonly associated with existentialism is very likely instead a reflection of our own anxiety with the ontological issues under consideration. One's fate being individualized in this way underlines the essentiality of the phenomenal world, that which is experienced by the individual.

Humankind is confronted with possibility and is forced to choose and commit to that choice. Although each individual perforce exists within history, circumstance, and one's own experiential domain, one's choice is nevertheless free; and by this freedom, the human creature is elevated immeasurably beyond the status bestowed on it by Darwin, by Copernicus before him, and for that matter, by Freud. This is perhaps one of the most appealing aspects of existentialism, more dignifying in some respects even than Eastern metaphysics, which has sometimes been used to rationalize avoidance of responsibility. Existentialism puts humankind at the center of creation and accepts having ontological responsibility placed squarely upon it; dignifying and terrifying, it is the ultimate empowerment.

Many luminaries of the 19th century and earlier contributed to the movement that became known as existentialism, and a number of great contributors appeared after the thought had become well established. Each had his or her favorite emphasis. For the purpose of reviewing the principal points of this school of thought, this discussion will draw
most heavily on the philosopher Heidegger. Although he was indebted to his mentor Husserl whose ideas he extended, it was Heidegger who seems to have most explicitly and systematically delineated the jargon of existentialism, in his *Sein und Zeit* (1962/1957). Following is a brief description of the fundamentals of this terminology.

**Dasein.** Heidegger's phenomenology as expounded in *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*, 1962/1957) is the study of the revelation of things in appearance. More than just appearance, showing-itself-in-itself directs attention to the essence of the thing, rather than some arbitrary feature which may merely be salient. This investigation thus moves beyond mere description to interpretation and hermeneutics. The distinction between the essence of a thing and its being, or existence, was more problematic for Heidegger than for his mentor, Husserl, and gave rise to the famous concept of *Dasein*, *being-in-the-world*. Being-in-the-world is unity of person and environment, defined as a single phenomenon.

Dasein, the self-conscious entity, is the person; for humanity, being is not automatic but "an issue" (he is self-conscious). With this definition it is incorrect to try to know the being (the person) apart from the person's world, because there is a reciprocal relationship or dependency of knowing one or the other (Solomon, 1972); we cannot know either part better than the other. The fundamental Cartesian subject-object relation was thus rejected by Heidegger, who claimed that the human race has been fooled in part by grammar: language that intrinsically involves these fundamentally illusory relations. Space, the world, has been constituted simultaneously with *Dasein*; Heidegger goes so far as to call the world "equipment," for the use of *Dasein* (Nenon, 1999).

"Existentials" (as a plural noun) are fundamental a priori characteristics of the *Dasein* of Husserl and later Heidegger. *A priori* is an important descriptor, specifically meaning necessarily unavoidable; for existentials are the *givens* of our existence.
The first given is *Dasein* itself, the existence of creation and the human consciousness of immersion in it. The term *Dasein* seems to have first been employed by Husserl (Solomon, 1972); literally it means "being there." *Dasein* has as part of its nature the necessity of describing and conceptualizing everything in the world including itself in terms of subject-object. This is dictated by the existing language used by *Dasein* but obviously originates very much deeper in consciousness, for the term incorporates fundamental human awareness and self-consciousness.

Other existentials include *Existenz*, *Facticity*, and *Fallenness*. These concepts ramify in many theoretical directions (which have been emphasized to a greater or lesser extent by various philosophers of this inclination): possibility and choice; death; dread (*Angst*), guilt; freedom; authenticity and inauthenticity. Following are brief descriptions of these important ideas.

**Temporality.** An important offshoot of *Dasein* is temporality. Time is "projected" from *Dasein*; neither person, world, or time exist independently, they only exist as *Dasein*. *Dasein*, previously defined as being-in-the-world, is also "being-in-time." Note the popular understandings which arise from this abstraction: our typical tendency to live in the past when we should be living in the now (as with guilt); the equally typical tendency to live in the future when we should be living in the now (as with anticipation); the especially meaningful event which then becomes part of oneself forever (the popular expression, "quality time"); the immediacy of flashes of insight, complete all at once; the ability to transcend the present by imagining the possible.

Heidegger's term "care" (*Sorge*) refers to humanity's inescapable need to understand or comprehend the nature of itself vis-à-vis the world. And it is this need that gives rise to past, present, and future, in that the important theme, *possibility*, embodies
futurity; fallenness, embodies the present and absorption in its distractions; and facticity involves the "already given" facts of existence, stemming from the past.

Existenz. Existenz is a concept revolving around not just being, but possibility. In the abstract sense, Dasein has chosen to be what it is. Translated into a more concrete sense, a person's intrinsic freedom of choice has resulted in that person's being what he or she is and in the person's present circumstances; and it is the person's intrinsic responsibility also to recognize this and accept it; this recognition, of course, in turn opening up possibility anew.

But the real meaning of this term reduces to a single choice: the choice of authenticity (Eigenlichkeit) or its absence, inauthenticity. All other "possibilities" involving the external condition are relatively arbitrary (not to say that they are not free choices); but the possibility of authenticity or not is inherent to the very nature of Dasein and therefore cannot be evaded, the choice of "how to be." Existenz is the possibility of being oneself, of adhering in one's comings and goings to that set of values, traits, concepts, and so forth, that one understands as oneself. However, possibility, to Heidegger, includes "necessary possibility," of which death is the most salient example (Solomon, 1972).

Death. Perhaps the most salient aspect of facticity (see below) is death; at the same time it is the ultimate limit of Existenz, of possibility. Heidegger goes so far as to term Dasein as "Being-onto-death" (Solomon, 1972). The main difficulty with death, as an ontological issue, is that, as many have observed (e.g., Freud, 1959d), it is unthinkable; one cannot conceive of one's own death, only the death of someone else. On the other hand, one of death's most valuable features is that it is the nurturant mother of authenticity; death makes us "honest," if we have the ability. Death provides perspective to life and all of its trifling misfortunes; although unthinkable, it makes known the absolute limit of experience (Koestenbaum, 1971).
**Freedom.** The question of freedom of choice has occupied philosophers for ages: that a person is condemned to be free in choices of actions, yet doomed to take the full burden of their consequences. We do not rejoice over the total freedom that we possess, but, on the contrary, make great efforts to hide it from ourselves. With freedom comes responsibility, with responsibility comes guilt, and with guilt comes anxiety. Kierkegaard (speaking from the point of view of his Christianity) remarked that freedom of choice becomes the *despair* of freedom, and then the guilt of responsibility (Solomon, 1972).

Kant was perhaps foremost among recent thinkers to bring the issue to the forefront for the purpose of elaborating upon Christian morality (Solomon, 1972). Freedom is a necessary precondition for human rationality; but for Kant it was the first precondition of morality, which was his immediate interest. Humanity has the ability to act according to its moral obligations, or not. But external freedoms of *action* as focused on by Kant are quite different from Heidegger's intent, which is to emphasize inherent freedom of *choice*.

**Facticity.** *Faktizität* ("facticity") represents the "givens" of existence, in their dynamic relationship with *Existenz*. *Dasein* finds itself "thrown" into a physical situation with certain limitations: one's physical existence and biological limitations, one's past, the particular point in historical time that one occupies, and so forth. These are *facts* of whose existence one has no choice. How one will deal with these facts—particularly referring to one's internal attitudes—is another matter, as has been mentioned, involving endless possibilities.

An interesting parenthetical fact is that Heidegger asserted that *moods* are the manifestation of *Gestimmtsein* ("being-tuned") to facticity. He is using mood not in the conventional sense, as affect, but rather, as general attitude. Hence these moods are phenomenological evidence of facticity—being thrown into a set of circumstances. The
most important one is Angst (dread); also Sartre's la nausée; these are objectless attitudes of ontological origin, according to Heidegger (Solomon, 1972).

**Fallenness.** "Fallenness" is the failure to question one's own being, and Being in general. Fallenness is "falling captive to the world"; "average everydayness" (Solomon, 1972). To refuse or fail to recognize one's own existential nature (i.e., as comprising these Existentials) and additionally including existing limitations and possibilities (a weighty term pregnant with implications); to get caught up with the illusory "importance" of mundane tasks; to see "significance" as somehow lying outside of oneself when in fact one is very source of significance or meaning; these things are Fallenness. The Biblical or Judeo-Christian reference should be obvious ("fall from Grace" as "loss of the sight of God") though doubtless for semantic purposes only. Unfortunately this represents the normal everyday state of people in general. It is the mother of "inauthenticity" (Nenon, 1999).

**Isolation.** That the human is a social animal is part of its Facticity; this characteristic is, after all, an evolved species-wide trait. However, humanity's Fallenness results in two inauthentic aspects of its social nature.

Betraying the expression of one's own unique identity for the sake of the comfort and security of "average everyday" conformity to mass values is a proper expression of sociability. Becoming authentic requires one to break some of those social ties—or at least the falseness of them—and face the isolation resulting from being oneself. This is not just social isolation or loneliness; it is the clear perception that Dasein is inherently unique and free; and these qualities necessitate ontological isolation.

The other way in which human sociability is inauthentic is that it would rather cloak in ignorance the inherent isolation of uniqueness, than face it. Merleau-Ponty (1942/1963) said, "I can be mistaken concerning another and know only the envelope of his behavior."
The perception which I have of him is never, in the case of suffering or mourning, for example, the equivalent of the perception which he has of himself.... I communicate with him by the signification of his conduct; but it is a question of attaining its structure, that is attaining, beyond his words or even his actions, the region where they are prepared" (p. 222). What is truly existential isolation may be superficially perceived as social isolation, however.

**Authenticity.** Authenticity (*Eigenlichkeit*) is made much of by existentialist writers. Authenticity is, above all, a choice. It is the choice to affirm one's true self, to embrace the uncertainty of life, to submit to responsibility for one's actions and one's present and future circumstances; to acknowledge the existential anxiety that is a part of it, and to reject the comfortable complacency of "average everydayness." This *inauthenticity* is the norm. In existentialist writings there is repeated emphasis of this, that for average people, most try to flee authenticity. There will be little difficulty in seeing examples of this in our daily life; television is a wonderful example of materialized inauthenticity.

Heidegger defines three aspects of authenticity: (1) Recognition of one's facticity, discovery of oneself as being already in the world; (2) Understanding (*Verstehen*), the projection of possibilities regarding one's attitudes and goals towards the world; and (3) Discourse, meaning that whatever can be understood can be articulated in speech. Speech can capture the first two points (and apparently other existential givens) and reflect them in the authentic person (note the emphasis on real communication); for the average person, avoiding authenticity, all they have is "chatter," *Gerede*, which says nothing. Heidegger apparently emphasizes the importance of this (Solomon, 1972).

*Authenticity* is intimately involved in time. The authentic view or relationship with time involves the entirety of past, present, and future, without the illusion of "immortality" that befuddles our youth and the panic of life's brevity that frequently besets us in mid-life.
It is a clear and non-self-deceptive understanding of cause and effect with respect to our own thinking and behavior (May, 1983; May & Yalom, 1989; Solomon, 1972).

**Existential Anxiety.** Angst, "dread" is another key concept in Existentialism. Brought into the spotlight by Kierkegaard (e.g., Gardiner, 1988; Marino, 1998), it was then eagerly espoused by subsequent existential luminaries. Heidegger describes this as a mood or "tuning-in" towards the world (Solomon, 1972); it is actually a dread of nothingness, Tillich's (1952) nonbeing. This encompasses both dread of death and dread of Existenz, as in the previous sense of possibility, referred to by Yalom (1980) as freedom. Awareness of humanity's Existenz is awareness of open-ended possibility, that which Yalom (1980), calls groundlessness. Solomon (1972) points out that this dread is actually dread of oneself as Dasein, one's human condition. Strangely, authenticity and ontological anxiety promote each other.

Tillich (1952) has become justly famous for his elaboration of this concept of ontological anxiety: "'Existential' is "the awareness that nonbeing is a part of one's own being." (p. 35). "If being is interpreted in terms of life or process or becoming, nonbeing is ontologically as basic as being" (p. 32). Tillich goes on to say that historically, nonbeing has always been inextricably intertwined with ontological discussions of being, in the same way that one cannot discuss a doughnut without being aware of the hole in the center. "Being has nonbeing 'within' itself as that which is eternally present and eternally overcome in the process of the divine life. The ground of everything that is, is not a dead identity without movement and becoming; it is living creativity. Creatively it affirms itself, eternally conquering its own nonbeing" (p. 34).

**Nonbeing and Anxiety.** Tillich (1952) distinguishes between fear and anxiety. Anxiety he confines to the sociological or group phenomenon. He defines ontological anxiety in the following way: "Anxiety is the state in which a being is aware of its possible
nonbeing. The same statement, in a shorter form, would read: anxiety is the existential awareness of nonbeing" (p. 35) . It has become part of modern culture, literature and art, "permeating the public consciousness by ideas and symbols of anxiety. Today it has become almost a truism to call our time an 'age of anxiety' " (p. 35). Note that he wrote this in the nuclear age. He went further to describe three types of existential anxiety: the anxiety of fate and death, the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness, and the anxiety of guilt and condemnation (p. 40).

The first type is the bedrock of human fear: "The anxiety of death overshadows all concrete anxieties and gives them their ultimate seriousness." This uneasiness has forever lurked in our common language: "The term 'fate' for this whole group of anxieties stresses one element which is common to all of them: their contingent character, their unpredictability, "the impossibility of showing their meaning and purpose" (p. 43). "Contingent does not mean causally undetermined but it means that the determining causes of our existence have no ultimate necessity. They are given, and they cannot be logically derived" (p. 44). But the relative threat (fate) produces anxiety "because in its background stands the absolute threat [death]. Fate would not produce inescapable anxiety without death behind it" (p. 45). "And death stands behind fate and its contingencies not only in the last moment when one is thrown out of existence but in every moment within existence" (p. 45).

Meaninglessness as an Existential Fundamental

A more comprehensive understanding of our topic, Meaninglessness, will be approached later, but as a fundamental Existential construct, it deserves some mention in the present context.
Meaning is our orientation; it is our compass on the journey through life; meaning provides the east, west, north, south, up and down of our personal phenomenological universe. Meaning is the groundedness of our perceptions and experience; the framework, the grid system across the topography of life and experience. Absence of it leaves nothing but a void; a terrifying existential weightlessness, a disorientation which challenges our most primitive thinking, adapting, and reasoning processes. Dissolution of meaning must be similar to experiences of schizophrenics when their perceptual controls begin to crumble.

It bears repeating from Tillich (1952) how fundamental is our need for meaning. Humanity's universal fear of fate arises from "the impossibility of showing [life events'] meaning and purpose" (p. 43). Meaning is inextricably tied with experiential and psychological balance; on the other side of meaning lies terror. Tillich (1952) has said that existentially alive people own their experiences, they take responsibility for their actions and their experiential world. This world is meaningful to them because it is through it that they work towards or perceive reality. Where this is somehow prevented, meaninglessness exists. "The anxiety of meaninglessness is anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings... of a spiritual center, of an answer, however symbolic and indirect, to the question of the meaning of existence" (Tillich, 1952, p. 47).

The concepts of the Existentialists have revivified and irreversibly transformed philosophy and psychology. The reason for this rather lengthy detour into Existentialism is that it most clearly, courageously, and with refreshing bluntness, engages the very concepts of ultimate concerns pertinent to this discussion, in a sort of raw, hand-to-hand combat, a directness that is disappointingly lacking in less virile schools of thought. Existentialists are correct in their pride of their "passion" (Solomon, 1972), but they have
a right also to be proud in their conceptualizations which they have borrowed from
Heidegger and his ilk. These concepts form the bedrock of any real discussion of
meaninglessness within the human condition. Without them it would be difficult to proceed
further to tackle this topic in the way that it deserves.

However, having asserted that the Existentialist formulations have embodied these
highly abstract notions with the greatest possible clarity, it would be overly optimistic to say
that they are now quite intelligible. Viktor Frankl (1969) tells the story of once presenting an
audience with two unidentified quotations, one from Heidegger’s writings, and the other
from a former schizophrenic patient. When asked to vote which was which, a large majority
of listeners thought the passage quoted from Heidegger originated from the schizophrenic!
Study of the original concepts, particularly by the uninitiated, can easily leave one feeling
vaguely disoriented, the kind of derealization that can be vicariously felt in the
alternate-reality adventures of Carlos Castaneda with his brujó mentor, Don Juan (e.g.,
Castaneda, 1971; incidentally, it would be a sad oversight to miss the parallels). Part of this
feeling no doubt arises from the universal and lifelong circumlocution of these realities
which has been expertly directed by our subconscious processes. But no doubt it is just
such a visceral response that would have given Heidegger some feeling of satisfaction that
he was being, however slightly, understood.

Acknowledgment of Ultimate Concerns by Scientific Psychology

and Emergence of "Existential Psychology"

Ascension of Science in the Renaissance/Enlightenment

To return briefly to the European Renaissance, it was stated that during the latter
centuries of that great cultural phenomenon, the two growing and previously largely
intertwined strands of human inquiry, theology and the secular, became more or less unraveled. Both strands continued, directly or indirectly, to serve the cause of ultimate concerns. But the secular, now freshly emerging as the recognizable discipline of science, had yet to shed a lot of magic, mystical, and metaphysical debris that had clung to it for ages. Then how did scientific psychology retain the ontological issues that had been vital essences for so long?

**Changing Defenses Against Ontological Anxiety.** Anxiety is inherent in humanity's ultimate concerns. If Europe's attempts to deal with this anxiety during Medieval times manifested as a "turning against the self" (e.g., Conte & Plutchik, 1995; Cramer, 1991; Vaillant, 1992) which took the form of obsession with sin, guilt, and penitence, then the Enlightenment produced a different cultural defense phenomenon. Although the transition to the new "defense mechanism" was not without some upheaval, science could now provide a relatively comfortable framework in which to rationalize and intellectualize about ontological questions, while maintaining a safer emotional distance.

The masterpieces of logical brilliance that sprung from this age, by Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Bacon, Descartes, Locke, Newton, Leibniz, and others are familiar to the history of human understanding. What is of underlying importance is that this "secularism" of science became a refusal to consider all non-material matters as part of its domain. In one sense it was a reaction to the centuries-long insistence of institutionalized religion that humanity must blame itself for world evil. Science could now purport to study the mechanisms of the cosmos while distracting itself from issues of cosmic meaning. This has continued in large part to the present day.

It has only been in the 20th century that yet another reaction has become quite visible. It has been built upon the reflections of Hume and others in the 18th century, and has ridden on a wave of global economic expansion, and the anomie and greed that have
accompanied it. Pressures of ontological discontent, restlessness, and dissatisfaction with secular science's responses to profound questions, have burst open the gates of social consciousness to yet another sea-change. Interest has been kindled anew in metaphysical areas where early reactionary science adamantly refused to tread. That branch of human science that eventually came to call itself Psychology is now diffidently trying to bridge the gap between its earlier materialistic heritage and the popular need for ontological answers (Kenny, 1994a,b; Popkin, 1999b).

Emergence of Psychology from Science and Philosophy

Although science provided humanity a new, more "objective," and less emotional way to view itself, it could not rid itself of those ultimate concerns which secretly motivated it. What it could do, however, with the "modernized" view of the person as a body plus a mind, was to begin to look within the sphere of human mind and behavior for clues to cosmic meaning. The mind no longer had to be seen as an extension of the divine soul. It was not flesh, neither was it heavenly spirit, but it did provide a bridge from the material realm to meanings. Thinkers had finally turned away from seeking answers to ultimate issues from the far-off heavens; they could now search very close to home.

Descartes' exposition of the interaction of body and soul/mind in the mid-17th century simply marked the beginning of the tide of change. By the 18th century the self-concept of Western people had begun to incorporate mechanistic psychological concepts in the writings of the British empiricist-philosophers.

Early Mechanistic, Structural, and Functional Views. Englishman John Locke's most famous work is *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In this and other works he elaborated on thinking, ideas, innate versus acquired ideas (the nature-nurture debate was already popular by the 1600s), the properties of objects and their relation to
perception, and personal identity. Locke's arch-critic, George Berkeley, in his *Principles of Human Knowledge*, and *Dialogues between Hylas and Philonius*, expounded on perception, mental images, the nature of ideas, and finally the very insubstantial nature of matter as ideas in the mind of God. David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* seems to have been one of the most important early works dealing with what could be called true psychology, but it also delves into philosophy, as do his later writings. Producing influential treatises on causation, free will versus determinism, a naturalist view of human nature, metaphysics, and religious skepticism, he had a great influence on Kant. Thus by the 18th century the groundwork was already well established for that period, at least a century or so later, that is usually thought of as the formative age of the science of psychology (Bracken, 1999; Kenny, 1994a,b; Popkin, 1999a; Rogers, 1999).

A number of "movements" subsequently appeared as psychology, as it is now known, got under way. Early "structuralists," an assortment of 19th century German scientists including such notables as Titchener and Wundt, held that introspection of conscious experiences reveals that the human mind can be thought of as compartmentalized. To some extent as a reaction, the "functionalist" approach of William James held that a truer picture could be obtained by elucidating the adaptive *functions* of the mind rather than its structure. James also had an interest in the whole phenomenon of consciousness as well as its sub-phenomena. At very nearly the same time (the end of the 19th century) another direction formed in scientific psychology. While adhering to functional and adaptational principles, Behaviorism, promoted by Watson and later by Skinner, rejected the holistic, consciousness-oriented views of early functionalists, claiming that only observable behaviors were worthy and applicable to their scientific investigations. The psychoanalytic movement, as founded by Sigmund Freud also around the turn of the century, began as fundamentally a psychobiological approach. Although
later lending itself to broader psychosocial issues, its original conception was emphatically deterministic. Freud was also convinced that his case-analytic methods that became the target of so much criticism by empiricists in succeeding decades, were sufficient to define the field as a science.

It can be seen that these "movements" were manifestations of psychology's perennial struggle for identity, rooted in the past and continuing to this day. It seems that psychology has always fretted about its identity as a rational-empirical or human science, and how it should or should not incorporate biological principles. Moreover, as is reflected in its long history of wrestling with the weighty issue of free will vs. determinism, it has never been quite sure of its relationship with ontological fundamentals.

Scientific Psychology Has Retained Ontological Issues

But despite the protestations of a couple of generations of Behaviorists around the turn of the 20th century, the parents of psychology have always been both philosophy and science. Psychology was, and is, an approach to questions of ultimate import. It is distinguished in that it recognizes the human being's uniqueness among creatures, and it proposes that looking at how these self-conscious beings function within their environment is the most efficacious route to answering questions of timeless profundity. Spurred on by human mortality, the whole of science in general and psychology and philosophy in particular are continuing attempts, since long before there were recognized "disciplines," to understand the " absolutes," the parameters of existence.

From the medieval times that preceded, the Age of Reason ushered in not actually a change of focus, but merely a shift of methods. What compelled humanity prior to this—finding answers to life's eternal riddles—continued to motivate a great deal of its
energies as thinking changed. Recently developed scientific methods could be directed outward at its environment, yet the fundamental issues remained at the core.

The nature of being that Bishop Berkeley grappled with, is the same question pondered on by Heraclitus before him and Sartre after him. Darwin's theory essentially confronted the issue of freedom, or "free will" which has been provoking philosophers for ages, and is now provoking genetic biologists. His predecessor, Locke, was much possessed by the notion of the tabula rasa versus innate ideas. Whether called functional, dynamic, or behavioral, the issue of determinism, free will, or personal responsibility for one's actions, recognized as a key point of modern psychotherapy, are again different names for an old ontological issue that may never be resolved. From Wundt, James, Watson, and Freud to May it remains a fundamental ontological substratum to the science.

When Kelly (1955) made famous his concept of personal constructs which form the structure of personal meanings, this was in reality a reformulation of a very old problem. Meaning, in the broad sense, is a perennial goal of all sciences, however dimly recognized or acknowledged. Meaning (and never too far away lurks its shadow, meaninglessness) gives purpose to these other ontological questions, which, as sources of anxiety, have become "objectified" into more euphemistic forms by science. They have remained the motivation behind all theory.

Psychodynamic Psychology

Freud. Freud was trained as a physician, and made his first scientific contributions in neurology. This biomedical orientation never left him. When he later became interested in hysteria, as a neurological disorder, it was more due to his powers of observation and creative genius than personal predilection, that caused him to seize upon its distinguishing
psychological factors. In his view a person remained, to the end, an organism bound and
directed by forces little amenable to its choosing.

Though Freud was undoubtedly too profound a thinker for deeper philosophical
implications to have escaped him completely, unyielding psychosexual determinism
leaves little maneuvering room for issues of free will, ultimate isolation, authenticity, and
the like. Clearly Freud’s view was that ontology was not a personal affair, and could be
considered only in the context of evolution.

This bias was evidently seen as an oversight by Jean-Paul Sartre, who took pains
to expose what he believed to be fatal existential errors in Freud’s theory (Sartre, 1956;
Solomon, 1972). Freud was so immersed in psychobiological libidinal theory that inquiry
along philosophical lines, in the direction of personal meaning (not to mention
meaninglessness) was regarded by him as frankly pathological. In his view, psychosexual
energies in the healthy individual impelled him or her towards their gratification; to go
deeper than that suggested morbidity (Jones, 1957; Singer, 1992).

Charmé (1984), on the other hand, points out that Sartre’s position was not a total
absolutist refutation of Freud’s. Rather, he held that psychological phenomena cannot
simply be the result of purely organic states; they are “first mediated by each person’s
system of meanings, goals and values, even when the person is not explicitly aware of this
system” (p. 25). In addition, says Sartre, an individual chooses the value and role—the
personal set of meanings—that biological fate provided with respect to self-concept, life
goals, social surrounds, and the like.

Freud was less interested in the abstractions of meaning or meaninglessness than
certain of his followers. The works of Jung, Fromm, Boss, and Binswanger as well as some
less well known figures have directly enriched the body of existential literature with
concepts merged from both psychodynamic and existential theory.
Jung. While implementing basic Freudian concepts, Jung was unapologetically spiritual, at times transcendental. His relentless holism rejected Freud's limiting biopsychological concepts. He made repeated references (Jung, 1969b, 1973) to the fundamental role of life-meaning, or its lack, in distress:

Among my patients from many countries, all of them educated persons, there is a considerable number who came to see me not because they were suffering from a neurosis but because they could find no meaning in their lives or were torturing themselves with questions which neither our philosophy nor our religion could answer.... Let us take for example that most ordinary and frequent of questions: What is the meaning of my life, or of life in general? .... When conscious life has lost its meaning and promise, it is as though a panic had broken loose: 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!' It is this mood, born of the meaninglessness of life, that causes the disturbance in the unconscious and provokes the painfully curbed instincts to break out anew. (Jung, 1969b, p. 336-337)

Jung is aptly famous for having blended contemporary psychiatry and spirituality into a comfortable cohabitation; not many historical figures have been willing or broad-minded enough to do this. And it is noteworthy that he did so before Existentialist concepts proper became a motive force in psychology.

Neo-Freudians. As in any science, psychology generally has tried to build upon what has been established, or accepted. The psychological zeitgeist in the early part of the 20th century that was felt to have the most powerful clinical potential, was psychodynamic psychology. The mechanistic behaviorism of that period was consigned to "the laboratory" and was decidedly less attractive for refusing to consider even the mind, not to mention the person. So psychologists with more humanistic leanings logically took the psychodynamic
format and attempted to wed to it new material that they felt was important, but as yet unaddressed, or inadequately so.

Pioneering theorists such as Erikson and Fromm are variously claimed as representatives by both psychodynamic and humanistic camps, and generally labeled as Neo-Freudians. Such labels have dubious identifying value. What can be said with confidence is that humanistic forces bearing on the established psychodynamic ideas of the time, produced much theoretical ferment. Resulting theory, although leaning hard towards a humanistic rejection of Freud's determinism, yet refused to break away completely from fundamental psychodynamic concepts. Fromm and Erickson are prominent representatives of views of profound ontological depth.

**Fromm.** In such classic works as *Escape from Freedom* (1941), *Man for Himself* (1947), and *The Heart of Man* (1964), Fromm left a rich legacy of profound observations on the nature of humankind (see also Fromm, 1950, 1956, 1976). Without abandoning the psychoanalytic principles in which he was trained, he nevertheless melded them with "radical humanism" into a fascinating approach that features at its center issues of ultimate freedom, meaning, pleasure, love, growth, death, evil, and ethics. His appreciation for and basic adherence to many Freudian concepts is obvious in such works as those cited above, but in his view they are fundamentally inseparable from and should be revitalized within a newer humanistic framework which encompasses core dialectics of life-meaning and its absence, and freedom and isolation.

To Fromm, the *significance* of a human life lay in the happy resolution of the individual's need for freedom within bio-social-psychological constraints. He was acutely aware that the person is the embodiment of the "contradiction inherent in human existence" (Fromm, 1964 p. 116): a free, meaning-seeking creature placed within these biosocial constraints. Too much in either direction—freedom as deviation from social
norms, or isolation—produces an imbalance of meaning. Likewise, recognition and realization of the individual's uniqueness, perhaps the highest form of freedom, is itself a condition for personal meaning. In the final analysis, Fromm expresses humanity's essential condition as a search for meaning: "[The human being] is a 'freak of nature,' being in nature as well as transcending it. These contradictions create conflict and fright, a disequilibrium which man must try to solve in order to achieve a better equilibrium.... In other words, the questions, not the answers, are man's 'essence.' The answers, trying to solve the dichotomies, lead to various manifestations of human nature" (Fromm & Xirau, 1968, pp. 8-9).

**Erikson.** Erikson is a prominent figure in developmental psychology, widely known for his pioneering expansion of this field to include the entire life-span; for introducing "psychohistorical" investigation (e.g., Erikson, 1975) and for bringing attention to issues of personal identity (e.g., 1975). The breadth of his interest also included psychobiographical histories of a number of famous world figures (1958, 1975). Of particular relevance to life-meaning are his views on developmental processes in adulthood (e.g., Erikson, 1959).

Like Fromm, Erikson's formulation of personality built upon and extended Freudian concepts of the unconscious, libidinal drives, and the like. He was unreserved in his praise of Freud's ingenuity (Rapaport, 1959; Erikson, 1982; Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986).

**Erikson's existential life-meaning contributions.** One of Erikson's most seminal contributions was his articulation of developmental stages of growth across the entire life-span. What makes this formulation relevant to existential meaning is that he perceived a "psychosocial crisis" occurring during each developmental stage, the healthy resolution of which was the acquisition by the individual of a "virtue", or measure of ego strength. Much of this bears a close resemblance to the acquisition of *authenticity* as described by Heidegger, Sartre, and others (Solomon, 1972).
Although acquisition of fidelity, love, and care are primarily psychosocial, the virtues of wisdom, hope, competence, will, and purpose deal necessarily with fundamental ontological issues particularly salient to the elderly. In *Vital Involvement in Old Age* (Erikson et al., 1986), competence, purpose, and will are described in terms of the mentally and physically debilitating effect of their absence.

At issue here is the role of autonomy (freedom) in the individual's lifelong self-identity, in the face of finitude. Wisdom and hope are seen in the elderly as increased empathy, integrity, intimacy, concern for posterity, and spiritual life. Hence, what Erikson reveals is the very substance, if not of abstract philosophy, then of the existentially authentic individual. "The concern with existential identity... with reaffirming commitments that best reflect the 'I' in the totality of life—such a concern is inseparable from the efforts... to participate in a belief system that clarifies the individual's place in an infinite and timeless universe" (Erikson et al., 1986, p. 234).

**Anxiety, Defenses, and Ultimate Concerns.** Although it was principally Freud's successors who introduced existential values into psychodynamic psychology, there has always been an important thread that is fundamental to existential thinking, yet which is associated directly with Freud's original efforts, and later with those of his daughter, Anna (1966/1936). The basic principle of psychological defense, specifically the appearance of defense mechanisms, has probably forever left its imprint on psychology. This concept is highly relevant to questions of all ultimate concerns by conceptualizing them as representing *threats*. That anxiety plays a central role in psychological distress of any kind, and potentially in psychopathology is largely attributable to Freud. Later successors extended Freud's basic model to become the standard existential paradigm:
Existential threat → (existential) Angst → Defenses → psychopathology

or in the case of meaninglessness in life:

Meaninglessness-threat → (existential) Angst → Defenses → psychopathology

The essence of the above is that it gives life-meaning (or other ultimate concern) its due as a key mediator in the maintenance of a deep sense of psychological well-being. Conversely, the anxiety-provoking or threat value of the absence of existential satisfaction, and subsequent maladaptive coping efforts, are highlighted as potential causal factors psychopathology (May & Yalom, 1989; Yalom, 1980).

Hence, probably despite Freud's original intent, ontological elements have crept into the psychodynamic tent, and have set up house quite happily within that framework, adapting basic components of the unconscious, anxiety, intrapsychic defenses, to serve their philosophical ends. It is curious that Freud's original concepts of anxiety and defense, understood broadly as distortions of meaning, were later adopted (and adapted) by cognitive approaches to psychotherapy. Historically, they have represented an important building-block in the foundation of basic existential issues, which, along with concepts such as personal freedom and meaninglessness, a few decades later began yet another segue towards humanistic psychology.

The Humanistic/Third Force Movement

By the middle of the 20th century yet another developing movement could be seen, this one particularly as a reaction against the reductionism and/or determinism of behaviorism and psychoanalysis. It is arguable that an individual can indeed be conceptualized in terms of behavior, defenses, psychosexual impulses, neuroses, or pure
biology, for that matter. But the humanistic psychology movement, or "Third Force" as it came to be known, emphasized that it is a phenomenological fact that people do not think of themselves in those terms; more commonly, they are aware of fear, love, confusion, hopes and aspirations, sometimes a need to feel alive (and occasionally some amorphous dread).

Discontents rallying around the cry, “where is the person?”, adamantly resisted the attempts at quantification of experience that characterized behaviorism, and the "fatalistic" determinism by psychosexual forces and early childhood experiences that was assumed in psychoanalysis. Humanistic psychologists emphasize the individual's individuality and awareness of self and self-worth, choice and responsibility, power to change and control one's life, and to direct life towards one's own highest conceptualization of "actualization."

Implicit in this picture of the individual is the central importance of the phenomenological viewpoint: how the person views the self, others, mutual relationships, and all experiences.

In the United States, phenomenological pioneers Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers have been among the most prominent among many representatives of humanistic psychology (for a list of key figures see bibliography of Maslow, 1968).

Maslow. Abraham Maslow was preoccupied with fundamental ontological issues and their relevance to life. Although he must have felt incongruent with the materialistic American culture that surrounded him, he characteristically remained irrepressibly positive in his overall view of humanity's fundamentally spiritual nature and its ability to move forward toward growth and evolution. His language is constantly peppered with phrases like "doing good," "helping mankind," "bettering the world" (Maslow, 1970a, xxiv).

He also was unabashedly spiritual.

I consider Humanistic, Third Force Psychology to be transitional, a preparation for a still "higher" Fourth Psychology, transpersonal, transhuman, centered in the
cosmos rather than in human needs and interest, going beyond humanness, identity, self-actualization, and the like.... These psychologies give promise of developing into the life-philosophy, the religion-surrogate, the value-system, the life-program that these people [quietly desperate people, especially the young] have been missing. Without the transcendent and the transpersonal, we get sick, violent, and nihilistic, or else hopeless and apathetic. We need something "bigger than we are" to be awed by and to commit ourselves to in a new, naturalistic, empirical, non-churchly sense, perhaps as Thoreau and Whitman, William James and John Dewey did. (Maslow, 1968, p. iii-iv)

But Maslow considered himself foremost a scientific psychologist, and he bolstered his then-revolutionary concepts with experimental data. Key concepts that originated with him were "self-actualization," which he defined as "self-fulfillment of the idiosyncratic and species-wide potentialities of the individual person" (1970a, p. 2); the "peak experience," the subjective experience of a "moment of highest happiness and fulfillment" (1970b, p. 73); and the "hierarchy of needs," based on instinct theory (see 1970a), particularly the identification of higher needs, those which lead to self-actualization. All of these embodied some aspect of transcendent human potential and growth, concepts which, like meaning and purpose, are at bottom existential. Major works included Toward a Psychology of Being (1968), Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences (1970b), Motivation and Personality (1970a), and The Farther Reaches of Human Nature (1971); (see also 1973/1956).

Rogers. The orientation of Carl Rogers was primarily that of psychotherapist. He felt psychology was to serve those in need, which was reflected in his early entry into theological seminary, and also a long and continued interest in education. Much of what he produced related directly to improving the process of psychotherapy and improving the
therapeutic relationship. But he maintained above all a respect for phenomenological
science: "experience is, for me, the highest authority," (1961, p. 23).

One of the key concepts with which his name will always be associated have to do
with being as "real" as possible with both client and oneself. Existentialists will recognize
this as authenticity. Another philosophical thrust of Rogers was concerned with the
becoming of the individual, the growth, personal development, and release of uniqueness.
"It has been my experience" said Rogers (1961, p. 26), "that persons have a basically
positive direction." No matter how "pathological" they may appear or may actually be, the
individual is nevertheless striving and moving at some core level towards self-expression,
positive growth, self-actualization. When this is achieved at a high level, he regarded that
individual as having become a fully functioning person, the goal towards which all strive.
Key books are: On Becoming a Person, (1961); Client-centered Therapy, (1951); Person
to Person: the Problem of Being Human (1967; see also Rogers, 1980).

Ultimate Concerns as Addressed by Humanistic Psychology. If the root
ultimate concern is nonbeing, as Tillich has suggested (1952), then humanistic psychology
has unquestionably been one of the more important historical building blocks of the
psychology of ultimate concerns. Perhaps more subjectively than ontologically, it is
nevertheless vitally concerned with being. In fact, it will be recognized that most of the
essential issues of the humanist movement could be subsumed by the central theme of
this essay, the ultimate concerns of humankind.

"Tragedy, confrontation with death, unhappiness, etc.," says Maslow, "can be
rapturous peak-experiences in that they sometimes clarify certain aspects of reality ('Being
knowledge'; Being-cognition). Our happiest and our unhappiest moments are also similar
or parallel in certain other puzzling ways... and may even come close to fusing in a peculiar
way, especially in love and in death, and probably also in religion" (1964, p. xvi). And
Geiger (Maslow, 1971), referring to the peak experience, says, "it is individuality freed of isolation" (p. xvii). Freedom indeed, it is a moment of ultimate existential freedom.

So too, Rogers (1961), speaking as usual from the point of view of the psychotherapist, notes the characteristic elements of the "process of the good life": increasing openness to experience, increasingly existential living (fully in each moment); increasing trust in one's organism (inner authentic guidance system); increasing freedom in one's direction of life, creativity, and richness of life. All topics suspiciously familiar: the brevity of life, authenticity, freedom, responsibility, and meaning.

The "Unnoticed Revolution" (Humanistic psychology) as Maslow (1970a, p. x) referred to it, spanned the breadth of human endeavor from active social philanthropy to the most profound introspection into humanity's spiritual essence. Both it and Existential psychology celebrate having gotten hold of the very stuff of human nature, humankind's ultimate concerns (see Maslow, 1968, "What Psychology Can Learn from the Existentialists", chapter 2, pp. 9-17).

**Existential Psychology**

The parents of psychology are both philosophy and science, and the parents of existential psychology are both existential philosophy and the differentiated humanistic and psychodynamic streams of psychology. Under their combined impetus it was inevitable that a theoretical creed would emerge, frankly declaring that the field was in fact existential psychology. This has come to be known as the field that deals, in a direct hands-on manner, with ultimate concerns, the theoretical springs of existential psychology.

On a practical level, the simultaneous realization gradually appeared that real psychotherapy patients frequently do deal with issues that had formerly been regarded as
belonging either to philosophers or theologians. More often the latter; when such issues actually became problematic they were handed over to the clergy.

There was another broad reason underlying the increased appearance and acknowledgment of ontological issues in psychology clinics at this period in time: the stage of history of the world. With World War II humankind had seen firsthand a breadth of devastation that it had naively believed would be precluded, a mere score of years previously, by what the politicians trumpeted was to be the “the war to end all wars.” But that was not the end; at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was seen the horror that many still believe to be a preview of future inevitability. In a very real sense, the world is now faced with the need for a “nuclear psychology.”

Self-destruction by nuclear holocaust; the rape and slow murder of the earth environment; the gradual disappearance of human contact in a world totally dependent on mechanization; the transmutation of unprecedented material prosperity into unprecedented greed; the decline of the stabilizing influence of institutional religion; the takeover of personal and psychological “space” by ubiquitous media... the list of woes is a long one. This worldwide anomie is felt by many sensitive individuals as a crisis in which they personally are involved, and in fact, they are.

As has been described at some length, the long lineage of existential psychology stems largely from philosophy and meanders through psychoanalysis, humanism, and phenomenology. Figures involved in the history of existential psychology per se, as contrasted to existential philosophy, have been predominantly European, and Europe’s fascination with Indology during the latter 19th century may have contributed (e.g., Craig, 1993), for similarities of existential thought to Indian philosophical concepts are easily recognizable. At any rate, when the European traditions of psychoanalysis and existential philosophy crossed the Atlantic they merged with the stream of humanistic thought that
was simultaneously on the rise in North America (Maslow, 1968). The result was an inevitable softening in tone of some of the harsher original existential views of, for example, Sartre (1956). The writings of Boss (1977, see also Craig, 1993), Frankl (1969, 1984), May (1958a, 1958b, 1979, 1983), and Tillich (1952) are good examples of the more positive spirit that resulted.

Phenomenological psychiatrists of note included Minkowski (France), Straus (Germany and the United States), and von Gebsattel (Germany). Prominent existential psychiatrists were Binswanger, Storch, Boss, Bally, Kuhn (all in Switzerland); Van Den Berg, Buysendijk (Holland); and Frankl (Austria). In America, Tillich, a German by birth and a theologian by choice, became one of existential psychology's most eloquent spokesmen. May introduced the term "Existential Psychology" in *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology* (May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958; see also May, 1973/1960, May, 1983). Then Yalom greatly popularized the movement by his book, *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980).

**Key Points.** The fundamentals of existential philosophy have been reviewed earlier. When these principles are focused in a psychology setting, the following features are salient:

- A person-centered, phenomenological viewpoint is assumed. Life problems exist within the experiential sphere of the individual; environmental influences and early childhood experiences are essentially moot issues.
- Emphasis is put on "what is existentially real for the given living person" rather than on "what is abstractly true" (May & Yalom, 1989, p. 373). Temporality, as concern for the moment, is of fundamental importance.
Authenticity is the only truly acceptable mode of being. It may take the form of feeling, intellectualism, or another, but any other qualitative posture toward life and self is, by definition, is a lie.

Four major issues were elevated to special status following Yalom's seminal book, *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980): Death, Freedom, Isolation, and Meaninglessness. As has been previously discussed, this list is hardly exhaustive. Yalom selected these for their centrality to existentialism, and especially because of their clinical relevance: they subsume the bulk of existential issues appearing in real psychotherapy settings.

Existential angst is real. People are compelled to face, at some level of consciousness, the existential Givens, the absolute and intimidating limits of life on earth. Their maladaptive efforts to cope with these represent pathology, according to the paradigm adopted from psychodynamic theory:

Existential threat $\rightarrow$ (existential) angst $\rightarrow$ Defenses $\rightarrow$ psychopathology

Above all, the emphasis is on the subjective and the idiosyncratic. The individual and the individual's world are essentially united and inseparable. *World* is the creation of "the environment persons create for themselves through exercising the capacities producing being and the expression of that being in action" (Maddi, 1989, p. 140). Since each individual participates in the design of its personal world, that world is unique. Also, there is emphasis on one's affective-subjective history of relationships as structuring and constituting the current, dynamically ongoing world.

**Ultimate Concerns in Clinical Psychology: Existential Psychotherapy**

Foregoing sections have endeavored to illustrate that ultimate concerns have long been alive and well in formal scholastic psychology, appearing in some form in almost all
branches of theory since before Freud. But much contemporary existential thinking has been quietly nourished by experiences of psychologists in the clinical setting. This is quite discernable in the writings of Jung, Bugental, and many others. Attention to these “eternal” values in the field of applied clinical psychology and psychotherapy has been gaining popularity; this is where its practical worth is proven.

In what must have been among the earliest of such non-theoretical observations, Heidegger pointed out the peculiar and paradoxically salubrious effect that a person’s conscious awareness of death can have on that person’s life (e.g., Kisiel, 1993). On the one hand, the knowledge that inevitably, death lies ahead for each person, induces, almost by definition, a state of (existential) anxiety. On the other hand, this knowledge imparts vivid, complete clarity and understanding to our life, and permits us to put everything in such firm perspective that, at the same time, the anxiety of uncertainty is reduced or dispelled (Solomon, 1972; Tomer, 1994). Existential therapists have joined forces with humanistic psychotherapists in their efforts to “rediscover the living person amid the dehumanization of modern culture” (May & Yalom, 1989, p. 373), by emphasizing personal authenticity in the face of reality as we know it.

**The Institution.** It has been typical of the collective group of people who have become identified with existential thought, be they novelists or psychiatrists, to avoid labeling themselves as such. Likewise, since that term became popular, existential psychotherapy has resisted containment in a “school.” May and Yalom (1989), denying that there is a formal institution as such, declare that therapists from any school “can legitimately call themselves existential if their assumptions are similar” to those they discuss (p. 375). They correctly emphasize it is “a way of conceiving the human being... [and] emphasize the assumptions underlying all systems of psychotherapy” (p. 375)
That there should thus be an absence of formal training institutions has not turned out so. Through the efforts of Viktor Frankl and his followers, logotherapy organizations are presently situated the world over. But of most importance is that there is a healthy growing interest among health practitioners in the application of ultimate concerns such as death and meaning to many clinical areas previously regarded as the domain of more superficial behavioral or cognitive-behavioral approaches.

**What Existential Psychotherapy Is.** Existential psychotherapy is the clinical application of existential psychology to personal problems. It makes a point of interpreting problems in an existential context, thereby confronting ontological questions that are normally not confronted by either clients or health practitioners alike. It begins with the assumption that these questions exist to one degree or another in every individual's experiential world. And it assumes that one's personal *weltanschauung*, as the foundation for all areas of functioning, can be distorted by maladaptive coping with ontological issues. That maladaptive coping can take almost any form, and it may appear merely as avoidance, as defensive strategies. On the other hand it may be actively overcompensated for, as with suicide or psychotic reaction.

In any case, the approach is person-centered, phenomenological, and centered in the present. One of the few constants in this strategy is that a primary goal of the therapist will be to promote authenticity within the client.

There is a narrowing of focus to ontological issues that are more relevant to individual lives and conflicts. As mentioned, issues of death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness, as emphasized by Yalom (1980), and especially the *angst* associated with them, are likely to have a prominent clinical presence, and/or can at least serve as good starting hypotheses. Personal freedom is considered in the ultimate context; isolation will try to be reconciled with social functioning; meaning and purpose (or
meaninglessness) with goals, rewards, and motivation in life; and death provides the realistic framework for life here and now. An effort is made to link pathological symptoms to intrapsychic defenses, and thence back to the underlying anxiety. The existential approach does not recognize limitations to specific areas of psychopathology.

**How Existential Psychotherapy Is Unique.** Existential psychotherapy differs from other therapeutic approaches in certain explicit ways. Whereas behavioral approaches tend to compromise external validity for the sake of internal validity, existentialists insist upon relationship to "real life"; real life is, of course, the experiential world of the individual. The classic Freudian approach assumes that the person is driven "from below"; indeed, Freud once described himself as having "always lived in the parterre and basement of the building" (Binswanger, 1963, p. 4). On the other hand, existentialists maintain the existence of the "upper story" of potentiality. Potential is actually the real nature of the individual, who, they insist, at the same time must take responsibility for all his or her actions. Whereas Adlerian and Interpersonal psychotherapeutic approaches emphasize the individual's *Mitwelt* (social world) existentialists maintain that *Eigenwelt* (internal world) is an essential cornerstone (actually all three, including *Umwelt*). Whereas a client-centered approach will generally be willing just to go along with, e.g., a client's avoidance of responsibility, existentialists feel obligated to have the patient confront directly the anxiety-provoking givens of existence. Whereas Jungian psychotherapy is eager to place intrapsychic conflicts within a broad archetypal-unconscious frame of reference, existentialists want to focus on the here and now, the seat of existential responsibility, freedom and possibility. Whereas cognitive therapists will do their best to assist the client to a place of internal ease and comfort, existentialists maintain that while self-acceptance is a necessary goal, it can never be achieved by compromising the
courage for and necessity of facing the uncertainty of life, and anxiety will always be an inevitable part of that courage (May & Yalom, 1989).

In the final analysis, the whole supporting philosophy of existential psychotherapy involves life-meaning or meaninglessness, or derivative issues. There are few areas of psychopathology where this becomes more apparent than in the case of victims of trauma. In the words of Janoff-Bulman and Frantz (1997), "the [trauma] survivor's crisis is an existential one about the meaninglessness of the universe.... After intense victimization we are forced to recognize and examine our most basic assumptions about the world and our existence" (Janoff-Bulman & Frantz, 1997, p. 92). Additional remarks about this specific connection with life-meaning are made below.

That there is no treatment manual is not a concern for existential therapists. Idiosyncratic manifestations of problems also presupposes unique potentialities. Clinicians must rely on their own authentic life experience to assist in diverting these forces away from disabling cyclical patterns toward constructive growth and re-creation of clients' personal universes. As Maddi says, the existentialist viewpoint is a "set of attitudes, a manifesto—more than a systematic theory of personality..." (1989, p. 137), and this is equally true as applied to formulating clinical strategy.

The cumulative writings of major pioneering figures, and other more recent but still insightful contributors, serve as a literature base. References to some of the work of Binswanger, Bugental, Frankl, May and Yalom, to mention a few, are provided in this study. Much overlap will be seen to exist with humanistic psychology, a field which also provides abundant food for thought. Reflecting the growing popularity and relevance of this approach, there is an ever-growing abundance of published case material in almost all areas of psychopathology and social problem areas.
As hinted at previously, an existential view to psychology seems peculiarly appropriate for the current times. Global threats such as environmental deterioration, the AIDS epidemic, and nuclear war, combined with an excess of freedom from a two-generation economic boom and the technological revolution, are changing the way fundamental meanings are dealt with. Anomie, decline/loss of religious values, escapism into fantasy bordering on the psychotic (acting out movie violence, video immersion), technology overload, and dehumanization of health care are altering basic human relations. Genetic engineering and birth control technology is removing responsibility and the need for self-control from the individual, and redefining our concept of biological life itself. It would be quite myopic to suppose that troubles are a new invention, but their broad cultural context has indisputably changed over the ages. Technology alone has quite literally changed the face of the planet and broadened people’s view of the physical universe; an expanded life-worldview of values is now fitting (Emmons, 1999).
CHAPTER 2

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

The basic feature of human existence is of an absolutely immaterial, unobjectifiable, unreifiable character. It consists of a perceptive openness for, and a responsivity to, whatever presences come to appear, and so be, in that worldly realm of openness, as which the human being exists.... It extends or "exists" as far as the temporally and spatially most distant beings and events that address us with meaning.

—Boss (1977, p. 186)

In emphatically denying the substantiality of matter, and declaring that our everyday reality consists of ideas (be they our own or belonging to God), Berkeley unmistakably identified himself as one of the early phenomenologists of the modern age. This direction, in reaction against the previous structuralist notions, was further developed in Germany during the 1920s through the work of Wertheimer, Kohler, and Koffka. Gestalt psychology in a sense went beyond functionalism to suggest that the whole (thought and behavior) is greater than the sum of its parts (e.g., elementary sensations). It also explicitly rejected the determinism embodied in both behaviorism and the psychoanalytic view, asserting that the individual is actively coping with the environment. This point of view was subsequently influential in the birth of social psychological concepts by Lewin, and was then adapted to clinical use by Perls; it was also elaborated clinically and personologically by Kelly, Maslow, Rogers, and others.

But the epistemological phenomenology which served as the bedrock of both the Gestalt psychology and Humanistic psychology schools, had its deeper origins in the philosophy concurrently burgeoning during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Since at
least Greek times (see e.g., Sextus Empiricus, Popkin, 1966, 1999c), there have been movements of philosophical skepticism which seem to represent periods of exasperation at "the frailty of human knowing" (Copenhaver & Schmitt, 1992, p. 43). By this is meant the difficulty of being able to arrive confidently at a sense of who we are, where we may be going, and indeed, what is "out there." The writings of Montaigne in the late 16th century are also famous in that they embody a widespread skeptical reaction to the early science of Francis Bacon and others in those times.

But these movements seem to have been like infantile explosions in comparison to the philosophical approach to that problem that matured in the late 19th century. Husserl's publication of Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Psychology in 1913 (Carr, 1999; Kockelmans, 1999) introduced a formal epistemology that embodied, in the words of Solomon (1972), "the goals towards which previous philosophers have been groping" (p. 143). It began a trend which later captured Heidegger, Sartre, and one of its most eloquent modern exponents, Merleau-Ponty.

The phenomenological view revolves around fundamental questions of perception, how consciousness can contact external objects (as opposed to "representations" of objects within consciousness), and the problem of "necessary truth," that is, a priori assumptions about the nature of the universe. These questions were naturally confronted by generations of thinkers before Husserl. But Husserl realized that the objectivist natural-science approach to knowledge was fatally flawed because it required that the acquisition of all knowledge be done through human experience. By placing this issue at the forefront of what must be solved, he committed himself to developing a method of doing so, and as such deserves credit as the founding influence in the phenomenological method that was also promoted by and identified with his student, Heidegger (Solomon, 1972).
To briefly recapitulate, Heidegger's phenomenology is the study of the essence of things, rather than apparent features. *Dasein*, the self-aware person, is part of his or her own experiential world. It is erroneous to try to know the being (person) apart from the person's world, because there is a reciprocal relationship or dependency of knowing one or the other; we cannot know either part better than the other. The fundamental subject-object relation was thus rejected by Heidegger.

But this viewpoint, far from closing the door on "reality," opens a new one. For it asserts that phenomenological reality (the only one), is actually quite accessible. *Being* is the sum total, the essence, of mental experiences. Thus *Dasein's* existential "givens" (limitations), its "own, usually inarticulate and implicit, self-understanding that also guides its understanding of everything else it encounters within the world" (Nenon, 1999, p. 683), also permit it to probe reality as itself (Faulconer & Williams, 1990a,b; Polkinghome, 1990; Williams, 1990).

Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 1963/1942), regarded today by some (Solomon, 1972) as perhaps the most articulate and thoroughly developed spokesperson of phenomenology, based his approach on concepts similar to those of Husserl and Heidegger. He both distinguished and endeared himself to philosophical followers, however, by emphasizing that phenomenology originates not in some transcendental or metaphysical self, as had been assumed by both Husserl and Heidegger (this latter expressed as *Dasein*), but in the body, inseparably from consciousness; hence perception plays a fundamental role in the whole system of phenomenology. Perception is the seat of all phenomenological experience, hence our physical existence lies at the root of our entire understanding of reality. "Body is the general medium for our having a world as well as its ambiguity" (Carr, 1999; Fisher, 1969; Flynn, 1999).
Phenomenological Research in Psychology

This section purports to lay some of the ground rules for the current research. By describing phenomenological research in a general way, a distinction is made with the natural science approach which is customary in most American settings. An outline of the theory will first demonstrate the validity and importance of phenomenological psychology and research, and set the general background for this study. A somewhat more detailed look at methods follows, which likewise puts our approach in proper context. Lastly, by way of introduction to the literature on the phenomena of meaning and meaningfulness, conceptually similar applications that have been published will be quickly mentioned.

Theory of Phenomenological Research

There has been growing disillusionment in the natural science approach to psychology for the past few decades, and simultaneously an awakening interest in qualitative and phenomenological methods. Resolution of the inevitable competition between internal and external validity has traditionally been on the side of internal "scientific rigor." "Fulfilling its goal of being precise, the attitude of science decides in advance the nature of the phenomenon that it studies" (Romanyshyn & Whalen, 1989, p. 24, italics in original). This has led to widespread dismay in a sector of the scientific community, that experimental output, though "accurate," is yet lacking in meaning with respect to real-world experiential contexts; that a large part of the experiential realm is simply being ignored because it seems unaccessible by conventional statistical methods. The sense that, as Osborne (1990) phrases it, research is "hard" but practice is "soft," has been increasingly questioned and to significant degree resolved (in the minds of many) by the development of phenomenological methods. Researchers no longer need cringe in
fear that their output lacks the *Imprimatur* stamp of structural equation modeling or whatever may be the current statistical fashion.

"Phenomenological psychology," says Fuller (1990), "... is one that focuses on meaning or, more precisely, on the human preoccupation with meaning" (p. 2). Though both it and conventional psychology recognize the reality of perceptions as interpretations of meanings, Fuller asserts that the important difference is how they answer the core question, "where is meaning located?" Conventional psychology assigns meaning to "an objective space," the same space in which behavior resides. Phenomenology locates meaning (and behavior, too) in an existential one. Meanings are not limited to perceptions, though the latter are understood by phenomenology to be their ultimate source; they are everything that surrounds us.

This view has its origins in the hermeneutical approach to the study of human behavior (Scruton, 1994), which devotes itself, via interpretation, to the study of reasons rather than causes, in contrast to the rationalist natural sciences. Psychology attempts to find a person's reasons for thoughts and behavior—inner reasons, not external causes. This is done by attempting to "enter" the person's world, to perceive and construe as that person does. An individual's experiential interface with the world cannot properly be called an explanation of the world, it is actually an ascribing of meaning to the world. The world with one's meanings so imposed on and in it—the Lebenswelt—therefore represents one's life.

From the beginning, the phenomenological approach has been essentially continental European. The bulk of philosophical writings have come from Germanic (Husserl, Scheler, Schutz, Heidegger) and French (Sartre, Merleau-Ponty) contributors. American psychologists have been relatively slow to catch up, sidetracked in the early part
of the 20th century by restrictions that behaviorism decreed must be part of "scientific" psychology.

Husserl's phenomenology is "the study of what appears to the mind, in the act of self-conscious reflection" (Scruton, 1994, p. 228). Husserl contended that human sciences like psychology ought to deal with human experiences in the most subjective way. A proper evaluation or study of this field then involves examination of these experiences themselves. After all, says Polkinghome (1989), “there is no viewpoint outside of consciousness from which to view things as they exist independently of our experience of them” (p. 45). Since consciousness is intentional, elucidation of experiences would therefore involve systematic description and examination of both subject-object aspects, which are essentially inseparable in such a science. In addition, besides clarifying the experience per se, this approach should also elucidate the phenomena of human consciousness upon which it all rests: time, space, intention, memory, imagination, and so forth. It is noteworthy that Husserl believed that this approach represented a radically new philosophical method (Carr, 1999; Faulconer & Williams, 1990a,b; Giorgi, 1984; Kockelmans, 1990; Williams, 1990).

However, although adopting the point of view of phenomenological philosophy, phenomenological psychology is not philosophy. It differs from philosophy primarily in having a more specific focus, on experiences particular to specific groups of individuals rather than all human beings; and in having an essentially empirical methodology, a systematic approach to gathering experiential data from people, and analyzing it following a systematic and replicable protocol (Polkinghome, 1989). This methodicalness will be elaborated below, and hopefully will stimulate reflection on pre-existing biases about what constitutes good science. Several key characteristics of the phenomenological approach follow.
Qualitative empiricism. Though qualitative instead of quantitative, proponents of this method assert that it lacks nothing in empirical value. Replicability and verifiability (or falsifiability) are maintained (von Eckartsberg, 1986, 1998a). Phenomenologists distinguish between empirical-phenomenological and hermeneutical-phenomenological psychology, in that the latter covers a potentially broader area of topics or data, to include any and all speech, literature and the arts, the emphasis being on spontaneously produced content. Though involving less structured methods of analysis, it is still content analysis, like empirical-phenomenological research. Distinction is also made between types of analysis involving process structure versus content structure (von Eckartsberg, 1986, 1998a).

There exists a more thorough literature on validity aspects of qualitative research (see references herein), but Polkinghorne (1989) sums it up in the following way. Validity of phenomenological investigations addresses the question whether the presentation has sufficient power to convince the audience that its findings are accurate. Accuracy of both transformational and synthetic steps (see below) should be demonstrated, as well as the overall question whether the general description of the phenomenon accurately embodies what the raw data collectively reported. Specific points of attention include whether the investigator introduced bias or neglected or omitted important points, and whether the general description fully covers the original data. (see also van Kaam, 1966).

Revealing Essences. Phenomenological investigation seeks to answer the question what? not why? (Polkinghorne, 1989). Phenomenological investigation strives to uncover the essence of objects. The phenomenological approach, like the natural science approach, seeks to understand an event. It asserts this can best be done by elucidating the essence of the event. However, unlike the natural science view, phenomenology says that controlling and predicting variables is not the way to do it. The way to understand the
essence of an event is to repeatedly examine different phenomenological occurrences or presentations of the event. "The structure of a phenomenon is, then, the commonality running through the many diverse appearances of the phenomenon" (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989, p. 14).

"The assumption of the phenomenological attitude thus implies that we describe something not in terms of what we already know or presume to know about it, but rather that we describe that which presents itself to our awareness exactly as it presents itself.... In the above dictum the 'things' toward which the phenomenological gaze struggles are no longer 'objects' as such (in the sense of naive realism), but rather their meanings, as given perceptually through a multiplicity of perspectival views and contexts" (von Eckartsberg, 1986, p. 5, italics added). "Human behavior is an expression of meaningful experience rather than a mechanically learned response to stimuli" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 43).

Von Eckartsberg (1986) notes that another fundamental postulate of existential phenomenology is our assumption that people share experiences. When one group of English-speaking Americans talks about a certain experience, another group of English-speaking Americans will be able to understand. This must be accepted as axiomatic, as in the rest of psychology, or the whole field disappears into an abyss of absurdity.

Bracketing. Husserl's methodology included a necessary attempt to separate subjective preconceptions of the world from observational attempts to describe the world: "phenomenological reduction," usually referred to in the phenomenological-psychology literature as "bracketing." Bracketing is an active method to reduce the illusion that the world "out there" exists independently of our consciousness, and can be "discovered" as an objective entity or set of entities. Bracketing is an attempt to achieve a "meta"-view which permits "observation," such as it is, of both observed world and observer. Bracketing
thus declares that our consciousness is not "discovering" events, it is entering into or
taking part in the creative process of those events. Moreover, events are participating and
have participated in the creation of our present consciousness, hence both consciousness
and events are co-creating each other.

Despite the intimate connection between the organism and its perceived world,
Husserl believed that it was possible to minimize cross-contamination in the scientific
investigation of a given topic by first consciously taking note of and separating one's
subjective assumptions, schemas, attitudes regarding the topic, revealing the essence of
the object. Application of this methodology purports to eventually map the limits or
boundaries of the phenomenon under study.

The complementary result of this is that the "subject" (observer) becomes purified
of all identifying characteristics, becoming a transparent "something about which nothing
can be said" (Scruton, 1994, p. 229). Heidegger later rejected this notion as intrinsically
impossible; Merleau-Ponty agreed, stating the essentially we can no more abandon our
subjective presuppositions than our fundamental self-consciousness itself (von
Eckartsberg, 1986).

"Objects" of study most valuable to empirical phenomenologists are peoples' lived
experiences. Properly speaking, bracketing is a continuing process of ongoing refinement,
and one does not expect to reach an "endpoint" (Polkinghome, 1989; Valle, King, &

**Existential-Phenomenological Paradox.** However, as noted, to reveal
phenomenological essences we depend on language; and we depend therefore on
experience. A paradox occurs in the fact that experience is individual, concrete, and
unique; while language is by necessity general and transmissible; in a word, it is
communication between individualities. Stated another way, existential reality is particular
and individual, while phenomenology, if it deals with essence, is general. This paradox of interdependence, of course, underlies all of science and experience; phenomenology openly acknowledges it (von Eckartsberg, 1986).

It was stated previously that consciousness has been a particularly elusive field for scientific inquiry. This is no doubt because of the objective-science stance that has historically been assumed. Major problems in the psychological study of the processes of consciousness, are outlined by Polkinghome (1989). One problem is that consciousness, unlike material objects, is insubstantial (unmeasurable) and dynamic, being always in a state of flux. Similarly, it is always filled with contents, and a complex of different modes of presentation (e.g., perceptions vs. memories); but although its operations are also constantly going on, only their outcome can be seen. Finally, access to consciousness is difficult. The process of observation itself involves a perturbation of the original consciousness, and further transformation into language another involves yet another change. This would be problematic enough with one's own consciousness, but the investigation of another's consciousness extends the difficulties, and includes the influence of culture.

In the phenomenological approach lies the answer, because "phenomenological research is descriptive... and qualitative... but it has, in addition, a special realm of inquiry—the structures that produce meaning in consciousness" (Polkinghome, 1989, p. 44, italics added). The above constraints thus dictate the necessity of the following procedure: (1) Gather a number of subjective ("naive") descriptions of the experience from participants who have had it; (2) Analyze to reveal common elements, essentials of the experience; and (3) Report a description of the experience accurately, clearly, so reader will understand the experience (Polkinghome, 1989).
Methods in Phenomenological Research

Four Basic Steps

There is no standardized method in phenomenological research. Valle (1998), for example, illustrates with examples various approaches; nevertheless there are common threads. Von Eckartsberg (1986, 1998a) describes four steps or parts of a complete phenomenological inquiry: definition of the phenomenon and research questions, data-generation, data analysis, and presentation of results.

Additionally, one could include Wertz's (1984) elaboration of the elements of the "subjective stance of the researcher" (some of which will be recognized as generally good clinical interviewing principles). The first is empathy, patience, intense interest, and suspended belief. Also important is being concept-guided, and aware of language expression. Perhaps most important is maintaining a focus on immanent meanings rather than details, relevance, and the relationships among constituents. These points will not be specifically elaborated here, although there is much relevance to the following.

Definition of the Phenomenon. The first task is to delineate the area of investigation and specific research questions. Data can be self-reported from other people, subjectively reported by the investigator (self-reflection data), or derived from other sources, as in hermeneutical research (Polkinghorne, 1989). Participants must have several necessary characteristics. They must have had the experience, and they must be able to sense (access), express, and articulate the thoughts and feelings surrounding the experience. The latter suggests that there must exist a certain level of interest or motivation. Collectively, their experiences should ideally cover the experiential range of the topic, and this is what should determine the number of participants, rather than a need to provide statistical validity to an arbitrary sample size. Generalizability results from exactly
that full coverage of the phenomenon; in turn this depends on the inherently specific or
general nature of the phenomenon.

**Data Generation.** The Interview. Experiential data is traditionally obtained via
interview, the purpose of which is to delve into the subjective experience of the
interviewee. The interview itself, normally part of the data-gathering procedure, is generally
unstructured and not time-limited. Details of procedural uniformity between participants
are obviously irrelevant. The interview ideally accesses the experience with minimal
interpretation or theorizing on the part of the participant; the end goal, as always, is to
capture the essence of the experience. Variations on specific approaches are mentioned

*The Protocol Life Text.* The next step is to generate data, usually by way of
narratives of “co-researchers” (this term is widely used and appropriate in the sense that
an iterative process of refinement and elaboration is used, in which the participant actually
continues to investigate his or her own experience in greater depth. The term, “participant,”
will also be employed herein.

**Data Analysis: Explication and interpretation.** The reflective attitude that is a
normal human asset forms the core on which is built good phenomenological investigation.
The interface between interdependent yet paradoxical (private, individualized) experience
and (public, generalized) language lies in the everyday human behavior of reflecting on
experience, according to von Eckartsberg (1986). This reflection consists of reporting,
narratization, conceptualizing, and reconceptualizing. Through a process of successive
refinement, clarification, and interpretation, we (automatically) endeavor, by stripping the
topic of circumstantial and idiosyncratic nonessentials, to reduce it to a more or less
enduring and reliable essence.
"Experience is not indistinct and unstructured chaos; it appears as differentiated and structured" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 51). The aim of the actual data analysis is to get at the meaning-structure, the logic, interrelationships and principles of coherence, and circumstances regarding these: both the structure of meaning and how it is created. The process of bringing this out is referred to as explication; here implicit meanings are revealed (van Kaam, 1966). Explication depends on an explication guiding question which keeps things focused.

The process is in many ways similar to normal human discourse. The essence of a topic is arrived at by: first articulating as fully as possible the topic as a subjective life-experience; second, abstracting the essential "meaning-constituents" or themes; then negotiating a satisfactorily meaningful interface between the two levels of description, everyday narrative language (idiosyncratic, individualized), and structural conceptual language (generalized, formalized).

Although there is no universal, inviolable standard or procedure for the explication, Polkinghorne (1989) describes several research applications, which condense to the following steps (see also Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997):

1. Familiarization by the researcher with the overall database; and selection of data statements to ensure that the entire span of experiential statements is covered. The use of other judges is possible.

2. Classification of the data into categories, units that seem to be self-contained, i.e., that are separable from each other by a recognizable transition. This is a judgmental process; the major obstacle here is to classify the material according to the respondents' own original naive content, not according to theoretical or a priori assumptions of the researcher. This "art" is, of course, one that is also required
(though frequently not admitted to) in a great deal of conventional positivistic research.

(3) Linguistic transformation and reduction of the raw data units into more accurately and precisely descriptive terms (and words) of the researcher. This is an attempt to capture the meaning essence of each category, concisely; and each block is referred to as a "meaning unit." This is referred to as transformation because the descriptive words are transformed from those of the participant to those of the researcher. Traditional content analysis differs by attempting to quantify and elucidate relationships among the original words and phrases. Polkinghorne (1989) says reflection and imaginative variation of the linguistic transformation are thought processes necessarily invoked by the researcher in this process.

(4) Eliminate any reduced statements that are irrelevant to the phenomenon or experience in question.

(5) Synthesis, or clustering of meaning units into theme clusters. This is done by application or testing the preliminary clusters against other protocols to see if they fit correctly. If other elements are discovered the thematic units are modified until they adequately define the themes. This step also involves the important transition from situated meaning units or structure to general structure. The result arrived at is considered to be a valid description of the phenomenon, for the given population. Like the previous transformational step, this is a process of successive refinement which may also involve other researchers.

(6) Usually a final step is included, involving going back to the original participants with the reformulated description, and having them confirm that it accurately embodies their experience. Modifications may take place here.
(7) Another step may also be included: trying to tie the thematic units together into a general expression of the phenomenon.

The goals of data analysis are as follows: (1) to describe the structure of a certain experience, not a parameter of the group of people who had the experience; (2) to find general insights (in individual reflections); (3) to compare analyzed individuals by identifying common convergences, not worrying about idiosyncrasies; and (4) to imaginatively generate new instances or examples of the phenomenon, gradually delineating the limits and boundaries of the definitions. This is thus a reversal of the conventional attitude of natural science, "turning away from the way things are in order to begin with how they have already been defined" (Romanyszyn & Whalen, 1989, p. 26).

The result of this process is revealing both "situated structure" (meaning situation-dependent), and "general structure." Polkinghorne (1989) calls this "essential structure"; it is made up of components or elements that determine its identity. Von Eckartsberg (1998a) calls this structure, meaning configuration, principle of coherence, and circumstances of occurrence and clustering, its "psycho-logic." Van Kaam (1966) outlined substantially the same essential steps involved in explication of narrative data. They are used as a template in the Results chapter. The guiding question remains, "How does this description reveal, embody, be illustrative of meaninglessness?"

**Presentation of Results, Formulation.** The final step is the presentation of the results. Wertz (1984) asserts that in this idealized procedure, the phenomenon can be presented as a description of the general class, along with the diversity or variation of specific instances within the class. Polkinghorne (1989) notes that results should be presented to some extent according to the nature of the audience. This may be scholarly, technical, or at a popular level.
Although this discussion has primarily had in mind individual participants, the principles are generally also valid for group research. Baker and Hinton (1999), for example, discuss various ramifications of relationship dynamics in "participatory research" as applied to groups.

Applications of Phenomenological Research

Von Eckartsberg (1986) has reviewed important applications of empirical-existential and hermeneutical-phenomenological methods. In order to limit the material, only life-text materials of the latter category will be mentioned here, but it should be understood that literary texts and other archival and/or artistic materials also lend themselves to analysis.

Valle (1998) notes that the phenomenological approach has been equally well suited for both existential and transcendental domains of experience. This is an interesting distinction, and is worth keeping in mind. The existential view, while in no way diminishing emotional experience, insists on groundedness in the here-and-now; this is, after all, the fundamental nature of Dasein. Transpersonal psychology seeks to recognize more completely realms of experience that are not necessarily anchored in the present human life, asserting that issues of freedom, meaninglessness, and so forth are "transcendable by a transformation of one's state of consciousness and sense of identity, such as can occur through meditation" (Walsh, 1989, p. 547). Transpersonal psychology is also interested in the extension of consciousness into altered states, and in alternative belief systems and potentially mystical or spiritual "realities," life after death being one such example; perhaps a better one is the near-death experience.
There is obviously a great amount of overlap on many aspects, and the distinction is admittedly somewhat academic, but expanding the terminological base emphasizes the main point that the phenomenological approach can be useful in describing and exploring human experience, without the content or experiential limitations of strictly quantitative methods.

Among empirical-existential applications, von Eckartsberg (1986) distinguishes between several kinds of research questions that can be addressed: (1) What is the topic under study, essentially? (2) How does a process happen? and (3) Does the data validate the phenomenological construct under examination?

There are other ways to classify studies: Valle and Halling's (1989) treatment of the field divides various topics into "classical" as well as developmental, social, and clinical psychology, existential areas, and transpersonal areas. Valle (1998) breaks up material into "existential dimensions" and "transpersonal dimensions."

There exist a number of major texts on phenomenology in psychology (e.g., Fewtrell & O'Connor, 1995; Pollio et al., 1997; Valle, 1998; Valle & Halling, 1989; van Kaam, 1966; von Eckartsberg, 1986) as well as an abundant literature of journal articles. These sources will provide additional bibliographical leads for the interested reader. It will probably be most useful to present a general classification of content areas which have been reviewed according to von Eckartsberg's (1986) outline. What follows is a somewhat arbitrary assignment of studies to the different categories. There is a great amount of overlap among these categories; many studies attempt to decompose an experience into components, but remain essentially descriptive. Some studies are strictly empirical, while others are heavily theoretical-conceptual. The present purpose is to offer a taste of the general flavors of phenomenological studies, as these are distinctive from the usual rational-empirical fare.
What Is the Topic under Study?


Valle's (1998) Existential selection includes "Dissociative Women's Experiences of Self-cutting"; "Psychology of Forgiveness"; "Women's Psychospiritual Paths Before, During and after Finding it Difficult to Pray to a Male God." His Transpersonal domain includes experiences of being silent, being unconditionally loved, being with suffering, being with a dying person, feeling grace in voluntary service to the terminally ill, encountering a divine presence during a near-death experience, and a study of the phenomenology of synchronicity.


Several other existentially-oriented empirical-phenomenological studies from the recent literature include "Authentic Experience" (Rahilly, 1993), and "Batterers' Experiences of Being Violent" (Reitz, 1999).

**How Does a Process Happen?**

Fewtrell and O'Connor (1995) targeted an array of subjective symptomatology associated with various pathological syndromes. Not traditional empirical-phenomenological studies, these are, rather, discussions of phenomenological theory. Their emphasis is on revealing aspects of cognitive and emotional mechanisms, although subjective descriptions are included. They discuss cognition, information processing, physiology, and experiences of self in panic disorder; cognitive and emotional symptoms associated with psychogenic dizziness; the experience of depersonalization; cognitive and physiological aspects of craving as pathology; the phenomenology of the Capgras syndrome (“the delusion that a specific person, or persons, have been replaced by near-identical doubles, who are imposters”; p. 128); and experiences of positive aesthetic and “enlightenment” states.

Formation." Presented in Vaile and Halling (1989) are discussions of transformation of the passions, and mostly theoretical transpersonal discussions of states of consciousness and the "imagery in movement" method of inquiry.

**Does the Data Validate the Phenomenological Construct under Examination?**


The now widespread acceptance of the universality of the near-death experience, and its profound aftereffects, have generated an abundant phenomenological literature itself. Over the past several decades, studies have gone from purely descriptive (e.g., Moody, 1975, 1977) to more analytic approaches (e.g., Atwater, 1994; Basford, Bauer, 1985; 1990; Greyson, 1991; Noyes, 1980; Ring, 1984, 1992; West, 1998). In conclusion, mention should be made of another familiar area, that of peak experiences, in which Maslow's original studies (1964) helped to validate and popularize this approach to the extent that the current psychological literature still contains many similar investigations (e.g., Hoffman, 1998).
CHAPTER 3
LITERATURE REVIEW:
CONCEPTUAL DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

—Lewis Carroll (1982, p. 136)

The topic of Meaning and Meaninglessness is apparently so intimidating, that in works in which it might well belong, such as treatments of religion (and many others), it is studiously avoided. It is also intimidating because it touches a sensitive spot within researchers and subjects alike: existential truths are often uncomfortable to contemplate (Ebersole, 1998). But the principal reason for its neglect seems to be that it encompasses a vast number of ill-defined constructs that lack clearly demarcated boundaries, overlap and ramify in countless directions, and prove not very amenable to the quantitative approaches which sanctify much of current science. Thus in-depth coverage demands a broad ecumenical viewpoint or integration of interests on the part of the investigator. For all these reasons it should be obvious that the following review of the literature cannot make a claim to "completeness." What this section does purport to establish are foundations of meaning and meaninglessness that will be satisfactory as a theoretical basis, and that in turn can be converted into working definitions. What is aimed at is to provide a fair and representative sampling of areas of current interest, questions currently being asked, and conclusions (however tentative) that have been arrived at.
Limitations of This Review. First, some guidelines should be set out as to certain matters that will and will not be addressed. Meaninglessness is widely accepted by virtually all scholars as lack of meaning; hence the unavoidable necessity of covering both terms. Meaning is the foundational term for meaninglessness, which would be incomprehensible without considering sources of meaning.

As will become clear presently, meaning and meaninglessness have often been used in senses other than specifically ontological. Though they are inevitably related, these uses have been labeled "generic" to distinguish them from those pointedly ontological applications which dominate this review. The latter are usually specified as "meaning of/in life" or something similar.

This treatise purports to deal with psychology, not philosophy, nor sociology, although it will be obvious by now that these other areas are intimately related. Any of these and undoubtedly many more points of view could be assumed while covering the same area, and each would impose its bias on the whole. The present bias is psychological.

In developing the constructs of meaning and meaninglessness, many commentators (not all) have drawn heavily upon empirical research. Although empirical work is included in this survey, no need was felt to repeat details serving as evidence for the conceptual statements made here. For a further understanding of that role as empirical support, the reader should consult the works cited.

To the clinician, the term meaninglessness will likely first evoke memories related to his or her experiences with the clinical syndrome of depression. That is one among several complications that will not be a major focus here, although more will be said below. Whether the perception of meaninglessness is necessarily contiguous with the clinical syndrome, and under what circumstances, is a full-blown issue in its own right (see Flett,
Vredenburg, & Krames, 1997, for a recent review). For this and other entanglements that are rather summarily dispensed with even though they may have important relationships with the main topic, see the following sections, "Impact and Varieties of the Question" and "Contexts of Meaning and Meaninglessness."

**Organization of This Review.** This review of current literature on meaning and meaninglessness will be divided into two sections, "Conceptual Definitions and Terminology" (Chapter 3), and "Methodological Approaches" (Chapter 4). These will in turn be divided into smaller, more manageable parts according to the following plan.

*Literature Review Part I: Conceptual Definitions and Terminology,* by far the largest subsection, will concern itself with conceptual definitions and terminology, the various ways in which the domain of scholarly material has been approached. The principal points of the construct of Meaninglessness, by way of its parent term, Meaning, will be covered. As a conceptual background for the current research this is the area of most importance, which is reflected in its volume as presented here. In addition, there appears to be at least as much, if not more, written on the theoretical aspects of Meaning and Meaninglessness, than on genuinely empirical research. This section is divided as follows:

- **Social Crisis Context** places the whole issue (mostly in its existential sense) in its current global anthropological context, in order to establish a setting.
- "**Generic**" Meaning and Meaninglessness is concerned with an overview of background uses of these concepts that are not directly ontological, including the creation of meanings and categories thereof.
- **Meaning and Meaninglessness in/of Life** specifically addresses the existential area, "meaning in life." Subcategories cover an assortment of correctly or incorrectly related notions, the impact and contexts of this concept, happiness,

...
psychopathology, death, the "tragic" sense, values, self-concept, "higher" meaning and spirituality, goals, and age.

- *Sources and Dimensions of Meaning/ Meaninglessness in Life* covers the wide variety of classifications and dimensions of "meaning in life" that appear in the literature.

- *Summary: Sources of Meaning and Dimensions of Meaning* is an attempt to summarize and condense current conceptualizations in an understandable way.

*Literature Review Part II: Methodological Approaches* will survey the different methodological procedures and approaches to studying life-meaning or meaninglessness that appear in the body of empirical research. It is organized into four subsections:

- *Qualitative Approaches* reviews qualitative studies, most of a phenomenological nature.

- *Quantitative Approaches* reviews the generally nomothetic attempts to establish demographic patterns for these phenomena.

- *Instruments* is a brief summary of the most well-known paper-and-pencil measurements.

- *Populations* summarizes the various participant groups that have been examined.

**Social Crisis Context: The "Black Hole" of Meaninglessness**

There exists a widespread notion that deeper questions on the meaning of life are not addressed by "desperate" people struggling to survive. This kind of cogitation is seen as a luxury affordable only by people who have already attained security, comfort, and so forth (e.g., Baumeister, 1991). At face value this notion has some appeal, and as with
Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs, there is a temptation to adopt this kind of serial approach and accept the existence of fixed order of existential inquiry. Furthermore, Baumeister (1991), asserting that modern lives are full of only superficial meanings, notes that people frequently become uncomfortable and respond in evasive ways to questions of existential meaning in life, apparently in an effort to avoid the issue.

**World Crisis of Meaninglessness**

However, despite the average citizen's preoccupation with housing payments and taxes, many have not failed to notice in indirect ways that the United States, the West, and apparently the entire populated world is experiencing a period of nebulous confusion. It extends beyond economies, beyond ethnicities, beyond politics, beyond science. People recognize that it is a product of the era, of world history, but it remains difficult to identify precisely. This vague social unrest that has plagued the world for most of the 20th century is, in the view of many scholars, a crisis of meaning, or more accurately, a crisis of meaninglessness.

Tillich (1952) points out that pandemics of meaninglessness become evident during major epochal shifts in philosophy, as during the end of the classical period/beginning of Christian era, and the end of the medieval period/Renaissance. Philosophers say that there is currently in progress a shift to what has been labeled the "Postmodern" view. The uncertainty that is aggravated in times such as these concerns not only what the future holds, but how we think and will think, how we will see the world. And this is part of the problem, the crisis of meaninglessness.

It must be concluded that the presumed shallowness of "average" people is wrong; people do concern themselves with existentials, at least at some level of awareness. As with most personological dimensions, a continuum is most probable: some people who
struggle for a living will be quite asleep to existential matters; some will not. And some who are able to live leisurely will not seek any further meaning; but many will. In other words, it is probable that external circumstances is not the only factor that predisposes an individual to ask ultimate questions. Frankl (1984) says, “Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a ‘secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning.” (p. 105). The widespread existence of the “existential vacuum” (in recent times) is because “no instinct tells him what he has to do, and no tradition tells him what he ought to do; sometimes he does not even know what he wishes to do” (1984, p. 111).

Depending somewhat on outer circumstances, deeper questions will undoubtedly be more salient or less salient, but it would seems that they are always lurking in the existential recesses of human consciousness. It is illogical to suppose that it is just the intelligentsia which feels a vague uneasiness at the loss of traditional guideposts, for this minority of people does not shape world history alone. The “common man” also gropes in the absence of well-established, time-tested traditional meaning in his basic perception and understanding of self, humanity, the world, and now more than ever, the physical universe.

**Signs of the Crisis: Breakdown of Values and Ideologies.** Various formulations have described the current crisis. Theologian M. Novak (1998) describes the widespread social-existential ennui as the collapse of America’s cultural mythology. In the United States, he names five ways this is being manifested: boredom; collapse of the value set/system; helplessness; a sense of “betrayal by permissiveness, pragmatism, and value-neutral discourse” (p. 7); and drug experiences and promiscuity. Novak then contrasts the European experience of nothingness as taking the form of Neitzschian
nihilism. This is manifesting as a loss or failure of meaning, (quoting Neitzsche) “recognition of the long waste of strength” (p. 9); loss or failure of a holistic foundational or grounding or deity/deified principle infinitely greater than oneself; and a lack of a reason even to suppose there exists a “true” world “above and beyond” the one which one sees as pointless.

A similar litany of woes is recited by Naylor, Willimon, and Naylor (1994). Noting that university campus life is an excellent barometer of social malaise, they point out that on the one hand students are plunging headlong into a life of alcohol and drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, violence, and suicide, while on the other hand they are outwardly pursuing career paths promising exclusively “money, power, and things.” Where the signs of meaning-starvation could not be more obvious, young adults are provided with little guidance, opportunity, or encouragement to pursue that philosophical direction of inquiry which is most needed. They are being passively led to become new citizens of “the living dead.”

Viktor Frankl (1969, 1984) echoes a similar commentary on the crisis of our time. His term, will to meaning, “the basic striving of man to find and fulfill meaning and purpose” (1969, p. 35), is juxtaposed against the sociocultural age. “To those people who are anxious to have money as though it were an end in itself, ‘time is money.’ They exhibit a need for speed. To them, driving a fast car becomes an end in itself. This is a defense mechanism, an attempt to escape the confrontation with an existential vacuum” (1969, p. 97). “Every age has its own collective neurosis.... The existential vacuum which is the mass neurosis of the present time can be described as a private and personal form of nihilism....” (1984, p. 131)

Stace (2000) describes the crisis as a loss of moral principles and values. There is a rise of “ethical relativity” and a loss of belief in freedom of the will, in the face of various
kinds of cultural and historical determinisms. Stace predicts that society as a whole faces a serious dilemma as it attempts to negotiate the anguish of seeing historical illusions (especially traditional religion) crumble. But the individual can prevail; the first step is to strive for "honesty" (elaboration reveals that he really means authenticity) in trying to find "truth," whatever form it may take. The second step is to learn to live with it, despite the cultural anguish of uncertainty.

Baier (1982) also elaborates on how historical trends can explain the nature of the current social breakdown. The scientific view, evolving from the medieval theistic view, removed the idea that the purpose of a person's life was simply to do God's will; this seems to have left a vacuum of aimlessness. Evolutionary theory also undermined humanity's racial self-concept in two ways: it shattered the illusion of specialness, and at the same time confined the human race in only a limited window of historical time. At the same time this undermining of the influence of religion has exposed an old problem, humanity's vulnerability to death, hence meaninglessness. "How can there be any meaning in our life if it ends in death? What meaning can there be in it that our inevitable death does not destroy?" (Baier, 1982, p. 392). Such questions, formerly placated by the doctrine of the afterlife and the Christian standard of perfection, are renewed by the loss of these institutions. "Science shows life to be meaningless, because life is without purpose," concludes Baier (1982, p. 385), a verdict echoed by some other contemporary cosmologists also (Easterbrook, 1997).

Individual meanings reside in a matrix of meaning-systems, ideologies, offered by culture and society, and it is impossible to discuss individual meanings except within this context of societal-cultural meanings (Baumeister, 1991). Ideologies first comprise "a broad set of ideas that include ones telling people how to interpret the events of their lives and how to make value judgments" (p. 26); in other words, they preclude any consideration
of meanings being based on individual experience. Secondly, they are "psychological systems"; not just logical ones—they may be logically weak or inconsistent. Thirdly, they are successful because they offer a complete set of instructions, how to evaluate events, make attributions, how to cope with events; and finally, they permit movement of thinking between different levels of meaning; they allow connecting specific events into a general picture. In sum, they are from the beginning collective and not individual.

**Knowledge and Meanings: Supernova and Black Hole.** As a peculiarly apt analogy, a supernova describes the explosive "death" of a star. As the star evolves to a certain massiveness and composition, its increasingly heavy core collapses, and the surface layers react in a huge expansion outward—an explosion that gives the phenomenon its name. If conditions are correct, the core can collapse to a supermassive entity (or non-entity)—the black hole.

This paradoxical phenomenon is fitting as an analogy of the current age because human civilization has indeed seen a virtual explosion of knowledge since the end of the Middle Ages. But, based largely upon the expansion of science and technology, which strive to hold their distance from the "fallibility" of human consciousness, it has been, in a sense, superficial knowledge. The *meaning* structure that underlies knowledge is simultaneously collapsing into disarray. The resulting separation of meaning from knowledge is indeed being experienced as a "black hole," with all its disquieting connotations.

**The Self.** Since Erikson's theories of development and his concept of the "identity crisis" became popularized to the extent that he himself wearied of its overuse (Erikson, 1975), this term has been frequently applied to the difficulties faced by younger generations in accommodating trans-generational values. To some extent it is possible to view the world crisis as a sort of global identity problem. Much of the ado over social
"causes" in every land can be seen as struggles for identity by one faction or another. Personal or group identity is obviously intertwined tightly with values. But it is important to bear in mind that the global phenomenon in question has evolved over several centuries, and to an extent that has never been seen before, particularly in the Western hemisphere. It clearly encompasses more than a few generations, and it corresponds to a worldwide "paradigm shift" in philosophical worldview.

Baumeister (1991) points out that there is at least one historically persistent and identifiable trend that seems to bridge both topics. Selfhood has become a value base; that is, it can export value without importing it. The modern Self, reconstituted on the socioeconomic changes in leisure, wealth, and power that followed upon the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Post-modern period, is in every way contrary to the Medieval view. The self is complex, and seen as full of potentialities and a source of meaning (even guidance). There is now unprecedented value in individuality, and value in the very exploration of the self.

But the relationship between morality (traditionally aimed at checking self-interest), virtue (traditionally being overcoming the self), and self has been inverted. "When people say they need to find themselves, often what they really mean is that they want a meaningful life" (Baumeister, 1991, p. 77). It is now more socially acceptable to say it this way, and the inversion has complications of its own. For now the Self is being used to supply meaning to life more than ever before; the Self has to carry the load of meaning, and this burden is likely part of the crisis (Baumeister, 1991). Perhaps it the reaction of throwing off this burden of selfhood that has permitted the spread of the social institutions that Frankl (e.g., 1973) has warned are the fruits of the meaninglessness vacuum: conformism and totalitarianism.
It is in this cultural-anthropological context of crisis in which concepts of meaning and meaninglessness are set, and in which the constructs that follow must be viewed. Frankl (1978) has said, “In an age like ours, an age of the existential vacuum, man must be equipped with the capacity to discover meaning, to find for himself the individual meanings of the singular situations that together form a string called human life” (p. 235). Now these meanings can be explored as they pertain to individual existences.

"Generic" Meaning and Meaninglessness

Limits of Constructs

Many definitions are inherently tautological. That result will be avoided here if possible, but of all the topics one could possibly focus on, meaning and meaninglessness must certainly rank as one of the most abstract ever to engage the human mind. Some exasperation is inevitable; a great many wise minds have struggled to compress this concept into essentially inadequate human language, let alone formulate a neat and comprehensible system of classification.

Meaninglessness is understood to be lack of meaning. As mentioned, this appears to be a universally accepted starting point. The nine-volume Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Craig, 1998), by way of example, does not include “meaninglessness” as an entry in its index; nor does the term receive explicit discussion in the three volumes of Corsini’s (1994) Encyclopedia of Psychology. However, this is a frequently-encountered term in the arts and sciences, with a vast array of surrounding connotations and circumstances. Therefore, except when noted to the contrary, the approach taken here will be that all such usages of meaninglessness derive in complementary form from those of “meaning,” as this seems to have historically been the approach of other scholars.
Linguistic and Philosophical Usages of Meaning and Meaninglessness. It was discussed earlier that the real reasons why the whole concept of meaning and meaninglessness is so important are first, that the human being is biologically programmed to internally represent external things its world, and hence to seek meaning by use of symbolic structures; and second, that it is peculiarly endowed to understand that actions or events are tied to effects, which are themselves kinds of meanings. Several theoretical directions have sprung from these irreducible facts. But whether meanings are seen from the mentalistic viewpoint of an "idea" connecting an object and its corresponding symbol, or from one of the views born of behaviorism (Osgood, 1969; Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1969), from this point on matters are not simple. As in the connectionist models of cognitive science, meanings for humans do not come as discrete pieces; they seem to be represented as networks, or webs, and are also interconnected with contexts (Baumeister, 1991).

Fuller (1990) has attached the term Requiredness, originating in phenomenology and Gestalt theory, to a related aspect of this associative view of meanings. He asserts that things exist in a network of meanings, and that network of meanings is existential space. Moreover, this "lifeworld" is a "realm of sensible qualities... in immediate internal communication with one another... signifying one another with a certain direction of requiredness.... [It] is not a mosaic of neutral objects merely pieced together" (p. 117-118).

Hence, meanings have directionality, "the manner in which a meaning points beyond itself and signifies other meanings; the way a lawn mower signals lawn and neighborhood....The long grass points at, signals, wants, the lawn mower and not the scissors" (p. 75; 117-118). And thus evolves the subjective sense, that "meanings, universally governed by a law of good gestalt—universally striving to be as balanced, clear, and fulfilled as circumstances permit—are qualified as right or wrong in their place in
ethical, logical, grammatical, esthetic, political, religious, culinary, or any contexts" (Fuller, 1990, p. 119). Although it is somewhat abstract, this concept is worth understanding, for it will assist our approach to a working definition of meaninglessness.

Blocker (1974) points out that the connectivity among symbols into webs is more important than the use of symbols itself, in terms of distinguishing human being-ness. And he has extended this reasoning to explain the apparent confusion between the linguistic use of the terms, meaning and meaninglessness, and their philosophical sense, arguing that the philosophical or existential context is the only proper one that can also include the former use.

Baumeister (1991) offers that "a rough definition would be that meaning is shared mental representations of possible relationships among things, events, and relationships. Thus meaning connects things" (p. 15). He also notes the importance of the relationship of existential (life) and grammatic (sentence) meaning: They are similar in that they share: having the parts fit together into a coherent pattern; being capable of being understood by others; fitting into a broader context; and invoking implicit assumptions shared by other members of the culture. Furthermore, a meaningless life and meaningless sentence are similar in that they reflect disconnected chaos, internal contradiction, and failure to fit context.

The linguistic differentiation has merit in the present context. Its importance lies in explaining the human mental tendency to fill in empty spaces with things: Heidegger is said to have despairied that no noun exists that properly conveys the meaning of nothingness (one could probably substitute meaninglessness)—for to every word has been attached, automatically, meanings. In other words, it is impossible to convey a sense of "no-thing" with a "thing" (Singer, 1992, p. 74).
Klinger's (1998) consideration of this topic, though less philosophical, embodies the similar idea that the etymological is closely tied to the psychological. The search for existential meaning is an inherent and inevitable outcome of the way the human brain is organized; hence, it is an evolutionary inevitability. And this explains why lack of meaning is experienced as a threat to the organism.

But Klinger (1998) also emphasizes the fundamental relationship of meaning and purpose. He asserts that purpose is an imperative that originates with primitive motile beings—organisms which have to move around to get survival materials from the environment. All parts or systems of all organisms also must have evolved in the same way: goal-directed. And this is true for cognitive systems as well as anatomical or physiological systems.

Further, the brain's "hard-wired" emotional systems have evolved to serve underlying motivational goal-seeking systems, including more subtle emotions. Klinger (1998) suggests that one major role of cognitive systems is to process stimuli information in order to assign them to one of the existing emotional-motivational-action systems. New information that cannot be classified in an existing system is perceived as neutral (irrelevant) or as demanding cognitive analysis and understanding for the purpose of assigning it to some goal-action system. New information is not meaningful until it is thus classified; it cannot be understood. He distinguishes between two types of goal-oriented behavior: goal-striving, leading to consummatory behavior; and consummatory behavior, or reaping rewards. This concept will be revisited later as a basis for the classification of meaning and meaninglessness.
The Phenomenological Understanding of Meanings

Romanyshyn and Whalen (1989) observed that "traditional psychology... engages in a practiced ignorance toward the meaning of behavior as it is lived" (p. 24). "Behavior has or is an interior significance; it has or is a depth and not merely a surface meaning visible to the other" (p. 25). This aspect of phenomenological differences, how personal meanings are perceived by others in the social context, is worth emphasizing. A person experiences his or her own life-meanings, but perceives the life-meanings of others as behaviors. Meanings are in either case filtered through one's personal history.

Without wishing to repeat the previous discussion of phenomenological theory and methodology, it bears pointing out that there are few approaches that are more receptive to the nuances, significance, and potential deceptions of receiving abstract meanings as they are transferred between phenomenological realities.

First, meanings are attributed to experiences, including those of others. Attribution of emotions comes readily to mind but attribution of meanings is so much more fundamental that it is often ignored. Hence meanings are intimately intertwined with society and history (see Giorgi, 1989). One's social environment imbues meaning; and also meanings are the cumulative continuation of one's personal history. Giorgi asserts that these three elements are the mainstays of the phenomenological analysis of experience.

Next, it will be recalled that one of the core steps in the phenomenological procedure is to abstract "meaning units" from the raw data. Here more emphasis is put on analyzing meaning structure than logical structure. The researcher looks for self-contained segments of meaning as these were experienced by the participant, then labels and classifies them as the researcher sees them. This transformation "goes through" the everyday linguistic expressions to the reality they describe" (Polkinghome, 1989, p. 55).
Finally, just as assimilation and accommodation are considered to be basic processes of acculturation, both inference and interpretation are involved in understanding meanings. Whereas inference implies imposing the reader's own forms (mental constructs) on the subject's experience, interpretation holds that "behavior is a meaning to be read" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 27), that is, the emphasis is on retaining the original form of the data. Romanyshyn and Whalen (1989) point out the active participatory aspect of the latter process. Both aspects are necessary and inevitable.

Meaning as Projection and Creation

Meanings Are Not Intrinsic, They Are Created. In a statement of classic postmodernism, Glynn (1990) says, "Ours is a construction of reality that regards our world as the world, and denigrates alternatives as constructions, even though they may be as intrinsically coherent as ours. The clear implication is that... while others believe the world to be such and such because they all experience it to be so, we experience it to be such and such because it is so" (p. 190).

But not only does a person construct his or her own realities; one of the most prominently repeated themes in the literature of meaning and meaninglessness is that one constructs the meanings of these realities. As Baumeister (1991) puts it, life does not have built-in meanings; meanings are imposed on life. Meanings reside in intelligence. There resides the meaning of one's own existence and the existence of other things (Baumeister, 1991; Joske, 1982).

Meanings Are the Result of Interpreting Events. Generating meanings is the function of interpretation, which Baumeister (1991) calls, "processing things and events with meaning" (p. 24). He differentiates between two kinds of interpretation: recognizing or
decoding the meaning of something, and conferring meaning upon something. It is this second sense that is important, that meaning can be created by acts of interpretation.

In contrast to the conventional view that sociocultural values provide the bases for meaningful behavior, Maddi (1998; see also Baumeister, 1991) has yet another, existential, slant on this theme of how the individual creates meaning. He asserts that meaning is derived from decisions, in turn the outcome of imagination and judgment. “Humans are capable of construing their interactions with the social, cultural, and physical world as their own doing as much, if not more, than the passive, inevitable result of pressures on them. In short, they will recognize that, as they go through the days, they are constantly making decisions that affect their lives. It is the content and direction of the decisions that give human lives their special meaning” (p. 5-6).

There are two implications to this that should be noted. First, from the earlier discussion of Existential principles, it will be recognized that what Maddi is talking about here is authenticity. To the existentialist, it is the ultimate standard or measure of meaning: if something enhances or is congruent with authenticity, it is meaningful, and conversely, meaninglessness is tantamount to a personal failure of authenticity. Hence, individual authenticity is the basis for personal meaning. Social values are merely a cumulative consensus (which is generally not very high in terms of authenticity). Actually, that social learning has little to do with the individual’s adoption of the authentic stance in the first place, is hard to accept; it would seem that in reality, both have occurred. The second point Maddi is making here is that even superficial meaning is enhanced by this stance if “the decision (be it mental or behavioral, large or small) points the individuals toward new experience [rather than if it] keeps them in familiar territory” (p. 4).

**Meanings Change and Evolve.** Not only do we create meanings, we are constantly doing so. Singer (1992) points out that meaning is constantly changing,
evolving; old meanings are constantly being replaced with new ones. And certain things threaten meaning with destruction, such as death (although there is a paradoxical growth effect here also).

**Created Meaning, Meaninglessness, and Objectivist Views of Reality.** The "naive objectivist" view of "reality" that has evolved along with the efforts of science and philosophy to reveal meaning, ironically holds the door wide open for meaninglessness. For, in the creation of meanings by their beholders can be seen the inherent arbitrariness of meaning: settling on one of multiple (but not infinite) possible interpretations. Blocker (1974) explains that it is in the recognition and acceptance of meanings as "a kind of projection" (p. xi), entirely human creations, that meaninglessness enters into the picture. "Recognition that any comprehensible aspect of a thing is a human interpretation from a particular standpoint, and that all intelligible meaning is therefore projection, is a tacit denial of the objectivist view of meaning, and this leads to a sense of meaninglessness" (p. 73). This recognition—experienced as disillusionment—is the sense of meaninglessness. "Meaninglessness... is an awareness that meaning is projection, but this awareness rests on a nonprojective interpretation of meaning" (p. 73). Meaninglessness then becomes the historically dreaded thing that it has been, prior to positivistic philosophy. Blocker concludes, "In short, whether in everyday experience, scientific investigation, philosophical analysis or religious contemplation, the search for meaning leads to meaninglessness, the conditions necessary for meaning are also necessary for meaninglessness, and meaninglessness is already contained in the traditional 'realist' concept of meaning" (p. 101).

Another problem is the linguistic difficulty inherent in *expressing* meaninglessness, as in the following illustration from Singer (1992). Physicists say, "everything began with the Big Bang." But to the question, "but what preceded it?" they are not able to respond.
What preceded the creation of the universe is not expressible in physics; nor is meaninglessness representable by word-symbols which have always expressed meaning. But the real reason this is important is because it illustrates our need to create meaning where there is apparently none: we cannot stand to experience the void of even the possibility of meaninglessness. Meaninglessness is not just dreaded, it is incomprehensible. This goes deeper than anxiety: it is refusal or rejection seemingly by our very neural architecture.

**Categories of “Generic” Meaning and Meaninglessness**

Of the many ways in which meaning and meaninglessness can be classified, different scholars have emphasized ones that conform to their areas of interest. Of present concern is a review of how categories of “generic” meaning have been mapped out by their exponents. Later it will be shown how the real focus of this study, meaning as it pertains to life, has been conceptualized. One can see, during the evolution of this area, the constant interplay between linguistic and existential realms of meaning. Bearing this connection in mind helps to emphasize the deep neuro-organic underpinnings of concepts which also extend in common usage to quality of life and well-being.

**Basic Dimensions of Meaning.** In the course of a global consideration of educational curricula, Phenix (1964) describes six fundamental realms of meaning in all of human understanding. These are identified by “the classes of specialists who serve as the guardians, refiners, and critics of the cultural heritage” (p. 23)—the discipline—that involves the particular type of meaning, in a particular culture during a particular period of human history. They are:

- **symbolics**, including language, rituals, and the like;
- **empirics**, which expresses meanings as empirical “truths”;
• esthetics, expression of "particular significant things as unique objectifications of ideated subjectivities," as in the arts;
• synnoetics, a coined term referring to direct, unmediated knowledge of meaning regarding oneself, other people, or things, and utilized in the existential aspects of philosophy, psychology, literature, and religion;
• ethics, the realm of moral meanings, refers to conduct as human beings; and
• synoptics, as the word suggests, summary and integrative meanings as seen in history, religion, and philosophy, which fields integrate previous meanings.

Phenix (1964) then distinguishes four dimensions of meaning. (1) Experience. Reflection is simply an inner experience; experience also presupposes a dualistic self-transcendence, because a person experiencing is during that moment both knower and known; to experience is to create a relational unity of "identity-in-difference" in which both states exist together (note that this sounds very similar to phenomenological viewpoint). (2) Rule, Logic, or Principle. This is the distinguishing dimension of meaning, where the meaning, by the type of logic it involves, identifies itself as belonging to one of the six categories above. (3) Selective Elaboration. This dimension accompanies the previous one; it is the dimension along which the meaning evolves, according to its survival value, to become one of the previous categories; otherwise there would be an infinite number of types of meaning. (4) Expression. All meanings are communicable through symbols.

Blocker's (1974) similar survey of types of meaning concludes his coverage of the uses of meaning with the following categorization: Intention, Connections between things, Being-as, and Identity (in the sense of copula, or "equals").

Klinger (1998) recognizes two broad senses for the term: Intention (purpose, aim, goal) and Semantics (linguistic signification, indication). He notes that in many languages,
the word root is the same, hence there seems to be some reason that the two senses are related. Philosophical treatment of the topic has likewise traditionally dealt largely with language also, referents of language, the relationship of linguistic symbol to external object, mental images, and so forth.

**Functions and Levels of Meaning.** Another basic property of meaning can be called its *function*; Baumeister (1991) identifies two such primary functions of meaning. The first is to discern patterns in the environment. This is an adaptive function, originally aimed at natural patterns, e.g., changes in weather, seasons, and in the biological environment, particularly the social one. The second function of meaning is to control the self-organism. This is also adaptive, and serves to regulate not only behavior, but also internal, affective states.

A number of authors (see also Ebersole, 1998) have additionally distinguished different *levels* of meaning and their implications. Baumeister (1991) asserts that these are revealed in the complexity of relationships. Low levels, involving the “how” have fewer associative links; and high levels, concerned with the “why” utilize complex associative webs for interpretations. Levels are revealed in time and in context.

Reker and Wong’s (1988) analysis of levels of meaning is more functional. Their idea is that, like value systems, meanings exist in hierarchies. Thus, in order of increasing “height,” they propose that the following classification applies: (1) hedonistic self interest; (2) development of one’s own potential (as in self-actualization); (3) service to others and/or dedication to a higher cause; and (4) pursuit of transcendent, cosmic, “ultimate” values. What is unexplained is how this hierarchy was arrived at; the one possible answer seems to be a cultural one: that service to others is “higher” than self-actualization. To some extent, this is likely a reflection of Judeo-Christian tradition. It would be interesting to compare an Eastern philosophical perspective on levels of meaning.
Basic Dimensions of Meaninglessness. Phenix (1964) asserts that in widespread meaninglessness crises such as the one that prevails now, each of the six categories of meaning described previously is threatened by a corresponding kind of meaninglessness.

- **Symbolics**: language is threatened by ambiguity and increasing use by power groups as a medium of deception and influence (propaganda);
- **Empirics**: relativity, probability, and biological reductionism have replaced the mechanical certainties of earlier thinking;
- **Esthetics**: abandonment of historical standards has left a "widespread suspicion that art may not express anything but the private feelings of the artist and that works of art have no universal, permanent, or objective meaning" (p. 34); hence all the levels of sophistication in music;
- **Synnoetics**: personal relatedness is deteriorating into estrangement from one another, nature, and self, and being replaced by depersonalization, lust, greed, mechanization, hostility, and so forth;
- **Ethics**: "no one appears able to demonstrate the validity of any particular moral injunction so as to convince anyone not already committed to it.... contemporary life is pervaded by doubts about the basis for moral commitment, and by skepticism as to the possibility of reliable meaning in the ethical realm" (p. 35);
- **Synoptics**: the certainty of previous historians has given way to a new culture of "multanimity" (vs. unanimity); religion no longer is inspired by its former faith; many philosophers have become skeptical of their own failure to reveal substantive large-scale schemes.
Blocker's (1974) categorization in turn produces this classification for meaninglessness: lack of purpose or intention, lack of connection between things, and loss of a sense of being-as.

Meaning and Meaninglessness in/of Life

In the foregoing the areas discussed set (but not exhaustively) the general perimeter of the topic: the broad setting of the current social-existential crisis of meaninglessness; the confusing existence of a linguistic branch of this concept as well as the existential one which is of most interest; some hints of how meanings of one individual are understood by others; the common theme that life-meaning is simply our own creation (which would seemingly threaten to nullify any attempts to define it); and the accompanying abstruse paradox that meaninglessness presupposes an objectivist universe.

This has so far been a map of how meaning and meaninglessness in the generic sense are considered in the literature, and it can be seen how the ground broadly covers both semantic and philosophical usages denoting connection or intention. Note how a large number of the foregoing discussions have a conspicuously pedantic tone.

"Anglo-Saxon philosophy has in various degrees 'gone linguistic'," writes Nielsen (2000, p. 233). It is almost as if there is an attempt to keep questions of meaning and meaninglessness comfortably ensconced in the analytic left-hemisphere of the brain, where they can be more safely insulated from anxiety-provoking implications. But, Nielsen continues, the question "What is the meaning of Life" reflects our desire to understand it as it is "employed in the public domain" (p. 234). Moreover, "we want an answer that is more than just an explanation or description of how people behave or how events are
arranged or how the world is constituted. We are asking for a justification for our existence" (p. 237, italics in original). We may in fact be asking, is anything worthwhile, really? It was for this reason that Existentialism was covered in such depth. Existentialists make much of possessing “passion” (Solomon, 1972) in their quest for meaning.

In defense of the linguistic approach to ontological issues, it can be said that it helps to clarify the question. Whether it is intended or not, it reveals the matter to extend far beyond mere intellectual realms. It seems obvious that passion and commitment are required as the issue cannot be gripped at a merely intellectual level.

Impact and Varieties of the Question

The Impact of Meaning. The essence of the meaning-of-life issue is now in a position to be appreciated, which Fuller (1990) discusses under the topic, the impact of meaning. Philosopher M. Merleau-Ponty (1942/1963) felt that a corporeal substratum exists for experience; meaning arises when a connection occurs between body and the experiential consciousness of Dasein. “Dasein is a bodily feeling, and what Dasein feels is its values” (Fuller, p. 174). More than just a harmonic resonance, an event is literally embodied, embedded in our bodies; one experiences this as insight, as the impact of meaning. When things do not have this impact, they virtually do not exist for the individual. Using grief and loss as an example, he says the loss outside (e.g., the death of a friend) impacts us by taking hold of us as grief. “The loss becomes itself—this original meaning, this intrinsically negative value, in the fullness of its lived dimensionality—precisely through its incorporation into our bodily dimensionality....” (p. 176); this is experienced as emotion, again the impact of meaning.

Meaning has moved from the intellectual realm into the life-world. What of meaninglessness? What of the impact of meaninglessness? In the context of an
individual's life, meaninglessness is a violation of some very basic phenomenological principles (particularly Fuller’s, 1990, “requiredness,” see previous discussion). Without experiencing such a state, one can only surmise from the subjective accounts of those who have. Where meaning disintegrates in the individual’s personal experiential universe, in which everyday life is immersed, the impact of this must surely be experienced at potentially psychotic levels.

**Varieties of the Question.** As various writers have noted (e.g., Yalom, 1980), the question, “What is the meaning of life?” can be understood in several different ways. Klemke (2000) detects three possible interpretations.

1. The first variety of this question is, “Why does the universe exist? Why is there something rather than nothing?” This is clearly the broadest possible context.

2. Another somewhat more specific approach is to ask, “Why do humans (in general) exist? Do they exist for some purpose? If so, what is it?” (This addresses cosmic meaning or meaninglessness of life, of humankind’s existence in the whole universe.)

3. A more personal alternative to this question, with which many are familiar, is: “Why do I exist? Do I exist for some purpose? If so, how am I to find what it is? If not, how can life have any significance or value?”

Arthur Schopenhauer (1851/2000) seems to have had the first two questions in mind when he described “the vanity of existence,” which, he observed, “is revealed in the whole form existence assumes: in the infiniteness of time and space contrasted with the finiteness of the individual in both; in the fleeting present as the sole form in which actuality exists; in the contingency and relativity of all things; in continual becoming without being; in continual desire without satisfaction; in the continual frustration of striving of which life consists” (p. 67). Or as Stace (2000) expresses it, “there is no reason for its being what it is. Everything might just as well have been quite different, and there would have been no
reason for that either.... If the scheme of things is purposeless and meaningless, then the life of man is purposeless and meaningless too. Everything is futile, all effort is in the end worthless" (p. 87).

But Schopenhauer's and Stace's lament is peculiarly impersonal, and the third personalized question addresses meaning or meaninglessness or purposelessness in one's life (Klemke, 2000, p. 2). For, as Edwards (2000) observes, in the familiar sense of "meaning," a human life and/or its activities can be meaningful independently of whether there is a God or whether there is immortality. Those who complain that current actions are without worth because we all eventually die, are ignoring the "short-term context." Nor can it be generally said that no human life is worthwhile. All three types fall into O'Connor and Chamberlain's (1996) category of "ultimate or cosmic" meaning, which "exists apart from one's perception of it" (p. 462).

Yet another facet can be added to this issue: "What is meaningful in my life/what gives my life meaning?" The domains, values, and things, in one's life, representing possible answers to this question, fall into O'Connor and Chamberlain's (1996) second category of "terrestrial" meaning, "based on a relative view of reality... people's perceptions of reality within their frame of reference" (p. 462).

Clearly, each formulation of the question propels thinking in a different direction, or even several possible directions. At the same time each phrasing overlaps with the others, since, for example, if human existence in general is a pointless "accident," does this not have somber implications for every aspect of one's own life?

**Questioning the Question: A Lame Way to Evade It?** No matter which interpretation of the question of meaning of life is preferred, Klemke (2000) notes that there have been basically three patterns or models of response. The first two ways involve adopting either a theistic or a nontheistic stance, which will be seen below. The third way
is to take the stance of Ayer (2000), who asserts that “there is no sense in asking what is
the ultimate purpose of our existence, or what is the real meaning of life.... those who
inquire, in this way, after the meaning of life are raising a question to which it is not logically
possible that there should be an answer” (Ayer, 2000, p. 226). By rejecting the
meaningfulness of the question as inherently illogical, or reductively analyzable so as to
lead in another direction, then the whole issue becomes trivial. Moreover, this is not a
tragedy: “If a question is so framed as to be unanswerable then it is not a matter for regret
that it remains unanswered” (Ayer, 2000, p. 226).

In the literature on meaning in life, a very frequently cited work is Leo Tolstoy's
Confessions (e.g., Flew, 2000). This is a classic not only for its predictable articulateness,
but for the universality of its content, a candid self-examination during a crisis of meaning
which Tolstoy suffered in mid-life. Flew (2000) has used an analysis of this autobiography
to examine several dimensions of the question. The one that emerged in conclusion was
the recognition of the “irrational” side of the question. Many “simple folk” (the peasants of
Tolstoy's estate) must have access to life meaning because they are not troubled by doubt
about it. Tolstoy concludes that “the enormous masses of men, the whole of mankind,
receive that meaning in irrational knowledge. And that irrational knowledge is faith”
(quoted in Flew, 2000, p. 214). In other words, if the answer is irrational, the question is
irrational, and its rejection qualifies, in the opinions of some, as a valid “solution.”

Hepburn (2000), for example, although noting that the general direction of inquiry is
valuable to “express important distinctions between and within individual human lives” (p.
275), tends to reject the whole question as unanswerable. Like some other observers, he
concludes that the answer to the question is simply the entirety of human history. In
individual terms, one's answer to the question is the entire drama of one's life, and little
more can be said. It seems that Wisdom (2000), pointing out that people don't really
understand their own question, would also agree with this conclusion. Moreover, he adds, answers to this question, more elusive than can be realized, will never be simple, nor clear, nor expressible in language.

It is hard to deny that one's personal reaction to the question of life-meaning is often full of self-deception. Flew (2000) points out that one common cognitive blind alley that people get into is the untenable notion that "nothing can matter unless it goes on forever" (p. 213).

On the other hand, there is no greater self-deception than inauthenticity and the denial of doubt (Marsella, 1999; Sartre, 1956). This is an even more ominous pitfall which can easily swallow otherwise intelligent people who have failed to understand the spirit of the postmodern revolution. For some of these, the distinction is sadly lost between the healthy rejection of dogmatic theism and the tragic rejection of the question that arguably defines the very humanness of Homo sapiens. "Only the scientifically illiterate accept the 'why' question ['why does life exist?'] where living creatures are concerned," asserts zoologist R. Dawkins (quoted in Easterbrook, 1997, p. 892). This quote is the perfect example of existential fallenness; "scientific literacy" has been substituted for existential authenticity.

As does the linguistic trend in philosophy mentioned earlier, much of this rejection smacks of reductio ad absurdum. Maintaining that questions of life-meaning are inherently faulty, invalid, or "illogical," simply because answers are not easily forthcoming, is a suspiciously summary dismissal. Analyzing the question into components commits the same ethical blunder that legal critics know well, circumventing the spirit of the law in order to maintain the letter of the law. For millennia, humankind has devised ingenious ways to evade the impact of uncomfortable questions by relegating them to the "trivial," so they can
be forgotten. The question is not illogical; it makes the most "sense" of any question in the
world. It is not trivial; it is vital.

Before proceeding to the actual classification of terms, some general issues of
meaning and meaningless in life must first be addressed, since their ramifications are so
widespread. The area of life-meaning and meaninglessness can be viewed as consisting
of many overlapping sets, or domains, of information. All of the sets are salient to the
current topic, and are present in the literature, to varying degrees. Some pertain quite
centrally, actually merging into "Sources of Meaning and Meaninglessness," to which this
section leads; some are more peripheral, but serve to show roughly where the limits of
life-meaning lie.

Obviously an exhaustive treatment is impossible; given the multiple ways that
domains can overlap, topics can be approached from many angles. But by touching very
briefly on this array of concepts, the present field of inquiry is both limited and clarified. The
purpose of the present section is to describe the domain of topics that currently enliven the
field, and to convey a sense of the "culture" underlying it, upon which are superimposed
dimensional concepts that are being lead up to.

**Contexts of Meaning and Meaninglessness**

Existential theory recognizes that humanity, though possessing extraordinary
freedom, is yet paradoxically bound by its *facticity*. These restrictions exist in time and
space. As with linguistic meanings, existential meanings do not come as discrete entities;
they also are interconnected as cognitive and affective networks, and exist in time-space
contexts (Baumeister, 1991). And although an individual initially absorbs values from the
early environment, from then on the system is in constant change.
Society as a Context of Meaning. As many sources suggest indirectly, Reker and Wong (1988) assert that two broad meaning-producing contexts can be identified: society and self. Although dependent to some extent on how receptive the individual is to social values, personal definitions of meaning occur through the assimilation by the individual of cultural values, themselves existing in an historical flux. Asserting that the bio-organic need for meaning, taking place within a social context, is what literally creates our "reality," Marsella (1999) says, "Culture is the context in which mind is acquired.... It is represented internally in such forms as worldviews, values, beliefs, attitudes, consciousness patterns, epistemologies, cognitive styles" (p. 42).

As cultures shift among traditionalist, modernist, and postmodernist structures, conforming individuals become the unknowing "culture bearers" for their group. The person retains, however, the personal experiential world, history, and choice. One's power to probe one's own depths, through introspection, in search of meanings, surpasses the collective ability to do so. In reality the interplay between self and society is a dynamic and changing one, moving through time, history, and development, and is malleable to individual choice. Insofar as the human being is genetically "fated" to be a social creature, the human universe remains influential as a context of an individual's personal meanings. The prominence of this influence will be elaborated later (see Relationship of Meanings and Values below).

Time as a Context of Meaning. Another important context of meaning is identified by Beike and Niedenthal (1998) as time. In the process of defining personal meanings, the individual inevitably thinks about oneself within one's circumstances. And within the context of time, an individual looks both forward ("what lies ahead, where am I going, what will I make of it?"), and backward ("what have I done, have I truly progressed, have I overcome my mistakes?"). The process is an evaluative one, in that meaning rests heavily
upon self-esteem ("do I hold an honored place, am I respected within my social group, is my sense of self—as reflected from my social group—positive?") and a sense of satisfaction or fulfillment ("have I undertaken worthy goals and performed well toward their achievement?").

Beike and Niedenthal (1998) differentiate two general ways in which past and future selves are involved in self-evaluation. One is by contrast: past and future images of self are juxtaposed against the present self, for a positive or negative comparison. The other way is to consider past and future selves as simply antecedent or consequential parts of the continuum of the present self.

Reker and Wong (1988) discuss how the values derived from society and self may shift in their equilibrium across the lifespan. People indulge in reminiscence on the past, reflect on the present, and anticipate the future; and the relative importance of these will change over the lifespan. An individual can create a "personal timetable" based in this context of time and changing meaning. One of the most familiar conceptualizations of this is Erikson's (e.g., 1959, 1982) system of changing values across lifespan. As one approaches the end of life, integration and transcendence of life experiences becomes increasingly important. "Integration becomes a meaning-producing process" (Reker & Wong, 1988, p. 232). Reker and Wong suggest the hypothesis that the personal meaning system becomes increasingly integrated with age (Kenyon, 2000).

**Meaningfulness is Not the Same as Happiness**

A misconception that may exist among those not familiar with the literature on meaningfulness is that this term is essentially the same as happiness, or life satisfaction. These constructs are not the same, and their distinction is well established in the literature. Singer (1992) points out that if happiness is a state of harmony with one's self and
environment, the absence of this in no way precludes meaningfulness. In fact, the absence of the former may itself be a source of meaning, as centuries of religious penitents have attested. Frankl (1973) observed that a person first needs a reason to be happy, then happiness can ensue. But “what happens when a man strives directly for happiness?... The more he embarks on a direct quest for happiness, precisely to this extent he loses sight of the reason to be happy and, consequently, happiness fades away....” (p. 233).

Distinguishing meaning from happiness, Emmons (1999) says, “A meaningful life is one that is characterized by a deep sense of purpose, a sense of inner conviction, and assurance that in spite of one's current plight, life has significance.... filled with rich and varied emotions, both pleasant and unpleasant” (p. 138, italics added).

Although this might appear to be a rather theoretical distinction, it seems to have some significance for most people. Emmons (1999) reviews various kinds of support related to this contention. McGregor and Little's study, for example, (Emmons, 1999, p. 154-155) showed that subjects rate meaning as being only slightly more important than happiness in contributing to the “desirability of a life.” They appear to equate meaning mostly with integrity (having goals consistent with core aspects of self); and happiness with efficacy (how successful one is in achieving goals). As a final remark on these twin concepts, Emmons (1999) asserts that although they are distinct, and one may find life-meaning in the absence of much happiness, achieving long-term happiness without having a sense of meaning is not possible.

**Meaning in Life, Well-being, and Psychopathology**

There exists a reflex-like association in the minds of many clinically-oriented psychologists between constructs such as life-meaning and meaninglessness and an array of possible clinical issues and syndromes. There is a deeply-embedded notion, and
not without a firm basis in clinical lore, that a sense of meaninglessness in life is associated with negative aspects of personality and pathological symptomology. Conversely, it is observed and assumed that heightened optimism and awareness of personal-life meaning covary closely with overall health or well-being, as well as certain other positive phenomena such as peak experiences.

Many of the early humanist-existential (and other) leaders in psychology, such as Jung, Erikson, Maslow, and Rogers, were clinically trained. There is a wealth of material related to this area in their original works, which have been seminal sources of development for these concepts. Also, the European existential analysts, Bingswanger, Boss, and Frankl, and Americans, May and Yalom, generated a large amount of anecdotal and systematic coverage (see also Laing, 1973/1960; May, 1983; May et al., 1958).

There is a very large number of potential clinical issues associated with life-meaning and meaninglessness, up to and including psychotic behavior (Laing, 1973/1960; May et al., 1958); indeed, the entire field of existential therapy purports to address exactly this collection of topics (e.g., May et al., 1958; Yalom, 1980). This is not to suggest that any such unique clinical "entities" actually exist independently; but one observation that has long nourished the association has been the recognition that intrapsychic defense processes generally accompany experiences of meaninglessness. Meaninglessness, that is, is experienced as a profound threat. Defensive processes have been noted at the levels of both society (Santmire, 1973; Yalom, 1980) and the individual (May et al., 1958; May & Yalom, 1989 Yalom, 1980). Since this conceptualization fits the existential-psychodynamic model of distress (May & Yalom, 1989), their presence suggests potential pathology.

For the present purpose, it should be emphasized that these clinical issues are related but peripheral, and do not belong at the center of a discussion of "what is
meaninglessness?" In order to preempt possible confusion, we will first deal with three of the most prominent meaning-health associations: trauma and depression (and suicide), which are usually associated with a sense of meaninglessness, and well-being, which is associated with a positive sense of life-meaning.

The Effects of Trauma on Meaning. In the previous discussion of creating meanings, it was suggested that the human mind cannot for long tolerate meaninglessness, which is sensed as some sort of psychic void. Deeper than the perception of anxiety, it is refusal or rejection apparently at a neural level. Trauma, in the existential sense, is thus the experience of the impossible; it is "what cannot be" actually made manifest. Individual meaning-structures, including their affective connective networks, are overwhelmed. The severity of it shocks both our psychoneurological system and our Weltanschauung. One's formerly comfortable illusions of the world, with oneself at the center of meaning, crumble (e.g., Winkler & Wininger, 1994).

This loss of structure understandably provokes a primal terror so unbearable that the mind immediately jumps to attempt to fill this void as quickly as possible. Frantic attempts are made to either retain one's original assumptions, or to reconstrue the new world-view in a meaningful way. Then, either from the disruption of the experience, or from chaotic psychological repair processes, lasting effects can be experienced.

Janoff-Bulman and Franz (1997) mention self-blame as a very typical example of attempting to maintain one's original assumptions of the world. Conversely, new positive meanings can sometimes be attached to or created for the new world-view to produce less of a threat, or anxiety. Beginning with Freud (1959a,b,c), many (e.g., Brewin, 1997; Conte & Plutchik, Cramer, 1991; Stein, 1997; Vaillant, 1992) have viewed these re-creations as intrapsychic defense mechanisms. They can be viewed as distortions of meaning involving the denial, avoidance, or transformation of the threat into a psychologically more palatable
form. The abundance of current clinical literature regarding defensive pathology as sequelae to childhood sexual abuse (this also beginning with Freud) will no doubt fuel this area for many years to come.

There is also a peculiar positive aspect, at least potentially, to experiencing trauma. Recent interpretations (e.g., Brewin, 1997) have raised the possibility that some such "distortions" of meaning may in fact be quite adaptive. This question is at bottom highly philosophical, since it stems from at least Kierkegaard's (Solomon, 1972) position that the individual *should* be ruthless with the self in facing "the truth"; the alteration of meaning may be cognitively allowable, but is existentially undesirable. Maslow (1955, cited in Emmons, 1999) said that traumatic experiences, forcing adaptive changes in one's *Weltanschauung*, were one's most important learning experiences. Emmons (1999) notes that, empirically, "[positive] meaning is often defined in terms of having experienced positive changes or perceived benefits as the result of the [stressful] event" (p. 144). Traumatic events can trigger a meaning crisis, but the goal-alterations involved in reconstructing meanings (relinquishing untenable goals, setting new goals, and working out pathways to attainment) are unquestionably positive growth experiences. Schaefer and Moos (1992) name three positive outcome types: enhancement in social resources, personal resources (value, goal changes), and coping skills. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) suggest a very similar classification of enhancement in self confidence, personal relationships, and philosophy of life. A recent review of this topic is found in Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun (1998); see also May et al. (1958) and Power and Brewin (1997). This area clearly is a complicated set of intersecting but fertile issues deserving further investigation.

**Meaninglessness, Depression and Suicide.** Possibly the first association to come to the minds of most clinicians, between meaninglessness in life and
psychopathology, is with depression and suicide. This association has a long history; Freud himself is quoted as asserting that "the moment one inquires about the sense or value of life one is sick..." (Jones, 1957, p. 465).

Contemporary studies of cognitive elements of depression (e.g., Beck, 1970) have established a sense of meaninglessness as a core feature. This mindset may possibly go by a variety of names, and teasing it apart from affective dimensions is not easy and perhaps not possible. But it has been a well-documented feature of the clinical picture for a long time (Frankl, 1969, 1984; May et al., 1958; Power & Brewin, 1997; Wong & Fry, 1998; Yalom, 1980). For example, the Purpose in Life scale (see below; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), one of the most commonly employed measurement instruments for life-meaning, is reported to correlate -.65 with the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory depression subscale, and -.58 with the Beck Depression Inventory (Dyck, 1987). Given the prevalence of clinical and subclinical depression, this syndrome obviously represents a potentially serious confound to empirical studies.

**Positive Life-meaning and Well-being.** There exists a relation of psychopathology with existential crises of meaninglessness; and there is an observed positive association of optimism, goal-striving, and purpose with well-being. From this many have concluded that meaning in life is synonymous with well-being. This assumption is not warranted, since as Frankl (1969, 1984) made very clear, people can find meaning in life under unthinkably horrible physical and psychological circumstances. Nevertheless, Frankl's concentration-camp experiences were extreme and unusual, and an undeniable long-term association does exist between positive life-meaning and health.

It is important to understand that positive life-meaning is an aspect or source of subjective well-being, and at the same time, well-being is an important source of meaning. Many other variables, such as age, can be seen to have probable roles in this equation,
and there has been increasing attention paid to this area by clinicians, researchers, and sources of funding (Emmons, 1999; Wong & Fry, 1998; Schumaker, 1992). Evidence is accumulating that patients and non-patients have different sources of meaning (Debats, 1999, 2000).

Besides the effects of the personal loss of meaning on psychological equilibrium, study in this area focuses attention largely on clinical or therapeutic strategies that can be employed to alleviate anxiety and other negative symptoms accompanying the experience of meaninglessness and, thus, optimize functioning.

The breadth of coverage and implications of this whole area of personal meaning, well-being, and psychopathology is immense, and far exceeds the scope of the current work. Recent general discussions and those of more specific topics can be found in Debats (1999, 2000); Little (1998); Emmons, Colby, and Kaiser, (1998); Colby (1999); Klinger (1998); Marsella (1999); Reker (1994); Reker, Peacock, and Wong (1987); Ryff (1989); Ryff and Keyes (1995), and Ryff and Singer (1998). Emmons (1999) devotes a large section of his book to well-being issues, and Wong and Fry (1998) devote the entire last section of their book to "The Role of Personal Meaning in Counseling and Psychotherapy."

Role of Death: Defying Meaningfulness

Death is a complex topic that has involved an extensive and diverse literature, and an extended discussion of it far exceeds the present limits. However, it would be remiss not to take note of the key role that death plays by setting the final limit of physical existence. Death is thus also an implicitly central component in the definition of life-meaning by seemingly *defying* meaningfulness in life. At the same time, impending
death is obviously not tantamount to lack of life-meaning, for it can propel people to seek meaning by way of trying to solve the paradox, as it has for countless ages (Kenyon, 2000).

Tillich (1952) says humankind is “finite freedom.” What circumscribes a human life is its mortality, which for the adult is an ever-present threat. Tillich and others (e.g., McCarthy, 1980) have said that the power of impending death comes from its threat to being. Herein also lies its power to defy life-meaning, because existence is a sine qua non for meaningfulness. In the minds of most people, asserts Baier (1982), death rudely intrudes the unanswerable dilemma, “If my life is soon to come to an end, then why did I ever exist in the first place? How can there be any meaning in our life if it ends in death? What meaning can there be in it that our inevitable death does not destroy?” (p. 392). Hence, invisible meaninglessness puts on the visible mask of death.

But once again human consciousness can transcend paradox with meaning. In this riddle of death, as Reker and Wong (1988; also Wong, 1989) point out, the specter of death has the effect not only of a threat, but also of a prompt, to seek meaning. Reker and Wong see the lifelong influence of death exerting itself with respect to the past in the form of life-review; to the present in the form of commitment (to creating meaning) and personal optimism (to bolster health as well as commitment); and to the future in the form of religious or spiritually transcendent meanings (see also Van Ranst & Marcoen, 2000).

Responses to the threat of death have generally taken two routes, the theistic response, or the non-theistic "epicurean" response. The theological, mystical, religious route is quite familiar. As was mentioned previously, the doctrine of an afterlife in Christianity and other religions is a standardized answer to death's threat against life-meaning.

But there is another route which claims it unnecessary to invent transcendent eternal structures. In Baier's (1982) words, death is "irrelevant." "If life can be worthwhile
at all, then it can be so even though it be short" (p. 396). Nielsen (2000) also takes the
stance of those who are not put off by death and its seeming incongruity with life-meaning:
“We know we must die; we would rather not, but why must we suffer angst, engage in
theatrics and create myths for ourselves. Why not simply face it and get on with the living
of our lives?” (p. 155). Nielsen (2000) also urges that even if there is no God (and thus
some cosmic purpose or plan to our life beyond our own inventing), and even if total
annihilation awaits us in the end, “it does not at all follow that there are no purposes in life
that are worth achieving, doing, or having... our lives are not robbed of meaning” (p. 157,
italics in original).

In essence, it appears that, for some individuals, just a foreshortened life-view
seems to offer sufficient structure to provide meaning, or at least comfort. How this occurs
is unclear. The blitheness of people who claim this stance suggests that at some
unconscious level they simply deceive themselves, in an act of Sartrean “bad faith” that is
untenable to the existentialist. One suspects some kind of “plan” involving the immortality
of at least some aspect of Self, even if not acknowledged (Epting & Neimeyer, 1984;
McCarthy, 1980; Tomer, 1994). Tillich (1952) was of the opinion that the threat of
non-being presented by death was a fundamental part of every person’s psyche. Death
anxiety per se and related coping strategies have for some time been popular subjects and
are somewhat peripheral to the present context. They have been treated at length
elsewhere (e.g., Durlak, Horn, & Kass, 1990; Firestone, 1994; Holcomb, Neimeyer, &

The “Tragic” Sense of Meaninglessness

The question of meaninglessness in life or of life has been perennially confused
with despair. The “tragic” sense of meaninglessness is reflected in European Existentialist
philosophy and art, and in Nihilism and Nietzschean philosophy. Expressions of
meaninglessness employ the use of jargon conveying a visceral and decidedly unpleasant
connotation, as in Sartre’s term, *nausea*. It is unclear whether this connection refers simply
to negative affect that is familiar in clinical depression, or to existential despair; but they
should not be confused, and certainly not equated.

**Tragic Meaninglessness.** For Sartre, the dissatisfaction characterizing human life
seems to lie in the paradoxical dilemma of Facticity versus Freedom. Humankind is “free
within the situation”: it is free to choose how to be, but it is still bound by the givens of
facticity, hence is free to be only within that context. Put another way, the inherent
dissatisfaction of life arises from the paradox of being-in-itself (*Dasein*) pure free
consciousness, and being-for-itself, that a human being is inherently intentional, must by
its very nature have intentions, therefore goals, therefore striving. In other words, it is a
paradox that it cannot enjoy its own free nature; human life is necessarily unfulfilling
(Solomon, 1972).

In contrast to Heidegger, Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, who are supposed to
be “rationalist” Existentialists, Camus is celebrated as an “irrationalist” (life is *absurd*
because the universe is and always will be irrational). For Camus (who has taken most of
the credit for the pejorative, *l’absurd*) the paradox is the “divorce between the mind that
desires and the world that disappoints” (quoted in Solomon, 1972, p. 278-279). This
irrational paradox he takes as the starting point of his philosophy, and he despises others
who have escaped the problem by making an “inauthentic” leap of faith (to God), as did
Kierkegaard (Solomon, 1972).

Blocker (1974) has concluded that the “tragic” sense of meaninglessness arises
from the loss of the “ideal” of “reality.” He points out that the fatal flaw is having that ideal
in the first place, and there is no real reason that it should exist. “Here the tragic modern
sense of meaninglessness presupposes and makes no sense without the assumption that a meaningful world ought to be one in which meaning is simply a part of or identical with reality" (p. 103).

**Positive Meaninglessness?** By way of contrast to the Western sense of what ought to be, and the resulting disappointment, Blocker (1974) notes that in cultures like that of Zen Buddhism, where the "ideal" assumption has never firmly taken root, the experience of meaninglessness is "greeted with a sense of joy and relief" (p. xiii).

Like Novak (1998), who argues that a certain critical mass of meaninglessness can be crucially creative as well as destructive, Singer (1992) points out that once the acceptance of meaninglessness in the world has been established as one's baseline, all conscious life then becomes entertainment. This sense of "wonderment" can be extended to include other beings, and though not limited to bipeds, it bears a close resemblance to altruistic love. Such a reverential attitude towards the miracle of creation and life, augmented in esthetic experiences, is correctly labeled as mystical by Singer (1992).

This is a very visible tradition in Indian, particularly Vedantic, cosmology. The basic "meaninglessness" of creation is accepted as divine lila (play), a "light show," a drama, made for amusement only, or an inexplicable figment of the Cosmic Imagination (e.g., Deutsch & van Buitenen, 1971). Whether there is such a Creator or not is another question.

In a more cerebral Western mode, Singer (1992) asserts that the "tragedy" of the existential situation has two principal interpretations, cognitive and valuational. The cognitive answer involves explanation and clarification. Distinguished from this is the valuational answer which involves emotional content and significance. He suggests that it is the emotional valence that propels the issue into the realm of values, or "ideas that we
cherish and pursue, that guide our behavior and provide the norms by which we live" (p. 24).

Singer (1992) believes that these two streams of "need" underlie existential questions about meaning or meaninglessness. One wants both to find some sort of emotional groundedness (he appears to be referring to a sense of security, a freedom from ontological anxiety), and to have the universe make some sort of logical sense as well. Singer also says that people wish to find a sense of purpose in the universe, as an organizing influence on behavior and a source of motivation.

Shakespeare's dreary "sound and fury, signifying nothing" is a very old theme, but which, depending on the circumstances of its interpretation, apparently can become positive acceptance. The Eastern response in which fault is found with the disappointment rather than with the nature of the universe, clearly overlaps with the issue of "Questioning the Question" (see previous section). Further, to Western critics familiar with clinical concepts, it might arguably be labeled "dissociative." It is interesting that at a certain psychological plexus, despair, insanity, Thanatos, and enlightenment seem to converge. "The source of the experience of nothingness lies in the deepest recesses of human consciousness, in its irrepressible tendency to ask questions. The necessary condition for the experience of nothingness is that everything can be questioned.... The drive to ask questions is the most persistent and basic drive of human consciousness. It is the principle of the experience of nothingness" (Novak, 1998, p. 12).

Relationship of Meanings and Values

There is observable confusion in the literature between the usages of values and meanings. Hare (2000) says, "The values of most of us come from two main sources; our own wants and our imitation of other people.... What is so difficult about growing up is the
integration into one stream of these two kinds of values" (p. 280). Perhaps it can be presumed that what is meant is that really "growing up" (towards self-actualization, that is) first necessitates the internal differentiation of these two streams, our own true "wants," from the values of the social milieu.

Others reflect a similar ambiguity. Baumeister (1991) asserts that values are one of the major "Four Needs of Meaning." Further clarification shows that he refers to the social validation of meanings. Frankl (1973), noting the worldwide decline of traditional values, reassures us that "there is a distinction between values and meanings. Only values are affected by the wane of traditions, while meanings are spared" (p. 235). He adds that values are "universal meanings," whereas "meanings are unique insofar as they refer to a unique person engaged in a unique situation" (p. 235).

A values-meanings continuum concept only serves to confuse the matter still further. It should be remembered that values reflect attitudes, which in turn are essentially social norms. Hence, the term values should be limited to refer to social attitudes that are acquired during life from one's immediate culture. The specific term personal meanings is often encountered in the context of meaning-of-life, serving to emphasize the existential-phenomenological uniqueness of one's personal ultimate concerns. But these meanings are more along the lines of conceptual entities; it is the prefix "personal" that indicates their high rank relative to other socially-acquired attitudes that may exist. The foregoing remarks will not solve the existing ambiguity in the literature, however, and the appearance and particularly the genesis of values as compared to meanings is inevitably complex.

**Origins and Loss of Values.** Hare (2000) claims that "You cannot annihilate values—not values as a whole. As a matter of empirical fact, a man is a valuing creature, and is likely to remain so" (p. 282). It is an impossibility that nothing could matter. Singer
(1992) concurs that meaning is not "found" (the traditionalist view); rather, it is created.

"Life itself includes the creation of meaning and value as part of its innate structure.... our species creates meaning by undergoing this dialectic of doubt and innovation" (p. 42).

Moreover, the creation of meanings is based on "the value-laden behavior that living creatures manifest. Meaning in life is the creating of values in accordance with the needs and inclinations that belong to one's natural condition" (Singer, 1992, p. 44; see also Marsella, 1999). One's "natural condition" is the key to the ambiguity of this topic, because for civilized humanity, "natural condition" is almost tantamount to "social condition." It seems that there is a gray area in which life-meanings and social values are indeed superimposed: the middle range of the continuum.

Although Singer (1992) asserts that personal meaning derives from everyday decisions, he concedes that the authentic movement of individual decisions away from social normative influence is regarded as an existentially positive development towards true personal meaning; and this would correspond to movement towards the existential end of the continuum.

To confuse matters further, there is no necessary uniformity in one's attempts to create meaning; there is an infinite variety. In addition, there always exists a certain probability that one's personal meanings may be similar in form to those of other people, and thus masquerade as social values.

Regarding the sense of loss of meaning, Hare (2000) explains, "what may happen is that one set of values may get discarded and another set substituted.... The suggestion that nothing matters naturally arises at [these] times of perplexity" (p. 282). In this term "perplexity," Hare seems to have identified the crux of the problem of experienced meaninglessness. Confusion of meanings in one's experiential life-world can indeed give rise to a sense of dismay that may be interpreted and exaggerated into the feeling that
“nothing matters.” Even if what has become confused are social norms which, in a global perspective, were quite arbitrary to begin with.

Although the authors cited above represent the view that social norms are the key source of even existential meanings, one should be cautioned against concluding that these social norms can be the only sources of existential meanings. Other dimensions of meaning will be elaborated later.

Meanings and the Self-Concept

Besides values, another psychological construct that has close parallels to the meaning-structure is the self-concept, and these two are interrelated in complex ways. Although two basic self-concepts have been distinguished (Ross, 1992), the “categorical self,” defined in terms of traits and external characteristics with which one classifies other people also, is our current concern, rather than the “existential self” (the knowledge that one exists). Self-awareness, arising during infancy, develops into self-concept as childhood advances. In cognitive terms, the framework is the prototypical self-schema, “the organized representation of those aspects of people’s experiences that have to do with themselves and their interaction with the environment” (Ross, 1992, p. 27). There is also the “social exterior” and the “psychological interior” of the self-concept, personal characteristics that can be easily known by others, and those that are private and internal.

It might be surmised that one’s meaning structure essentially defines one’s self-concept. "In very broad terms, self-concept is a person's perception of himself. These perceptions are formed through his experience with his environment... and are influenced especially by environmental reinforcements and significant others.... One's perceptions of himself are thought to influence the ways in which he acts, and his acts in turn influence the ways in which he perceives himself.... Self-concept is inferred from a person's
responses to situations... physical or symbolic” (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976, p. 411).

As can be seen from a summary of research pertaining to sources of meaning (see Sources and Dimensions of Meaning/ Meaninglessness in Life), the major sources of meaning have a close parallel to most important elements of the self-concept. Shavelson et al. (1976) identify core aspects of the self-concept as evaluative; as organized, hierarchical, and multifaceted; and as stable, yet developmental and differentiable. In this model the highest level of the hierarchy is the general self-concept. The next level consists of areas that correspond to the individual's salient life-components. At the next level, each of these areas has physical, social, emotional, and other aspects; and differentiation continues to successively finer levels. In keeping with the dynamic concept of life-meanings also, the self-concept model is self-evaluative and fluid, and the contributing weights of the categories vary. Stability decreases going down the hierarchy to lower levels, where each is dependent on both the relatively more stable level above it, and unpredictable external influences (see also Marsh, Byrne, & Shavelson, 1992).

Sartre (1956), in his celebrated repudiation of Freud's determinism, took an (existentialist) position that embraced much of this conceptualization, declaring that one has the power to define oneself as one wishes, and that one chooses the meanings of everything to define oneself. Charmé (1984) sums up this position in the following way: "Everything depends on the variety of ways in which consciousness defines a situation and picks out particular qualities about it.... Consciousness selects and organizes objects around it in patterns" (p. 29-30). “When past events serve as the grounds for repeated action over a period of time, it is because their meaning is continually “rediscovered” and “re-created.” To this extent, the situation that motivates me is of my own making, since my interpretation has constituted and molded its characteristics and meaning” (p. 29).
The following selection from Charmé (1984) is highly reminiscent of a central theme in the present review: "one's character... is not a hidden force from which behavior emanates, but rather 'a free interpretation of certain ambiguous details in [the] past. In this sense there is no character, there is only a project of oneself" (Being and Nothingness, p. 552).... The only way to control or reappropriate the past is to interpret it.... Memory, like imagination, is an active process of consciousness.... The past has no ready-made meaning of its own" (p. 30; see also the section, Meaning as Projection and Creation).

Meaninglessness, the absence of meaning, and self-concept are often linked in the context of such concepts as estrangement, alienation, powerlessness, normlessness, isolation, and the like. Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory has sired research in the relationship of efficacy with various aspects of estrangement. The relationship is predictably negative; Breakwell (1992) provides a review. References will be found below to other connections in the meaning-literature, e.g., to the self-esteem aspect of self-concept (Fry, 1998), meaning as social roles, identity self as "the perfect something" in the future (Koestenbaum, 1971), meaning as expression of individuality (Flanagan, 2000).

The Controversy of "Higher Meaning"

The exception to an individual's creation of life-meanings, discussed earlier, is the abstract possibility that his or her life can have meaning that is not known except by a "higher intelligence," i.e., "God." Baumeister (1991) analyzes what he calls this ubiquitous myth of higher meaning in terms of what he considers to be its central point, that people assume the world will make sense.

This assumption he calls the expectation of meaningfulness. This primordial expectation stems from the very way people learn. One grows up individually learning meanings: names, categories, and patterns, and this is also collectively true for society,
which accumulates science, fields of knowledge, and so forth. Baumeister points out that due to this process by which we organize and categorize information, we further assume that at the end there is a "grand design," a cosmic organization, and that we will be able to understand it.

However, Baumeister asserts, life is possible without a unifying meaning. A story may not be able to be superimposed onto an individual's life: more than one story could fit, or may not fit completely, or it may fail to make sense of all events. Just as "deconstructionist theory" in literature reveals that many parts of a novel or life-story will not fit with the main theme or interpretation, so this is probably true of every life. The point is that, "while people want and expect things to fit together into grand patterns,.... meanings of life... are likely to be incomplete.... they are a very selectively edited version of life" (Baumeister, 1991, p. 62).

Baumeister (1991) names several offshoot "corollaries" to the myth of higher meaning, worth mentioning to round off his point of view. The Corollary of Completeness is the assumption that everything makes sense, every problem has a solution, every question an answer. Baumeister points out how this myth is manifesting a tension in science between the post-positive, probabilistic acceptance of uncertainty and the lingering notion that there are yet-undiscovered variables that allow complete prediction. The Corollary of Faith in Consistency is the wish that answers to questions be consistent and do not contradict each other. It is noted that people probably "alter their autobiographies" to maintain consistency and avoid intrapsychic anxiety (this has been explained by cognitive dissonance theory). The Corollary of False Permanence is people's expectation that the rules and principles they learn will remain constant; people yearn for stability. The underlying contradiction here is that although the life of any organism undergoes processes of constant and relentless change, meaning is based on stability and
permanence (even in language); change violates meaning's essentially stable nature. False permanence is built into the knowledge system of humanity: concepts tend to be more stable than the phenomena they represent. The *Corollary Myth of Fulfillment* concerns fulfillment as "a positive desirable state based on a concept of a substantial improvement over present circumstances... feeling very good on a regular basis" (p. 70).

Possibly the most important point to be obtained from Baumeister's (1991) discussion of higher meaning is that it pits perceived meaning against potential meaning. A person failing to perceive meaning in life has another option, besides nihilism or "the absurd," and that is faith. Despite its seemingly inferior status, *belief* in "higher" principles seems to sustain a large portion of humanity when perceived life-meaning crumbles. This theme has been developed with respect to life-meaning by a great number of writers, among the most prominent being Viktor Frankl (1969, 1984). Other "theistic" notables include Buber, Berdyaev, and Maritain (Herberg, 1958), not to mention Tillich (1952; Herberg, 1958).

**Meaningfulness Is Not Spirituality—But Related**

Spirituality has long been shunned by psychologists not only for its seeming incompatibility with the "hard science" demands of the biomedical and behaviorist traditions, but also for its sheer complexity. It is now showing signs of being reborn into new prominence. At the same time, the fears that scientists have held of even mentioning religion or spirituality, lest they be considered heretical to their own discipline, seem to be gradually diminishing.

The history of the world has demonstrated a virtually timeless connection between spiritual and religious matters and the ultimate concern of meaning in life. But with the growth of the secular discipline of psychology, it is no longer necessary to assume that
they are equivalent domains. Theoretically, it is now easy to differentiate essentially 
transpersonal issues from those that should properly be labeled existential or ontological. 
Further, the recent acknowledgment of phenomena such as near-death and out-of-body 
experiences has encouraged even more flexibility among researchers. It is now possible to 
discuss paranormal aspects without infringing on either transpersonal-spiritual, or 
existential-ontological areas. Proponents of these various directions can be comfortable 
within their interests, while actually being enriched by the high degree of overlap with 
adjacent fields.

Spirituality has a transpersonal dimension all its own, that defies categorization 
with other areas of human or biological science. It would be a mistake to assume identity 
with ultimate concerns such as life-meaning; and it would be wrong to ignore the overlap 
of spirituality with other areas. Actually, spirituality also has a tradition of association with 
both physical and mental well-being that dates from antiquity. More recently, thinkers of 
non-orthodox religious and psychological inclination, such as Jung (1969b), Frankl (1984), 
May (1979), Tillich (1952), Maslow (1968), Fromm (1950)—many with first-hand clinical 
experience—have been urging scientific investigation into these areas (as the areas 
themselves rapidly converge). As every possible strategy is sought to attack persistent 
life-threatening illnesses, increased attention is being paid to this association (e.g., Fetzer 
Institute, 1999).

Spirituality is obviously closely connected to issues of aging, life as an elderly 
person, diseases of the elderly which are frequently terminal, and imminent mortality. The 
older the population, the more the value of spirituality is enhanced as an avenue of 
life-meaning (e.g., Carr & Morris, 1996; Mickley, Soeken, & Belcher, 1992; O'Neil & 
Kenny, 1998; Peteet, 1985; Reed, 1986; Smith et al., 1993).
Spirituality is related to goal-seeking and motivation. The lives of many individuals are structured around religious or spiritual observances. While transcendent meanings can provide reasons for this, the converse is also true, that such outward structures contribute essentially to the foundation of meanings that ground peoples' lives.

The literature on religion and spirituality and its relevance to other life areas is vast. Recent reviews of spirituality and its relationship to meaning in life and related areas can be found in Burris, Jackson, Tarpley, and Smith, (1996), Chamberlain and Zika (1992), Emmons (1999), Fetzer Institute (1999), Reker and Wong (1988), and Wong (1998c).

Goals and Meaning

Goal-involvement is a prominent construct in the literature on meaning in life, and is often held to be a central source of meaning. Emmons (1999) goes so far as to equate personal goals with ultimate concerns. According to "personal striving theory," which takes as its basic position that human beings are goal-directed creatures, meaning in life, an ultimate concern, is transmuted into goal-striving. Others agree that pursuit of goals "gives meaning and purpose to people's lives.... goals appear to be prime constituents of the meaning-making process" (Emmons, 1999, p. 15, 147). Personal goals are "internal representations of desired states, where states are broadly construed as outcomes, events, or processes" (Emmons, 1999, p. 16).

It would be a mistake, however, to try to simplify matters to the extent that meaning in life is a matter of being involved with goals. The assertion that goal-involvement is a major source of life-meaning invokes a number of key questions or related issues.

Facets of the Argument. First is the matter of what is specifically meant by "goals." Although in popular usage, goals are frequently thought of as ends that must be achieved in order to be meaningful, Emmons' (1999) definition above points out that other
considerations apply. Klinger (1998), as have others, maintains that life's meaning is largely derived from the pursuit of goals itself, not just in reaping the rewards. Furthermore, he asserts that the four needs for meaning identified by Baumeister (1991; purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth; see below) are best seen as four dimensions of the same process, essentially goal-seeking. Is this just a matter of being or feeling motivated? Ebersole (1998) asserts that although it is a "near-universal" fact that everyone has purpose(s), actively seeking (existential) meaning depends on not being preoccupied with survival or some other struggle.

There are also many different types or levels of goals (Klinger, 1998). Goals can range from the very mundane to rarified spiritual realms, and involve behaviors of very different kinds. Emmons (1999) offers an in-depth discussion of spiritual striving as a foundational indicator of life-meaning.

Like many of the other issues related to life-meaning, goal-involvement also overlaps with physical and mental well-being. Emmons et al. (1998) discuss in detail the interaction of goals, traumatic events, and life-meaning: goals assist in finding or creating life-meanings; goals are altered upon impact with traumatic life events, hence they can be used as an outcome measure and also a predictor in well-being research; and goals are used in the reconstruction of life-meanings after trauma (see also Emmons, 1999).

It is possible to take an even more behavioral stance towards the relationship of goals and meaning in life. Joske (1982) approaches the question from the point of view of activities and goals. He distinguishes between two types of meaning of activities. Intrinsic meaning is the value of the performance itself, and derivative meaning is the part it plays in the achievement of some worthwhile end. Joske (1982) claims that "What is the meaning of life?" refers to derivative meaning; whether life serves a further purpose which is itself meaningful. His argument resides in the idea that "the meaning of life [is] analogous to the
meaning of an activity" (p. 402); human life can be evaluated (in a broad sense) as if it were an activity. And just as an activity can be evaluated with respect to its intrinsic meaning, its derivative meaning, or on other grounds, so life may seem meaningless because of an inherent flaw in the system, i.e., the nature of the world, and not from lack of commitment on the part of the person.

**People Seek Meanings, Not Just Goals.** Although this theme provides valuable insight into some of the behavioral ramifications of meaning, it is difficult to leave it at that level. From earlier discussion on the information-handling legacy of *homo sapiens*, the conclusion seems inescapable that while it is true that humans are goal-seeking, this is a rather superficial appearance: in reality, they are *meaning-seeking*. Hence goals are useful only to the extent that they contribute to meanings (see Klinger, 1998).

Individual theorists will argue their own viewpoints, and undoubtedly low-level "subsistence" goals can provide higher level meanings. But there is no reason to deny that higher-level meanings can also dictate lower-level goals. To stop the discussion at the former is to miss an important point. Though goals may be useful "units of analysis" of higher constructs (Emmons, 1999), it is important to appreciate the phenomenological view that first we construe our world, then from that construal comes goals. If the human creature is indeed "fated" by its nature never to be far from questioning the meaning of life, then it is ever balanced on the edge of the terrifying existential abyss. It is not so much that questions of meaning *appear* when other preoccupations fail. To restate Heidegger's principle of *Fallenness* (see previous *Fundamentals of Existentialism*), it is that people busily attend to other preoccupations to assist them in ignoring the existential questions that are *always there*, but are usually too uncomfortable to face.
Age and Meaning

The psychological phenomena that occur in old age have always been of special interest to developmental and existentially-oriented scientists, because this stage of life is uniquely discontiguous: it is the last stage. Erikson (Erikson et al., 1986) made use of his established reputation as a developmental psychologist to become one of the most seminal contributors to the field of meaning-structures in old age. Identifying "psychosocial crises" and their resolution by the acquisition of "virtues," Erikson rallied attention around the changing roles and balance of values especially central to the elderly.

Changes in Content and Role of Meanings. Inevitable losses occur in occupation, social status and the gradual disappearance of peer groups, and physical energy and activity. Psychosocial concerns (love and care) become increasingly outpaced in advancing age by determined continuance of mental and physical autonomy, usefulness, interest, enterprise and enthusiasm for new experiences. That values and meanings change with age, with respect to both content and impact, is thus one of the main themes of this area (Dittmann-Kohli & Westerhof, 2000; Ebersole, 1998; Wong, 1998c).

In fact, with declining physical energy, meanings per se take on a more substantial role, relative to activities, among older people. The gerontology literature is full of studies involving life-stories in one form or another, storytelling, life narratives, autobiographical sketches, reminiscences, and so forth, and their particularly salubrious role in the lives of the elderly. "Successful aging" (e.g., Wong, 1989, 1998c) is the term used to indicate the recognition that happiness is not always guaranteed in the infirmity of old age, but that meaningfulness can be maintained. In fact, say Van Ranst and Marcoen (2000), "Most
aging people... continue to strive for congruence between their actual and expected self- and life-perceptions" (p. 60).

Spiritual and religious concerns, like death and dying, generally take on a more prominent role in advancing age, and this area is often associated with meaning-in-life literature. Spirituality is a major source of meaning later in life for several reasons. It provides a conceptual (belief and understanding) bridge between life and death; it provides a strategy of coping with loss of personal strengths and relationships; and it provides a framework for purpose (personal salvation or redemption) and activities (good deeds towards others) (Wong, 1998c).

Reker and Wong (1988) have emphasized the importance of society and time as contexts for meaning that are particularly relevant in advanced age. Society is a context in that personal value systems are inherited in large part from one’s culture. Time becomes an increasingly important context as age advances because of the increase in an individual’s perspective, as well as the shift in balance of meaningful experiences from “ahead of me” to “behind me.” The self-concept, not static but rather a dynamic evaluative process, becomes more associated with the past than the future (Beike & Niedenthal, 1998). Past events are fixed in time (although not their interpretations) and are the objects of reminiscence; and future events, promising personal change, are anticipated. When the balance of mental energy thus shifts to the past, personal meanings can change dramatically.
Sources and Dimensions of Meaning and Meaninglessness in Life

As in all of existential-phenomenological psychology, it is an inherent paradox within this essay that an attempt is being made to describe in communicable, transmissible generalizations what can ultimately be experienced only within the individual's private experiential universe. And so it is with meaning and meaninglessness. Fuller (1990), referring to the infinite universe of phenomenological meanings, points out that strictly speaking, "none of [these] meanings is a part of our mind. None has a psychological character" (p. 36). What is meant is that as the domain of Dasein, the existential being-in-the-world, they are not confined to a psychological "space," some "inner realm of consciousness" that conventional psychology usually assigns to people.

Nevertheless, an effort must be made to define parameters of a common universe. In order to speak comprehensibly of the conceptual and empirical exploration that has occurred in this field, it is necessary to move beyond the general existential characteristics suggested by Maddi (1998), such as courage or hardiness, and individualism (authenticity).

It is necessary to return once again to the query, "What is the meaning of life?" and its various permutations (see the section, Impact and Varieties of the Question). Klemke (2000) suggests that despite the almost infinite variety of attempts to answer this question, including some that challenge the very nature of the question, responses have generally fallen into two categories: Theistic answers, that there is a Supreme Being within which resides the answer(s), and Nontheistic alternatives, which state that there is no need to postulate anything more than observable creation in which the answer(s) must lie. As will be seen, these two categories are not mutually exclusive and cannot be reviewed in serial fashion. Not only do commentators frequently confuse these categories in their
conceptualization of the question, they frequently try to include all these stances in their final responses (see also Nagel, 2000).

In the previous section a number of concepts were introduced that are related to the task immediately at hand, some distantly, some fairly closely, but generally as peripheral ideas. This section purports to distill out and identify that specific set of dimensional constructs and associated terminology that represents the conceptual foundation of the current literature on meaning and meaninglessness in life. An effort is made to progress roughly from the more general to the more specific, but further attempts to arrange the material at this point would have been artificial and forced. The following section, Summary: Sources of Meaning and Dimensions of Meaning, will offer an overview.

This raises the important question whether, across the findings of numerous observers reviewed herein, the constructs describing various sources of meaning and meaninglessness (such as "goals," "well-being," "relationships," etc.) are uniformly applied. Predictably, the answer is no; such an assumption should never be made. The solution to that problem, however, is not within the scope of the present work; perhaps this will be approached in the future by way of meta-analytical studies. Caution is thus advised in the interpretation and understanding of the nomenclature that follows.

Baier

Baier's (1982) perspective is among the broadest of those encountered. He acknowledges the popularity of the idea of meaninglessness, and asserts that it arises from the conflict between two culturally-embedded institutions and the misconceptions surrounding them. His primary theme appears to be an attempt to vindicate science from what he claims is its accepted role as the source of cultural pessimism. Pessimism arises
from the combination of two beliefs, both only half-true: (1) that meaningfulness of human life depends on the satisfaction of at least three conditions (the universe is intelligible, life has a purpose, and all men's hopes and desires can ultimately be satisfied) and (2) that the universe satisfies none of these conditions.

Science is the source of the second statement that the universe fails to satisfy the three conditions, because it appears to most people to defy them. Hence the dilemma; but Baier claims the dilemma is unreal because life can be meaningful even if all three conditions are not met. Moreover, science, for several reasons which are not relevant here, is fundamentally better than Christianity's answer to the three initial conditions.

Craig and Quinn: Theistic Answers

The theistic or theological response to the question of meaning in life has been the standard one for the majority of the human race for thousands of years. The highly structured systems of dogma that form the backbone of organized religions, are familiar to all. At a supra-institutional level, specific spiritual dimensions of meaning can be identified. Aside from his theological conclusion (which also includes immortality and God), Craig (2000) sees the broad question of "meaning" as comprised of (1) Meaning of life (in the rational sense of signifying something that we can understand); (2) Value of life (i.e., translation into social values, in terms of necessary standards of right and wrong, how one should or should not behave) and (3) Purpose of Life (i.e., direction, destination, cause leading to effect).

Quinn (2000), also arguing in a theistic vein, notes several definitions of life meaning and their requirements. (1) For "Axiological Meaning," human life must have positive intrinsic value, and on the whole it must be good for the person. (2) For "Teleological Meaning," a person's life must have purposes understood to be nontrivial
and achievable; these purposes must have positive value; and the life must contain
actions directed towards achieving these purposes that "are performed with zest" (p. 57).
(3) For "Complete Meaning," a life has both positive axiological meaning and positive
teleological meaning.

Frankl

As one of the pioneers of the existential psychotherapy movement and one of the
most viscerally influential writers on meaning in life, many people would say that Viktor
Frankl (1969, 1984) deserves a place of honor in this discussion. His existential
c conceptualization was derived in large part from his own experiences in Nazi concentration
camps during World War II.

Frankl's concept of humankind stands on three triads, which are also the "three
pillars" of Logotherapy. The first triad is freedom of will, "will to meaning," and meaning of
life. These are mostly traditional existential concepts as previously discussed. "Will to
meaning" is his term for striving to find meaning in personal existence, "the basic striving
of man to find and fulfill meaning and purpose" (1969, p. 35).

Meaning of life is composed of the second triad: creative, experiential, and
attitudinal values. Creativity is "what he gives to the world in terms of his creations";
experience is "what he takes from the world in terms of encounters and experiences"; and
his attitude is "the stand he takes to his predicament in case he must face a fate which he
cannot change" (Frankl, 1969, p. 70, italics in original). The third triad of attitudinal values
is composed in turn of meaningful attitudes towards pain, guilt, and death.

In this system, Frankl's components of meaning of life can be seen residing
specifically in the values a person adopts, freely, towards relationships with life in terms of
giving, receiving, and the inevitabilities of facticity. The elements of ultimate meaning,
Frankl first emphasizes, are completely individual: "Each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible" (1969, pp. 113-114).

Hence individual responsibility ("responsibleness"), though not strictly a dimensional component of meaning, is one foundational element. "Live as if you were living already for the second time and as if you had acted the first time as wrongly as you are about to act now!" (p. 114). Frankl rejects self-actualization as being "not an attainable aim at all" (p. 115) because it is too self-centered; the important point is exactly to redirect attention from self towards a "transcendent" goal elsewhere.

Operationalization of Frankl's (1984) system resides in the three ways he prescribes to discover the meaning in life: (1) by creating a work or doing a deed; (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; (3) by the attitude that is taken toward unavoidable suffering. Attitude is the key element here. To discover meaning is to change one's attitudes, to rise above conditions, to grow beyond them, to exercise this unique feature of human existence, improving oneself, becoming stronger, also is mentioned as a purpose for or answer to suffering.

In addition, Frankl (1969) does not hesitate to draw on fundamentals of his Jewish faith, discussing his belief in a higher meaning and the possibility of "another dimension, a world beyond man's world; a world in which the question of an ultimate meaning of human suffering would find an answer" (p. 122). This level of meaning is approached not by thinking but by faith, and faith in turn is preceded by trust in the existence of "Ultimate Meaning." Frankl (1969) concludes that ultimate meaning resides in the divine world, in God, which is another dimension (that of Being) but which is already part of our natures. Again, his writings are peppered with anecdotes which appear to support his conviction that this has wide applicability.
Turning specifically to meaninglessness, it can be seen that according to Frankl, this is experienced as the absence of the above values. When the will to meaning (striving to find meaning in personal existence) is frustrated, this can lead to "nøogenic neurosis," the "existential vacuum," which manifests itself mainly as a state of boredom. This "Sunday neurosis" is when people become aware of the emptiness of their lives when they are not caught up in the busy-ness of the week. This atrophy of the will to meaning may be compensated for by will to power, will to money, or by will to pleasure (especially by way of sex).

Many anecdotes of the fatal consequences of loss of purpose (provided by the will to meaning) illustrate Frankl's (1984) basic thesis. Meaninglessness is basically a failure of the attitudinal dimensions of the will to meaning, which are involved in the inevitable encountering of "the tragic triad" of human existence: pain, guilt, and death. A healthy will to meaning creates "a certain degree of tension, the tension between what one has already achieved and what one still ought to accomplish, or the gap between what one is and what one should become" (p. 110). This tension is necessary to life.

**Singer**

Drawing on ideas expressed by William James a century earlier, Singer (1992) claims that life-meaning arises from potential meaninglessness by virtue of the human capacity to create and pursue ideals. By embellishing the ordinary with values or qualities that elevate it beyond our immediate reach, we create not only something that is worthy of admiration, but also a "goal." This tendency is apparently a deeply-embedded peculiarity. In fact, it is this love of ideals that provides basic meaning to life.

Mention has been made of Singer's rapturous "wonderment" at the world's "entertainment," this experienced by liberation from the burdensome structures invented in
the name of “meaning.” From this ability to behold the wonder of creation arises humankind’s similar tendency to idealize (Singer emphatically rejects the Platonic notion of pre-existing ideals, however). Argument might also be made that this is not terribly dissimilar to the ubiquitous tendency to anthropomorphize; and additionally, it lends itself readily to Jungian archetypal analysis. Singer is saying that this tendency to look to the transcendent, however “quixotic” it may be labeled by the masses, is exactly what provides the psychological lifeblood of the race, ontological meaning.

Singer (1992) is emphatic that it is necessary to recognize the pluralism of all observable forms of meaning, that there is no generalizable standard of meaning for all individuals. Nevertheless, identifiable empirical sources of meaning are: purposeful activity or goals (satisfying in the activity itself or as the consummation thereof); imagination or creativity itself (the ability to “surmount the routine, repetitive, mechanical elements in life”) (p. 108); self-expression (feeling one’s unique identity is being made manifest in some way; the existential notion of free choice is involved here); and significance (“dedication to ends that we choose because they exceed the goal of personal well-being” [p. 115], ends that benefit other beings besides oneself, or which move us beyond individuality).

Yalom

Irvin Yalom’s *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980) has had wide appeal to both lay and professional audiences, and a catalytic effect on the entire field of existential-phenomenological inquiry. Using the point of view of a psychopathologist, Yalom focuses on just four existential issues, death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness, in their role as existential threats. Many interested commentators have since apparently come to assume that the field is limited by those four areas. This is, of course, false; but, in fairness, it should also be pointed out that by thus focusing interest,
his work has probably had a net positive effect on the subsequent productivity of existential researchers.

What also distinguishes Yalom's approach, from the point of this review, is that he concerns himself directly with meaninglessness. Recognizing that the two sides cannot really be considered separately, he addresses the negative, threatening side of absence of meaning. And the sources of meaning that appear in his discussion are regarded in the sense of antidotes to meaninglessness, i.e., therapeutic methods for those that are ailing with existential crisis (or Frankl's noögenic neurosis).

These antidotes are therefore, in a sense, defenses against meaninglessness. Hence they may not be functionally identical to sources of meaning of "normal" (non-distressed) people. Sartre's (1956; Solomon, 1974) criteria are assumed, that activities generating a sense of purpose be intrinsically satisfying and not spring from other motivations. In the directions of outward, inward, or beyond, Yalom provides the following six-fold classification of strategies.

*Altruism:* identified by Yalom as an especially potent source of meaning for people dying prematurely, of cancer or other illness.

*Dedication to a Cause:* the cause must be first and foremost greater than oneself in terms of whom it serves, and this "getting beyond the self" seems to be the key to its effectiveness.

*Creativity:* yet another form of productivity, of giving to the world, of forming some sort of legacy; this is not referring strictly to people with conventional artistic gifts; any creative form appears to work.

*The Hedonistic Solution:* this is not used with the negative and condemnatory connotations usually attached to it in a traditional Christian culture. Here Yalom intends the idea as embodying what he considers to be the core concept in the creation of meaning,
that "it is good and right to immerse oneself in the stream of life" (p. 431, italics in original). He also notes the efficiency of this solution because it can include almost any activity.

*Self-Actualization:* in the sense of Maslow (1968), of realizing one's potential, this also involves attention to self, but in an effortful way that may not always be superficially pleasurable. It speaks to some deeper core of a person, however, that embodies individual potential.

*Self-Transcendence:* like altruism, dedication to a cause, and creativity, this is seen as getting "out of the self." Yalom agrees with Frankl's (1969, 1984) dissatisfaction with self-actualization, citing the superiority of getting away from oneself altogether to find meaning. This point is clearly open to interpretation, but Yalom cites several famous psychologists' beliefs that this is arguably a key element in creating meaning for oneself, to get away from the self.

Making numerous and respectful references to the value of Frankl's (1969) assertion of the transcendent as the elemental source of meaning, Yalom seems to be in accordance with him on this point. At the same time, he concludes that there is something inherently pernicious in what he calls the "galactic view." Viewing life from too distant and sweeping a vantage point invites confusion. It is by definition fruitless to try to answer questions that have been teasing philosophers of all civilizations from the very beginning. In contrast, he points out the therapeutic value of "immersing oneself," of getting involved, in order to activate one or more of the antidotes mentioned here.

It is well to remember this system comes from one who, as a psychiatrist, has dedicated his career to helping a great many people cope with questions of meaning, in other words, to "fixing problems." The system is largely empirical and is therefore quite relevant to the present discussion, but might in some respects be regarded as a too-pragmatic "band-aid" approach by thinkers of a more theoretical bent.
Antonovsky and Korotkov: Meaning as Part of "Sense of Coherence"

Antonovsky (1987), in an attempt to decipher the unpredictability of people's health outcomes, proposed salutogenesis, a very broad theoretical approach to the study of health. Salutogenesis offsets the traditional one-sided approach of traditional medicine, pathogenesis. Although there was no assumption that disease is totally out of the ordinary, the emphasis was put on studying the factors which contribute to what is right, rather than what is wrong (for an updated discussion see Korotkov, 1998). Within this framework, Antonovsky proposed the Sense of Coherence construct, "a pervasive, enduring though dynamic, feeling of confidence that one's internal and external environments are predictable and that there is a high probability that things will work out as well as can reasonably be expected" (Antonovsky, 1987, p. xiii). This construct, he suggested, consists of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness.

Korotkov's (1998) description of the component of comprehensibility appears very similar to the semantic aspect of meaning, making cognitive or logical sense out of experiences, and that this can never be fully separated from our usual existential understanding of meaning. Meaningfulness, however, emphasizes a need for integrated emotional experience. It appeals to one's motivation to pursue goals, invest energy, to strive, and to cope. There is a clear motivational denotation here that is not reflected in the previous component. This was seen as the most important component of Sense of Coherence.

The general parallel between the Sense of Coherence construct and cognitive models of symbolic representation is easily seen, and serves to remind us of the close tie between semantic and existential meanings. The construct and its components are hypothesized to be closely involved in the appraisal processes of stress-coping models,
and the resulting positive or negative health outcomes. Clearly there is also a feedback connection between a positive or negative health outcome and life-meaningfulness.

**Flanagan: Expression of Individuality**

Meaning in life can be translated as what is necessary to *live* a life, and that in turn as what makes life *worth* living. Happiness confers worth, is normally a component of a life worth living, but by itself is not enough. Flanagan (2000) asserts that what really motivates humans with a sense of being alive, is having an identity and expressing it, being something rather than nothing, being an *agent*.

Flanagan illustrates how this sense of self has been annihilated by the three arguments against the conventional idea of *agent*. (1) The metaphysical argument says "me" is just a location (in the complex causal time-space network known as the universe) through which certain things happen; (2) the sociological argument says "me" is just the intersection of a bunch of roles corresponding to the complex of overlapping social niches; and (3) the developmental argument asserts that "me" is a series of self-stages *without* a unifying and continuing ego or I, since one is always changing.

Flanagan also rejects as impotent the two usual approaches to the specific broader question of "why do I (and all the rest of creation) exist in the first place?" He calls these two answers "looking for meaning in origins": (1) the theological answer that an omnipresent God has a purpose, a plan for everything; and (2) the scientific answer that things just inexplicably fell into some sort of created state by way of the Big Bang or a similar event that is still explainable just by randomness.

Flanagan (2000) summarizes his thesis by saying that personal meaning can be found in relations in life, but not just in the usual narrow sense of the term. Relations may take the form of social relations, love and friendship, but the significance is not limited to
that. Relations between one's Self and what is around it are an expression of one's "causalness." It matters that I do what "I" want to do because this expresses the identity of my "I-ness."

Relatedness can also exist in creative work, providing meaning because these things express one's uniqueness. Leaving creative and good parts of oneself (a legacy) in the world also defies death (death in the sense that it is total annihilation). "It involves believing that there are selves, that we can in self-expression make a difference, and if we use our truth detectors and good detectors well, that difference might be positive, a contribution to the cosmos" (Flanagan, 2000, p. 205). The message is clear, then, that self or individuality implies eternalness:

**Little: Personal Projects**

Little (1998) has taken a somewhat unique point of view towards meaning in life. Personal projects are "extended sets of personally salient action" (p. 194). These can represent units of analysis in various areas of research, including personal meaning research. The content of personal projects likewise reflects content of personal meaning, and may also indicate the deeper dimensions of that construct. Like other goal-pursuit approaches to meaning, the same caution applies here that meaning may ambiguously arise from the sheer pursuit, as well as from the accomplishment of the objective.

Little (1998) lists five core dimensions for the assessment of personal projects as being also relevant to personal life meaning: **Importance**: a project must have enough importance to be acted on; **Value-congruency**: it must be congruent with personal value system; **Enjoyment**: this is the motivational element; **Absorption**: another motivational element; and **Self-identity**: how close the individual feels the project reflects self-concept.
This list does not claim to describe the main dimensions of personal meaning, and Little (1998) points out inconsistency between personal project meaning, life-meaning, and well-being, despite a tendency to assume that they are closely related. Nevertheless, his system shows how similar dimensions of meaning appear (tentatively) in a slightly different empirical approach.

Wong and Reker: Cognitive, Motivational, Affective Components

Reker and Wong (1988; see also Reker, 2000; Wong, 1989, 1998b) have developed a rather complete system for the conceptualization of personal meanings. They rest their conceptualization of personal meaning on the three dimensions of cognition, motivation, and affect. The cognitive component is primarily a sense of conscious understanding about life's value, purpose, and a logical sense of "rightness." Socially-derived belief systems offer important blueprints for this process. The motivational component refers to an individual's value system, which orders priorities as they relate to daily activities and efforts towards goals. The affective component has more to do with the effects of these strivings, the feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment that derive from meaningful activities; hence this aspect is the result of personal valuation of one's inner and outer doings. This tripartite construct has also been applied to an elderly population by Van Ranst and Marcoen (2000) with slightly different results.

Reker and Wong (1988) assert that values are the primary source of personal meanings. Values derive from beliefs and from needs, roughly according to Maslow's (1970a) theory. As sources of meanings, the broad category of values includes personal relationships, personal growth, success as achievements, altruism or service to others, hedonism, creativity, religion, and legacy.
The cognitive, motivational, and affective triad in turn rests on Kelly's (1955) notion of personal constructs, which provide the framework for meanings; in fact, these seem to be simply aspects of that notion. As did Kelly with his theory, Reker and Wong (1988) assert that the conceptual framework of personal meaning can be represented in large part by a series of postulates.

Fundamental postulate: “Every individual is motivated to seek and to find personal meaning in existence” (p. 222).

Breadth postulate: “An individual's degree of personal meaning will increase in direct proportion to his or her diversification of sources of meaning” (p. 225); this refers to the diversity of different systems of values.

Depth postulate: “An individual's degree of personal meaning will increase in direct proportion to his or her commitment to higher levels of meaning” (p. 226); “levels of meaning” is a concept also treated by others (Baumeister, 1991; Ebersole, 1998).

Meaning system postulate: “The personal meaning system of an individual who has available a variety of sources of meaning and who strives for higher levels of personal meaning will be highly differentiated and integrated” (p. 226). This reflects the complexity of the entire topic of personal meanings.

Choice postulate: “An individual chooses for himself or herself a position on the meaning-producing continuum for the construction of his or her personal meaning system” (p. 228).

Individuality hypothesis: “The personal meaning system of an individualist will be more differentiated and integrated compared to that of a conformist” (p. 228).

Reconstruction postulate: “The personal meaning system of an individual who faces major value changes will become temporarily dis-integrated” (p. 231); valeurs
change with circumstances and vary intrapersonally across the span of experience; nothing is permanently fixed.

*Developmental hypothesis:* "The personal meaning system of an individual will become increasingly more integrated as a function of age" (p. 232); this is juxtaposed against the previous postulate, that despite fluidity, experience seems to provide a broad perspective for integration.

O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996) point out that Reker and Wong's (1988) system comprehensively covers four components of personal life-meaning: "how meaning is experienced (structural components), where it comes from (sources), the diversity with which it is experienced (breadth), and the degree of self-transcendence involved (depth)" (O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996, p. 462). It can be seen that this conceptualization also covers the suggestions of many others, regarding key areas such as age, "higher" meaning as compared to lower, the central role of free choice (Frankl, 1969, 1984), and the associated sense of individuality (Flanagan, 2000; see also Reker, 2000; Wong, 1989, 1998a,b).

A similar broad heuristic employed by Dittmann-Kohli and Westerhof (2000) has the name "personal meaning system," an "affect-laden network of cognitions" (p. 108). One's personal meaning system provides cohesion between meaningful cognitive schemata (including self and various external sources of meaning), affective dimensions of values, and the goals that organize meaningful behaviors.

**Wong: Meaning and Successful Aging**

Pertaining particularly to the elderly, Wong (1989) has suggested four meaning-enhancing strategies. These are less *sources* of meaning than actual methods
of pursuing or enhancing life-meaning during the vulnerability to meaninglessness brought on by old age.

**Reminiscence:** This is a widely reported strategy used with gerontological populations, and can take several different forms ranging from simple conversation to elaborate written exercises. Emphasis is put on constructive, positive practice.

**Commitment:** The idea is commitment and responsibility to meaningful "tasks."

Wong points out that this is an affirmation of value by the investment of time and energy.

**Optimism:** Apart from its link to physical health, this seems to be an important antidote to hopelessness, which can easily beset the elderly.

**Religiosity and Spiritual Well-being:** Provides a meaningful context for events in life, positive or negative. It also serves as a bridge of meaning between life and death, the "big event" for the elderly.

Wong (1998c) later revised the nonreligious part of this classification of strategies as follows: **Creative Work:** including hobbies; **Relationship:** social relationships; **Self-transcendence:** "helping others and serving God" (p. 381); **Simple Pleasures of Life:** this is acknowledged as a capacity to enjoy, an attitude, that must be developed; **Hope for the Future:** a restatement of "optimism"; and **Life Review:** a restatement of "reminiscence."

**Wong: "Personal Meaning Profile"**

Within the cognitive, motivational, and affective dimensional framework, Wong (1998b) has approached personal life-meaning from the direction of implicit theories. Factor analysis of an empirically-derived set of 102 descriptors of "the ideally meaningful life" gave a nine-factor model. **Achievement Striving** was by far the strongest factor, although this does not seem to discriminate between attainment and the joy of pursuit; **Religion** in the sense of an inner spiritual life, was also fairly prominent. The others were:
Relationship (social relations, not necessarily romantic); Fulfillment, as a feeling of satisfaction in accomplishment; Fairness-Respect refers to one’s receiving positive social recognition; Self-confidence reflects optimism and a feeling of empowerment about one’s own abilities; Self-integration appears to refer to a feeling of self-worth in the overall scheme of things; Self-transcendence refers to a transpersonal sense of values; and Self-acceptance which is resignation and acceptance of one’s failures. The order of importance of ideal components was different than listed here, and turned out to be age-dependent.

The foregoing refers to an idealized meaningful life. From actual self-ratings, personal profiles of meanings reduced to a slightly different eight-factor structure. Intimacy was distinguished from Community Relationship and the “fairness” theme becomes Fair Treatment. The original “Self-integration” and “Self-confidence” items merged into other factors.

Ebersole

Ebersole (1998) also has examined self-reported life meanings based on numerous samples of various subject types. Ebersole’s review of his findings includes eight content-categories of personal meanings, as follows: Relationships: additionally broken down into family, spouse or romantic relationship, and other friends; Service: helping others; Belief: belief systems, in which religious systems were more important that political ones; Obtaining: in a purely materialistic sense (i.e., success is not included); Growth: self-improvement and understanding, discovery; Health: physical health; Life Work: occupation, career; does not include homemaker; and Pleasure: which seems to range from sensory to rarified esthetic enjoyment. In addition, Ebersole and colleagues
Koestenbaum

Koestenbaum (1971) says the question of meaning in life can be approached from four directions: meaning as roles; meaning as pleasure and fulfillment; meaning as boundary situations; and meaning as suffering. These conceptual approaches offer valuable insight into the anxiety and guilt associated with meaninglessness which arise when these systems break down.

(1) Meaning as Roles: Social roles define meaning. They do so by putting demands on people, causing them to try to fulfill the demands. A person can also upgrade or downgrade the role in order to make the real-life situation fit better. "What life expects from us is really what the sociologist calls the problem of roles.... in our lives we are expected to fulfill our roles" (p. 46). Role-failure leads to guilt and a sense of meaninglessness; a classic example being the case in which a mother loses a child, resulting in her feeling that her role has not been fulfilled (the role she has accepted for herself).

An additional point is that the person is the future vision, the end-state, the perfect something—this is what fails; the future is taken away from the person, leaving a void: angst. "In an emotional sense, ego, person, self, subjectivity, and inwardness are none other than the projected and fulfilled image of ourselves in the future" (p. 45). The subjective sense of failure is what pains us, not the objective one. The underlying theme that seems to be suggested here is having a satisfying social self-concept.

(2) Meaning as Pleasure and Fulfillment: This question is, "what can I expect from life?" The answer is, usually, "successful living or satisfaction" (p. 50) Just as social role-expectations confront us from the very beginning, so do fantasies of rewards that
might be expected from life. In turn we expect complete fulfillment and satisfaction; it never comes, but we then expect the next new direction to provide it; that doesn't either, and so on. So with respect to failure of meaning, Koestenbaum (1971) says, "First, man cannot fulfill the demands of his roles—he cannot be what life expects of him. Second, he finds that life responds with equal fraudulence: it does not give him the fulfillment and infinite happiness that he deserves and that he needs for a meaningful life" (p. 51).

(3) Meaning as Boundary Situations: Koestenbaum (1971) distinguishes between two possible attitudes towards fulfillment. First, humanity can be seen as eternally striving to achieve the more, the eternally future goal, or second, as having achieved the Zen satori, "to live in the spontaneous present as if it were eternity" (p. 51). Apart from arguing that they are essentially the same (striving is always now, and the eternal now is always being strived for), he points out that either stance soon runs into existential boundaries, or limitations. The following are familiar elements of existential facticity, which clash with our desire for fulfillment, producing a paradox of meaninglessness: Death; Guilt ("the experience of man's basic unacceptability" [Tillich, 1952], the inevitable falling short); Situation (Koestenbaum says this is also called "fate"; the time in which one lives, the culture, one's gender, parents, and so forth); Suffering (of self or others, which is unavoidable); Conflict (which always seems to be in the way of fulfillment); and Chance (the ever-present sword of Damocles, "bad luck").

(4) Meaning as Suffering: The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism have as their core the pervasiveness of suffering; any form of human existence is suffering. This is a much-relished topic in Christianity, Judaism; and even in Freudian psychology. Koestenbaum (1971) highlights three forms of suffering. The first is suffering as pain; physical pain is inevitable (as is anguish); its central characteristic is its unjustness. The second is suffering as compassion; this also is inescapable, as there seems to be built-in
empathy for others' suffering, revulsion at others' injuries, and so forth. The third is suffering as imperfection. This suffering resides in humanity's always being faced with the question of life's meaning; we always expect meaningfulness and perfection, and life always falls short, leaving the existential Absurd.

Naylor et al.: “Life Matrix”

Naylor et al. (1994) have suggested a chart-like Life Matrix as an aid in systematizing and clarifying one's personal meaning systems. To begin, four separable states of life-meaning are identified: meaninglessness, separation (isolation), having, and being, which they note are not hierarchically related. Each state is associated with certain experiential effects on the following dimensions: spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physiological.

Hence, for the lowest or most negative level of life meaning, meaninglessness, one can experience (spiritual) despair, (intellectual) nihilism, (emotional) depression, and (physiological) death. Separation can be expressed as disconnection from “higher” sources of spiritual meaning, alienation from one's sense of self, emotional anxiety resulting from dysfunctional attachments to other people, or physiological somatization, the latter two categories arising from disconnection from one's feelings and body. Having is a step upward towards positive meaning, and involves values familiar in the West. It is experienced spiritually as orthodoxy, and intellectually as hedonism and all the false values that accompany it. At an emotional level this self-oriented view becomes narcissism, and at the physiological level it shows up as health fetishism. The highest level of life-meaning they have labeled as being. This is spiritually experienced as "quest," intellectually as growth, emotionally as balance, and physiologically as homeostasis. Being
allows access to other sources of meaning: one's creations, love and social relationships, and a courageous attitude towards suffering and death.

Although the authors make allowances for their lack of conceptual systematicness, this matrix still suffers from what appears to be a somewhat forced symmetry, imposed on rather arbitrary dimensions.

Joske: Goals and Meaning

Discussion was made previously of goals as an area that overlaps heavily with meaning in life, to the extent that the boundaries of these areas are blurred, but they still could not be considered identical. Mention was made that goals-involvement seems to be integral to physical and mental well-being, motivation in general, and the behavioral aspect of spirituality. In addition, goals can have wide ranges of content dimensions. Perhaps most importantly, there exists a continuum of achievement with a complex and still-unelucidated relationship to meaning in life, ranging from pursuit with virtually no hope of success to full achievement.

Joske's (1982) analysis of the personal meaning of activities into intrinsic (value of the performance) and derivative (value of the end) meanings reflects this last point. It will be recalled that "meaning of life" embodies the expectation that life has a derivative meaning beyond itself. Failure to find meaning in life, he points out, can be interpreted as failure to live life effectively (the means), or a defect in the nature of the world (the end). If it is discovered that the end-goal to which a life is dedicated is lacking in meaning, then the activities constituting that life will also appear meaningless.

Joske (1982) identifies at least four elements of the meaningless (activity), which can help to fill out the dimensions of meaninglessness: Worthlessness, "it lacks intrinsic merit, so that its performance needs justification by reference to some external purpose";
Pointlessness, "not directed toward the fulfillment of an end"; Triviality, "although it has a point, the purpose lacks sufficient worth to justify its performance" (i.e., the end fails to justify the means); and Futility, "although it has a point or needs a point in order to make it fully meaningful, the world prevents the achievement of the required end." Activity is fully meaningful if it suffers from none of above defects, it is valueless if all four elements above apply, and there exists a whole range in between.

Baumeister: Four Needs of Meaning

Baumeister (1991; Sommer & Baumeister, 1998) has assessed meaning in life in terms of what he calls The Four Needs of Meaning. Using a conceptual approach bearing certain similarities to that of Maslow (1970a), he proposes that these needs are strongly felt but are not necessary for survival. People have a need for life to make sense in certain ways. If these four need-domains are satisfied, a person will probably feel that life has sufficient meaning. If one or more are not satisfied, then life-meaning will be lacking, and the person will be motivated to change elements in his or her life. Some degree of interchangeability is implied, for people change in terms of what is meaningful to them. These four are claimed to cover the "total conceptual space."

Purpose (or "purposiveness") is to see one's current activities oriented in relation to future or possible states. This concept runs parallel to the behavioral view of goal-directed behavior in animals, but people can think about goals, and purposes do not have to be achieved in fact. There are two broad categories of purpose: goals, which lie beyond current activity and exist in the future (often in nested hierarchies); and fulfillments, which are inherently fulfilling current activities, that is, produce a positive affect and involve approach towards goals (although this is something of an illusion).
Value is “people's motivation to feel that their actions are right and good and justifiable. They need to see their current actions as well as their past acts as not being bad and objectionable, and they want to see their life as having positive value” (p. 36). Justification is the central idea here, but values can be both positive and negative. Positive values are reflected in prescriptive rules, making certain acts more desirable than most; and negative values are reflected in proscriptive rules against certain acts (most moral rules and systems, with both cultural and pan-cultural common elements). The value base provides guideline for making value judgments. “The most common, major problem area for providing one's life with meaning in a modern Western society appears to be finding a firm basis for values” (p. 80). Decline of historical bases, religion, morality and tradition, has led to the present “value gap.”

Efficacy is feeling capable and strong, often taking the form of needing to feel one is “making a difference.” This is maximized in meeting challenges and realizing difficult goals. Efficacy also exists as a need to believe one has some control over other events, a familiar concept in psychology. The power of this need is such that people are sometimes drawn to illusions of control, either of self or environment.

Self-worth is the need for a feeling of positive personal value, which usually takes the social form of feeling superior to others, and is visible in a wide range of actions. This obviously overlaps somewhat with the need for value. This need has historically been associated with social hierarchy systems, but in current democratic societies it is very uncertain. It can be based on the individual or on a group.

Fry (1998) also found similar categories in adolescents' reflections on life meanings. She mentions three major need themes of purpose, maintaining mastery over the environment through self-management or self-efficacy, and maintaining self-esteem.
At a more concrete level, Baumeister (1991) mentions three currently salient approaches to providing value bases for his “needs for meaning.” Work is useful in feeding one’s sense of efficacy by expressing the self, and depending on the type, can be a reservoir of social values. Love and family attachments offer a tempting (but largely illusory) solution to the “value gap.” Parenthood in particular may be pursued as a means toward values and personal purpose or fulfillment. Religion claims the ability to satisfy all four “needs”: a higher purpose in salvation, the highest justification, efficacy by providing explanations for life events, and self-worth as membership in the religious community.

*Unsatisfied Needs* is how Baumeister (1991) conceptualizes meaninglessness, and, through empirical studies, asserts that his system conveniently provides a set of converse dimensions for this construct. When people have unmet needs of meaning, contrary to expectation, they do not try to replace the missing need. Instead they try to elaborate other sources of meaning to compensate.

*Loss of Purpose* is a classic symptom of mid-life disillusionment with respect to career goals. This experience can be traumatic; the most common response (for men) was to put more emphasis on family life. The work of Klinger (1998) on the seriousness of loss of goals (see herein, and other goal research) was cited as supporting.

*Lack of Value and Justification* can occur as two types: an absence of positive value bases (the crisis of modern society), or an inability to justify actions. Baumeister (1991) cites as an example a study of mothers who had killed their infants. They felt miserable, and usually wanted to have another baby to “do it right” and make up for error.

*Loss of Efficacy* attained wide popularity in Seligman’s (e.g., 1975; Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993) work surrounding depression. Anorexia nervosa is suggested by Baumeister (1991) as another area involving this loss of meaning, where the syndrome is
actually an assertion of self-efficacy that is felt threatened in other ways, and "going out of control" refers to a loss of self-efficacy feeling rather than eating binges.

_Lack of Self-worth_ is not only a common element of depression, it has also been seen worldwide in the history of slavery. Slaves were lowest on the social hierarchy, but curiously in early America they rarely internalized a lack of self-worth, instead often identifying with Christian moral superiority.

**Battista and Almond: Life Regard Index**

The theoretical framework of Battista and Almond's (1973) _Life Regard Index_ deserves mention for two reasons. First, it involved a condensation by the authors of the existing variety of theoretical conceptions of life meaning; and second, rather than start with a theoretical construct, their intent was to create a clinically usable test instrument based on a sound phenomenological basis.

From conceptualizations existing at the time, these authors distilled four fundamental themes of personal meaning ("positive life regard"). (1) The first theme is positive _commitment_ to a conceptual or belief system. (2) This belief system provides a working _framework_, the second theme, which defines specific and attainable goals in life, and which also sets the rules for interpreting life events. (3) Meaningfulness in life is thus perceived as being in the process of or having _fulfilled_ these purposes or goals (the third theme). (4) Finally, this fulfillment provides a feeling of integration or _significance_ to one's life, which is the last theme. "Framework" and "fulfillment" concepts actually form the two subscales of the test.

The system above refers to required conditions for positive life-meaning. But the authors assert that there are five possible approaches to these conditions, the first two describing the framework for commitment, and the last three referring to the sense of
fulfillment. (1) The Philosophical Framework refers only to an objectively-existing “ultimate” framework (such as religious ones), while the (2) Relativistic Framework reflects the idea that any framework will suffice if the other components are satisfied also. (3) Psychological Fulfillment involves fulfillment through developmental stages or resolution of inherent needs (e.g., the systems of Maslow, Erikson, or psychodynamic psychology). (4) Transactional Fulfillment is attained through successfully satisfying social roles, and (5) Phenomenological Fulfillment emphasizes its dependence on a subjective complex of goals, perceptions of self and social environment.

Noteworthy points in Battista and Almond’s (1973) system are, first, that the authors favored a “relativistic” view that actual personal meanings are somewhat idiosyncratic: any belief system that operates as described above can suffice. Also, the approach is functional rather than structural; the content of the belief system does not seem to matter. This is consistent with postmodern rejection of an objectively existing and “true” meaning that is valid for all people. Also notable are the authors’ attempts to validate their instrument by empirical studies conforming to each of the psychological, transactional, and phenomenological approaches (see also Debats, 2000).

**Prager et al.: The SOMP and SLM**

Prager, Bar Tur, & Abramowici (1997) and Reker (2000) developed and tested the Sources of Meaning Profile (SOMP). Prager, Savaya, and Bar-Tur (2000) have recently reported on the development of a more culturally-sensitive Sources of Life Meaning (SLM) scale that they consider to be an improvement on the SOMP. Factor analysis produced 11 categories of life-meaning: *Family and communal values; Materialistic concerns/values; Life satisfaction/autonomy; “Sense of connectedness”; Communal consciousness/awareness; Attainment of tranquility/peace; Leisure pursuits and*
Self-development; Family relationships; Leisure activities away from home; Enjoyment from animals; and Relationship with partner. These factor titles do not fully convey their meanings, and Prager et al. (2000) emphasize that their research is not yet complete.

O'Connor and Chamberlain: “Depth” or “Levels”

O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996, 2000), reviewing previously accumulated material on sources of meaning, rejected the labeling of several areas previously reported as “sources” of meaning. Understanding, they claim, is rather “an aspect of the cognitive component of any source”; Service and altruism are “motivational components of, for example, relationships with people”; pleasure, satisfaction, achievement are “affective components which can be associated with any source of meaning” (p. 464).

These assertions are debatable, given that, for example, dedicated scientists, or theologians or monastics, may conceivably be motivated by simply a desire to understand. However, O'Connor and Chamberlain’s (1996) point is well taken, that categorizations (including their own) are somewhat arbitrary and open to interpretation, and that there is a need for a more reliable classifications of constructs. At any rate, applying their reasoning to previously suggested sources of meaning, they claim that only five sources (1-5) clearly emerge; from their own studies they add a sixth: (1) Relationship with people; (2) Social and political; (3) Religious and spiritual; (4) Creativity; (5) Personal development; and (6) Relationship with nature.

Though O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996, 2000) accepted the cognitive, motivational, and affective structure of life-meanings, they attempted to redefine the “breadth” and “depth” components previously suggested (Reker & Wong, 1988), regarding them as suffering from various confounds. They chose to operationalize breadth
by "counting each category once, regardless of the number of specific sources reported within it" (p. 464).

For depth of life-meanings, tradition has it that this is a subjective judgment which properly lies with the individual. Such is the approach taken by the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964, described briefly later). Various attempts have been made to circumvent the inherent weaknesses in validity of this measure. Reker and Wong's (1988) approach was to judge responses according to Frankl's (1984) original theoretical system, in which depth of meaning corresponds to the degree of self-transcendence, and is comprised of four levels: Self-preoccupation with hedonistic pleasure and comfort; Devotion of time and energy to the realization of personal potential; Service to others and commitment to larger societal or political causes; and Entertaining values that transcend individuals and encompass cosmic meaning and ultimate purpose (O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996; Reker & Wong, 1988). O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996) also accepted this approach, but concluded from their own study that these depth measures remain unsatisfactory.

Contrast Ebersole's (1998) approach, in which an independent rater uses a different set of criteria for judging greater depth: whether (1) central meaning is discussed with complexity and the writer conveys a sense of the individuality of the meaning; and whether (2) the meaning and example are specific, believable, concrete, and down-to-earth; that is, significant and not trivial. Lesser depth is judged according to whether (1) meaning is new and relatively untried and shallow; or been held for a while without undergoing development; and whether (2) emphasis is put on the rater's own judgment of meaning rather than the subject's; and, lastly, conservatively rating those meanings which are unclear as "middle."
Lukas (1986) approaches this concept of breadth of personal meanings with the use of slightly different analogies. Utilizing the idea of Kratochvil (Lukas, 1986, p. 6-7), people who have established value systems for themselves have established one of two kinds. "Parallel" value systems have "several equally strong values in their lives, all meaningful" (Lukas, 1986, p. 7); an example is the person who derives meaning from career, family, spiritual life, and other interests. The "pyramidal" value system, in contrast, is like Maslow's (1970a) hierarchy of needs. "One large value is at the top while the others rank far below" (Lukas, 1986, p. 7); examples of these lopsided systems are easy to find among "workaholic" business executives, politicians, religious fanatics, and in many other areas. The great vulnerability of the pyramidal system lies in the existential void that is experienced if the top value crumbles; the parallel system offers much more flexibility.

Van Selm and Dittmann-Kohli

Van Selm and Dittmann-Kohli (1998), drawing in part on the work of Klinger (e.g., 1998) have suggested that both meaningfulness and meaninglessness in life, at least in its latter half, can be described as a four-part construct. They propose that personal coherence or harmony among affective, motivational, cognitive, and self-evaluative aspects of life results in a sense of meaningfulness. The affective aspect is closely involved with striving for incentives, as is the motivational. The authors assume that cognitive experience of meaninglessness arises from breakdown of assumptions about purpose and control in life and the world. Lastly, meaningfulness is also thought to depend on positive self-esteem.

Van Selm and Dittmann-Kohli assessed meaninglessness among an elderly sample by content analysis of a sentence-completion questionnaire, a geriatric depression
scale, and Antonovsky's (1987) Sense of Coherence Questionnaire. Evaluation of the data was felt to support the authors' original model.

** Debats **

Debats (1999, 2000), following the theoretical perspective of Battista and Almond (1973), also investigated major sources of meaning among psychotherapy patients and nonpatients of a university population. He also tested Battista and Almond's contention that degree of commitment to the sources of meaning is an important variable in achieving a feeling of meaningfulness. He employed both the *Life Regard Index* of Battista and Almond and a freestyle *Sources of Meaning Questionnaire*.

In order of decreasing importance, the first four domains of personal meaning were considerably more prevalent: (1) Relationships (commitment to family, partner/lover, friends, combinations); (2) Life-work (engagement in school or occupation); (3) Personal Well-being (appreciation of life, pleasure, health); and (4) Self-actualization (tangible and intangible goals/talents).

In addition, (5) Service to others, (6) Beliefs (devotion to or practice of religious/spiritual and social/political), and (7) Materiality (obtaining), provided smaller domains of meaning. Post-hoc analysis exposed a moderately prevalent (8) Future/hope category. It was found that the clinical subject group showed less commitment to meaning sources than the non-patient group, and concerns for well-being were predictably greater among those who had less of it. Also of interest is that these results seem to disconfirm Frankl's emphasis on the importance of self-transcendence.

A combined idiographic-essay/nomothetic-inventory approach found the most prominent sources of meaning for a sample of college undergraduates to be positive social interactions, leisure pleasures, making new plans, well-being, and "positive appraisals of
Debats (2000) summarizes these results as being in contact with self as integratedness, with others as relatedness, and with the world as being or transcendence. Furthermore, in one of the few instances where meaninglessness is directly addressed, in this study Debats (2000) asserts that his results describe a "a general picture of alienation on three levels: from self (blocked potentials, disabilities), from others (separation, isolation) and from life or the world (living marginally, without purpose)" (p. 100).

Harlow and Newcomb: Hierarchical Models

Harlow and Newcomb (1990) employed a substantial sample of young adults from the general population to investigate the applicability of a general hierarchical model of meaning in life. Their model was rationally derived from the theoretical and empirical literature, from which nine primary factors were postulated. Subjects rated questions pertaining to 25 variables. Principal component analysis supported the notion of a general hierarchical model. Factor loadings were moderately high to high for all variables. The optimum model selected by the authors can be described as consisting of three tiers.

The first tier is the single overall general factor of Meaning and satisfaction in life. (1) The first second-order factor, Relationship satisfaction, consists of three third-order factors (Peer relationships, Intimate relationships, and Family relationships). (2) The second second-order factor, Perceptions of purposeful living, consists of four third-order factors (Purpose in life and Perceived opportunities, with high negative loadings for Meaninglessness and Powerlessness). (3) The third second-order factor, Work and health satisfaction, consisted of two third-order factors (Work satisfaction and Health satisfaction).
After testing the second-order factors for redundancy, Harlow and Newcomb concluded that they should be retained, although they appear to be very closely related to the lowest factors. Although approaching from the usual direction of meaning, not meaninglessness, it is notable that these authors made an attempt to directly allow for Meaninglessness and Powerlessness factors. Although their questions probing these dimensions appear to be somewhat arbitrary, this study stands out because most others are concerned only with positive sources of meaning. Since they borrowed from existing literature (e.g., the PIL), there is a fair amount of terminological overlap, an asset to the field, rather than inventing their own. As a quantitative approach it stands as an interesting complement to previous material.

This makes for an interesting comparison to Wong's (1998b) factor analysis of young and older adults' self-ratings on his 59-item Personal Meaning Profile. His 8-factor solution produces relationship items that are compatible with Harlow and Newcomb's (1990) first second-order factor, and a Fulfillment factor that fits the third "satisfaction" factor above. But Wong's remaining four factors (Achievement striving, Religion, Self-transcendence, and Self-acceptance) are harder to place; they could possibly be reconciled with "purposeful living."

**Summary: Sources of Meaning and Dimensions of Meaning**

The foregoing sections have reviewed divers dimensions, factors, or aspects that have been investigated and/or proposed as applying to meaning-in-life and meaninglessness. It appears from the outset that sources of meaning can be distinguished from dimensions of meaning, although at this point it is not yet clear in what ways or by how
much they might differ. From the maze of terminology applied, it is not always easy to distinguish sources of meaning from other dimensions of meaning.

The Phenomenological World and Sources of Meaning

By way of summarization, it will be useful first of all to classify these sources of meaning—comprehensive but specific conceptual domains from which people derive meaning in life. The following approach represents a subjective scheme, and incorporates a great deal of conceptual condensation. Whereas different authors tend to put individualistic slants on the terms they employ, here their ideas will be clustered together according to similarities. It will be immediately obvious that the following conceptualization bears no resemblance nor relationship to other factorial or hierarchical model(s) which have been proposed (e.g., Harlow & Newcomb, 1990; Wong, 1998b).

May (1958b) makes a wonderful statement embodying the phenomenological viewpoint that is also the basis of the present study. Referring to the existential person, *Dasein*, the being-in-the-world, he said, "World is the structure of meaningful relationships in which a person exists and in the design of which he participates. Thus world includes the past events which condition my existence and all the vast variety of deterministic influences which operate upon me. But it is these as I relate to them, am aware of them, carry them with me, molding, inevitably forming, building them in every minute of relating" (p. 59, italics in original). Sartre (1956) goes to great (and obscure) lengths in his discussion of the same idea, while rejecting Cartesian dualism, under the headings of "being-in-itself" and "being-for-itself," in *Being and Nothingness*.

Each individual is thus exactly identical to his or her sphere of experience, which in turn is composed of "meaningful relationships" (or meanings; May is not referring merely to social relationships). So it appears that to describe the *Weitanschauung* is to describe all
possible meanings; that is, adequate coverage of Weltanschauung will also include all sources of personal meanings.

Another classic set of terms from Heidegger's phenomenology, and dear to the heart of existential analysts, does exactly describe the Weltanschauung as comprising three aspects: Umwelt, Mitwelt, and Eigenwelt, the three "worlds" or "modes of being." Umwelt is "the world around you," biological, physical, environmental needs and influences (food, shelter, safety, etc.). Mitwelt is the "with-world," the world of fellow humans, the world of accommodating and assimilating social relationships as it is embedded in the individual (the need to belong, to communicate, need for intimacy, and the like). And Eigenwelt is the "own-world," the world relating to oneself, one's personal world, not only of internal dialogue and self-awareness, but also of psychological processes of categorization and classification of experiences, understanding, identity, awareness of values, and so forth (Heidegger, 1982; May, 1958a).

In essence, then, these three modes of relating must also include a person's sources of meaning. Progressing from Umwelt to Mitwelt and then to Eigenwelt, there is something of a rough progression from the concrete, biological, "mundane" outer world to the more subtle, emotional, psychological, and spiritual inner world. Hence, as pertains to meanings of life, and the philosophical, anxiety-laden connotations of this term, these three domains become progressively more relevant. Moreover, Heidegger (1982) has stressed that Dasein is also "Being-in-time"; time also only exists in Dasein; i.e., our subjective perception of time is the only real one.

These concepts can be adapted to provide a convenient starting point for summarizing and classifying the diversity of sources of meaning that have been proposed. Further scanning of the material reveals several salient clusters of meaning-sources which can tentatively be placed as subcategories in this framework. Again bearing in mind that
the following system is proposed only as a heuristic, without suggesting that it will be useful or valid for other purposes, let us consider the following outline:

1. **Umwelt**: concerns of the "shallow," world-oriented self, both present and past
2. **Mitwelt**: concerns oriented towards the social group
   1. present: self-centered: social identity, recognition
   2. future: group-centered: altruism
3. **Eigenwelt**: concerns of self-relatedness and existence
   1. "deep" spiritual-Self oriented, mostly future, also present
      1. philosophical attitudes towards life
      2. creativity, Self-expression, empowerment
   2. cosmos/spiritual/transpersonal oriented, timeless-eternal
      1. faith/belief/relationship with universe/cosmos/God/Nature

**Umwelt.** Umwelt consists of the first and most "mundane" field of meanings.

Beyond survival needs or creature comforts, which are apparently rarely considered by Western researchers, the core of this category is subjective attitudes towards things or ideas. This grouping starts with purely physical concerns: fulfillment of pleasure and material concerns (Ebersole, 1998; Koestenbaum, 1971; Prager et al., 2000; Wong, 1998b) or derivative meaning of activities and (external) attainment of goals (Battista & Almond, 1973; Emmons, 1999; Joske, 1982); obtaining (Ebersole, 1998); and health and simple pleasures among the elderly (Ebersole, 1998; Wong, 1989); work (Baumeister, 1991). It progresses towards moderately psychological levels: Yalom's (1980) "hedonistic" sense of being alive, sensuous, and energetic; work, health, and well-being appreciation and satisfaction, (Debats, 1999; Ebersole, 1998; Harlow & Newcomb, 1990); emotional balance and peace (Naylor et al., 1994; Prager et al., 2000); reminiscence, life-review (Wong, 1989); commitment (Battista & Almond, 1973; Wong, 1989); and a sense that
internal and external environments are comprehensible and manageable (Korotkov, 1998).

Mitwelt. Mitwelt, the individual's interiorized representation of and relationships with society, parental influence, and so forth, plays a very prominent role as a field of meanings. The individual can assume different meaningful postures with respect to the greater social world both in the present and in the future, both receiving from it and giving to it.

Hence, the social world acts to satisfy individual needs in intimate relationships, love, family attachment, peer relationships (Baumeister, 1991; Debats, 1999; Harlow & Newcomb, 1990; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996; Prager et al., 2000; Wong, 1989, 1998b); social respect, fair treatment; successful fulfillment of social roles, rules defined by one's belief system framework (Battista & Almond, 1973; Debats, 1999; Koestenbaum, 1971; Prager et al., 2000). All of this seems to further point to one's social self-concept (Baumeister's, 1991, self-worth or Fry's, 1998, self-esteem), and further, identity with social-political beliefs or causes (Debats, 1999; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996).

Then as the individual moves beyond receiving personal needs for companionship and self-identity from society, the individual is in a position to give back, through service (Debats, 1999; Ebersole, 1998) or creative altruism, a higher sense of social "cause" and/or identity (Prager et al., 2000; Wong, 1989; Yalom, 1980). Here the individual is experiencing a sense that there is value in one's activities, that there is a social basis for justification of self (Baumeister, 1991). Finally, the conversion is internalized and elevated to self-transcendence (transcending self-interest, Wong, 1998b; Yalom, 1980)

Eigenwelt. Eigenwelt, as a domain of personal meanings, involves at once turning inward and expanding outward; this is the field of inner space and infinity. Two orientations can be identified in this domain also: the first is orientation to the transcendent spiritual
Self, in the present and in the future, in terms of Self-expression and in terms of chosen attitudes towards life; and the second is the individual's orientation towards the universe, cosmos, or God, in eternity.

Self-expression picks up where psychological satisfaction by external means (under Umwelt) leaves off. Hence, a step higher involves a belief system with respect to personal growth (Ebersole, 1998), intrinsic meaning of activities and value as (internally) related to performance, pursuit per se, "achievement striving" (Battista & Almond, 1973; Joske, 1982, Klinger, 1998; Wong, 1998b); "self-confidence-integration-acceptance" and personal significance (Battista & Almond, 1973; Wong, 1998b), a sense of personal efficacy, that one is making a difference, meeting challenging and difficult goals, exercising control (Baumeister, 1991; Fry, 1998), perceived purposeful-living, purposiveness (having purpose and opportunity, Baumeister, 1991; Fry, 1998; Harlow & Newcomb, 1990); creativity, creating and experiencing (Frankl, 1969, 1984; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996; Wong, 1989; Yalom, 1980); ability to create ideals, pursue goals beyond self-interest, expression of one's identity (Little, 1998; Singer, 1992). Overtly spiritual meaning-sources are growth, self-actualization and self-transcendence (Ebersole, 1998; Wong, 1989; Yalom, 1980); spiritual quest (Naylor et al., 1994); expression of individuality, sense of being an agent, causalness, connection with the environment (Flanagan, 2000). Creative, experiential, and attitudinal values, specifically regarding one's relationship with the experiential world: giving, receiving, enduring pain, guilt, death (Koestenbaum, 1971), and particularly important is the attitude of "responsibleness," the choice to be authentic towards life—provide generally ontological guidelines, rules, or reference points (Frankl, 1969, 1984).

The other "direction" in the Eigenwelt is towards the cosmos, the beyond-self, so that one is involved in a transpersonal relationship with it. This has historically been the
substance of most dogmatic belief systems of traditional religions (and science in some cases), and the spirituality and faith usually promoted by them (Baumeister, 1991; Debats, 1999; Frankl, 1969; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996, 2000; Wong, 1989, 1998b). It can also include the natural environment (O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996, 2000). It extends into the most subtle meanings of philosophical fulfillment, a broad cosmological awareness that the universe must make sense and is purposeful, intelligible, and meaningful, i.e., not just an indifferent and random system (Baier, 1982; Battista & Almond, 1973; Craig, 2000; Quinn, 2000; Wong, 1998b).

Existentialists emphasize that the three "worlds" are active simultaneously. If these concepts were represented pictorially they could be drawn as three intersecting circles. This is useful because it emphasizes that there are a number of conceptual sources of meaning that could in fact be part of more than one of the "worlds." A prime example would be the need for human intimacy. Few contemporary psychologists would argue that this has some biological origins, so it should be placed in an overlapping Mitwelt-Umwelt area. Likewise a true altruistic sense has often been referred to by theological writers as concern for the "greater self" or something of the kind; as such it belongs in a Mitwelt-Eigenwelt area. There is also a border zone between Umwelt and Eigenwelt which is the proper domain for sources of meaning such as highly creative work. Though striving for transcendent heights, it remains work; even Shakespeare and Mozart were aware that there were always bills that had to be paid.

Dimensions of Meaning

This Umwelt-Mitwelt-Eigenwelt framework has summarized sources of personal meanings because that area has obviously attracted most of the speculation and research. The more difficult question of various possible dimensions of meaning, and to what extent
they may differ from sources, is less well developed. But as the preceding coverage indicated, research in this direction is off to a good start, particularly with the dimensional or hierarchical models proposed by Wong (1998b) and Harlow and Newcomb (1990).

There are several points that are worth bringing to mind again. First, it is generally accepted that meaninglessness is lack of meaning, but it cannot be assumed that it is possible to make a direct translation or inversion of meaning to meaninglessness. In other words, given a factorial model of meaning (which in fact has only tentatively been proposed by Harlow and Newcomb, 1990), can meaninglessness be defined as weakness in certain of the very same dimensions? If so, in which dimensions, and how much? By examination of these factors it may be possible to assess their suitability for representing meaninglessness in life, as deficiencies in them. But for now, the domains discussed so far are of positive meaning, and not limitations to personal meaning.

Secondly, it is also for the present moot whether meaning is somehow inherent in these domains or created by involvement with them. These two views, that there is an "ultimate meaning" which can be discovered, or whether meaning is created by us, are in fact not necessarily mutually exclusive. There are some views (Reker & Wong, 1988) that accept both; i.e., that some but not all meanings can be created.

Lastly, many of the empirical studies of life-meaning underlying the foregoing schemes have employed subjects in some kind of distress or suffering some sort of loss. That in itself is a major caveat for drawing further conclusions.

The next task is to look at some aspects of the experimental underpinnings of the foregoing definitional and dimensional material, and at what is being currently done to expand the field.
CHAPTER 4
LITERATURE REVIEW:
METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Thirst is the surest proof for the existence of water.
—Franz Werfel, quoted in Frankl, 1969

In the foregoing review of sources of life-meaning, both qualitative and quantitative empirical methods have been involved. They have converged, or at least have not conflicted, in the previous systematized conceptualization (see section: "Summary: Sources of Meaning and Dimensions of Meaning"). On the other hand, much material underlying the foregoing array of dimensional topics on meaning and meaninglessness has been derived from neither qualitative nor quantitative experimental approaches. Fields as disparate as astronomy (origins of the universe, e.g., New, 1993) and drama (Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Friedman, 1989) are full of cogent observations on the implications of meaning and its absence. This, in fact, simply emphasizes the universality of this issue. The heavy amount of overlap with philosophy, anthropology, religion, and similar fields has produced a flood of ideas in ways that are considered outside the bounds of the social sciences. Recall the earlier remarks on hermeneutical research. Sweeping conclusions about abstractions like meaning and meaninglessness are necessarily interpretive by nature, the broadest observations of human history and endeavor.

It is the purpose of this section to topically review recent theoretical and experimental applications of meaning and meaninglessness in life. Interest in areas that
lend themselves to qualitative as well as quantitative studies has grown tremendously over
the past few decades, resulting in an abundance of studies. Most of the important
theoretical territory has been covered in the previous section, *Sources and Dimensions of
Meaning/meaninglessness in Life*. Here the focus will be on recent experimental work,
both qualitative and quantitative which directly addresses life-meaning and
meaninglessness. In so doing an effort will be made to provide a sense of the breadth of
the content of recent work, the variety of approaches now in use, and how the foregoing
conceptual dimensions were arrived at.

In an effort to simplify things, the following section is divided into two main parts,
Qualitative and Quantitative research. These designations refer primarily to the type of
results obtained, but they have involved, respectively, mostly personal narratives and
questionnaires. What the investigator wishes to accomplish decides which methodology
will be used. Obviously, either personal narrative or questionnaire methods can be used to
some extent to gather certain kinds of data for quantitative analysis, but only some sort of
subjective narrative report permits qualitative analysis. Also, in certain circumstances,
there is no reason that a combined or integrated approach could not be used. Hermeneutic
evaluation of non-scientific material like drama, can also contribute valuable data.
Complete discussions of these topics can be found in Valle (1998), Valle and Halling
(1989), and von Eckartsberg (1986).

These headings cannot be adhered to rigorously; they are employed as rough
guidelines only. The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of how different
methodologies are being applied in research. To this end important representative
references are provided, but no claim is made to exhaustive coverage.
Domains of subjective experience lend themselves to qualitative phenomenological investigation. These methods involve personal accounts of experiences delivered in an unstructured, minimally-directed format, the idea being that the less demand pressure that exists, the greater the probability that personally salient features will appear prominently and appropriately in the report. This permits a relatively accurate accounting of both external and subjective dimensions, and encourages a richness of descriptive detail that can be acquired in no other way. Personal autobiographical narratives usually take the form of either independently written accounts or live-interview transcripts. They have the disadvantage of cumbersome and time-consuming logistics when used to examine a large group of subjects. "Clinical" accounts also fall under this general rubric; although, since clinicians have as their immediate aim pragmatic solutions to problems, in the breadth and depth of experiential material these accounts may not be comparable to investigations of a purely research nature. Groups of subjects supplying narrative material can also be a source of quantitative material. Narrative text can be analyzed quantitatively for both content and structure; but in many ways a greater wealth of data can be obtained with a larger semantic overview, if the material is already available.

Wellness and Illness. With respect to the volume of published matter on meaning and meaninglessness in life, the largest currently-popular content area seems to be that of wellness and illness. The conclusions of Frankl (1969, 1984), often the first name to be cited in discussions of the fundamental parameters of meaning and meaninglessness, were based primarily on his "clinical" experiences. His observations included those actually within the concentration camps of World War II, where he acted in various medical capacities, and afterward as he became known through this writings. His influence in integrating clinical and theoretical notions has been seminal. Yalom (1980) also cites clinical experience with terminal cancer patients in support of his classification of sources of meaning (antidotes for meaninglessness), along with general narrative material from a variety of sources.

Current subtopics include physical illness, particularly chronic illness, and questions of meaning (Lukas, 1992, 1998); terminal illness (especially AIDS and cancer) and its effect on meaning of life (Bloom, 1997; Cunningham, 1993; Schwartzberg, 1993); mental illness, including dementia, and its influence on personal meaning (Rife, 1990; Russell, 1996); trauma (individual or society-wide disasters) and stress and their influence on personal meaning systems (Emmons et al., 1998; Jacobson, 1994; Janoff-Bulman & Frantz, 1997); and meaning and suicide, often considered not necessarily as part of depression (Duberstein, 1995; Moore, 1997; Pearson & Conwell, 1996; Schmitz-Scherzer, 1995). Also, various therapeutic applications of the exploration of meanings in clinical contexts such as these, including caregiving (Farran & Kuhn, 1998), generate regular interest.

Age and Aging. Another large area receiving increasing attention is that of meanings in the context of aging, to include both the process and individuals in various stages, with heavy emphasis on the elderly. A related area concerns the roles of personal

**Death and Dying.** Personal meaning in the context of death and dying forms a popular topic. Included here are meanings within shrinking time, and in the experience of bereavement (Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Wheeler, 1993-1994). Closely related is the spiritual context of meanings, though this area still seems to be suffering intimidation from secular science (Ellis & Smith, 1991; Wong, 1998c).

The foregoing are the currently most-popular applied areas of personal meanings research. Other less popular areas are meanings in marital, family, and social relationships, and meanings' relationships with self-concept, identity, and various social roles (Fry, 1998). This is not to be understood as a systematic classification, and there are of course many other areas of application. Baumeister's (1991; Sommer & Baumeister, 1998) purportedly comprehensive system of classification (the "Four Needs for Meaning") is based primarily on narrative-based studies by his own associates and other researchers in a broad variety of personological and applied areas (see Sommer & Baumeister, 1998 for a review).

**Qualitative Material Specifically Involving Meaninglessness.** Apart from the studies devoted to suicide (e.g., Moore, 1997), which almost by definition involve concepts of meaninglessness in life, in other types of studies that specific construct is conspicuous in its absence.

Exceptions are the conceptual examinations by Janoff-Bulman and Frantz (1997) and van Kalmthout (1998). This is theoretical work, and, like that of Frankl (1969, 1984) focuses on the relevance of the meaninglessness construct to clinical work.
Janoff-Bulman and Frantz specifically concentrate on the effects of trauma and the experience of meaninglessness in life. Similar recent conceptual examinations of meaninglessness can be had from the psychoanalytic viewpoint (Grotstein, 1990a,b, 1991), and with respect to disaster from the existential viewpoint (Thompson, 1995).

Recent empirical studies include that of Debats, Drost, and Hansen, (1995) which looked at "experienced meaninglessness" in a study of "experienced meaningfulness" and their relationship to general well-being; both qualitative and quantitative-nomothetic techniques were used (see also Debats, 2000). Denne and Thompson (1991) used a phenomenological interview study specifically focused on experienced transitions "from a prolonged state of despair at the meaninglessness and purposelessness of life to a prolonged state of strong, clear, and satisfying meaning and purpose in life" (p. 115).

**Quantitative Approaches**

Another way to collect experiential data is with the self-report questionnaire, generally employed in quantitative nomothetic studies. The usual aim is to identify statistically significant relationships among or between subject groups along various parameters. Use of these devices has the disadvantage of imposing an a priori theoretical structure upon the subjects' responses, that is, guiding them along the pre-existing assumptions of the researcher. Nevertheless, a number of such instruments have been satisfactorily validated and have received a wide welcome by researchers interested in nomothetic investigations of particular parameters. As relatively standardized tools, they lend themselves to time- and cost-efficient application across large and often diverse groups of subjects (Reker & Wong, 1988; Wong & Fry, 1998). As might be expected,
concentration of research can be observed in certain areas for which valid measurement instruments already exist.

**General Conceptual Models.** Harlow and Newcomb (1990) used a sample of 739 subjects to obtain their hierarchical model of "meaning and satisfaction in life." Questions were mostly face-valid and of their own design, but they also employed a modification of Crumbaugh and Maholick's (1964) *Purpose in Life* test. This was an extension of previous work (Harlow, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1986) which placed "Purpose in life" in a model also including depression, suicidal ideation, self-derogation, and substance use.

Wong (1998b) also used moderate-sized groups of subjects in personal narrative studies, and used self-ratings in the development of the *Personal Meaning Profile*. This involved representations of both the idealized meaningful life and personal ratings of subjects' own life-meaning. Little's (1998) Personal Project Analysis used both qualitative and quantitative methods. Subjects were asked to submit free expressions of personal projects, then subjected to statistical evaluation. Debats (1999) used a similar approach in studying commitment to sources of life-meaning. De Vogler-Ebersole and Ebersole (1985) used a method of rating content areas for depths of life-meanings.

**Health and Illness.** Life-meaning in health and illness is probably the area that generates the greatest volume of studies. This should not be surprising because the area of physical and mental illness or health covers a huge territory; and also because discrete "medical" illnesses (which includes "medicalized" mental illness), by virtue of their categorical symptom-based conceptualization, have always lent themselves to quantitative analysis.

Sub-domains are again: well-being (Debats, 1996; Debats et al., 1995; Lapierre, Bouffard, Bastin, 1997; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992); and physical and mental illness (Shek, Ma, & Cheung, 1994). Predictably, trauma and meaning has received quantitative
attention. Emmons et al., (1998) study utilized two self-report measures, Emmons' Personal Striving Assessment Packet, and a checklist of "difficult life events," and correlational analysis was employed. In a quantitative study illustrating the close association of semantic meaning with the existential, Newman, Riggs, and Roth (1997) studied thematic disruption and resolution in PTSD (see also Magomed-Eminov, 1997; Simon, Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1998). Remaining areas include drug abuse, terminal illness, caregiving, and the like (Fife, 1995; Nicholson et al., 1994).

**Age and Aging.** Research involving meaning among the elderly and in issues of age and aging are again abundantly represented by quantitative studies. Recent quantitative studies of topics related to death, dying, and bereavement seem to be relatively fewer than experiential-phenomenological approaches (DePaola, Ebersole, 1995; Dittmann-Kohli & Westerhof, 2000; Durlak, Horn, & Kass, 1990; Ebersole & DePaola, 1989; Florian, 1989; van Selm & Dittmann-Kohli, 1998).

**Social and Personality Areas.** Personal meanings in divers areas as marital and social relations, and in the contexts of religion and spiritually transcendent experiences, are being investigated (Chamberlain & Zika, 1992; McCann & Biaggio, 1989). One area in which quantitative studies are predictably more common that those involving subjective reports is that of personal meanings and various personality differences, including cross-cultural (Simon et al., 1998). In fact, there is a tendency to regard meaning in life as simply a trait or dimension of personality, on the same order of the Five Factor model (e.g., John, 1990). Given the available body of knowledge, this reductionist approach is quite untenable, deliberately missing the complex network of associations which is the whole richness of the field.

**Quantitative Material Specifically Involving Meaninglessness.** Again, for studies involving quantitative analysis of the meaning-in-life construct and its relation to
other psychological dimensions, the vast majority dealt with the positive construct. Among recent studies specifically acknowledging meaninglessness, foremost was Harlow and Newcomb's (1990) hierarchical model in which Meaninglessness was a third-order factor. Van Selm and Dittman-Kohli (1998) used content analytical techniques of sentence completions in an attempt to develop the construct of "meaninglessness in the second half of life." Reker et al. (1987) also used a life-span perspective to look at well-being and purpose in life, in a nomothetic study of several hundred people. One of the measures was their own seven-item "Existential Vacuum" subscale which is claimed to assess "lack of meaning in life, lack of goals, and free-floating anxiety" (p. 45). Florian's (1989) study of bereaved Israeli parents tested directly for "existential vacuum" as gauged by subjective health evaluation. Baumeister (1991) has references to empirical work that he feels supports his notion of unsatisfied needs. De Vogler-Ebersole and Ebersole (1985) specifically directed attention to the possibility of lack of meaning in life in their rating of undergraduates' sources of meanings. Meaninglessness was conspicuously lacking, the mean score they obtained on a 1 to 7 scale being a positive 5.9. Neal and Groat's (1974) measure of alienation included, along with powerlessness, social isolation, and normlessness, a subscale reflecting meaninglessness. This focuses on the individual's perception of global events as being "overwhelmingly complex, without purpose, and lacking in predictability" (p. 550), and correlated with social class indicators.

**Instruments**

Although it would be a great conceptual error to try to reduce meaning in life to a simple dimension, there is always a demand for concise, portable instruments usable in the empirical investigation of aspects of the construct. A number of such instruments have
met with a generally positive reception from researchers in life-meaning. They have subsequently appeared in quite a few studies, and there have been intermittent examination of various aspects of their validity.

Limitations

Due to unavoidable overlap with many other conceptual domains, it is impossible to provide full coverage of available research instruments intended to measure life-meaning and/or meaninglessness. In a discussion of subjective life-meaning, Yalom (1980) points to the problem of various kinds of conceptual contaminants. He specifically notes that death and the ontological anxiety that accompanies it, as Tillich (1952) believed, lies underneath all forms of existential concern. Death is the physical framework in which one must necessarily place any conceptualization of life, or one's own life; only young children can avoid this through their inability to grasp it.

So, death, as an inescapable context of life-meaning, is a major confound in the construct validity of any device designed to measure meaninglessness. However, death is but one among many potential complications. A number of issues were previously addressed: one's place in society, the state of one's happiness and well-being and its numerous ramifications, personal values, one's spiritual orientation, goals, and age; and these are only the most prominent. Due to the abstract nature of the meaning/meaninglessness construct, almost every such related issue discussed, and probably many not mentioned, is a potential confound. In fact, Yalom (1980) suggests that it is really the existential anxiety, in almost any form (he specifically mentions that accompanying freedom and isolation), that may frequently be misinterpreted as meaninglessness.
Existing factor analytic attempts to clarify the conceptual structures of some of these scales have merely served to emphasize the difficulty in identifying exactly what meaning, purpose, well-being, and the like, are, and how they are distinguished from each other (Dyck, 1987; Pargament, 1999).

Other instruments exist to assess locus of control, depression, alienation, values, and so forth (e.g., Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991). Those constructs also overlap with subjective, personal, existential, meaning and/or its absence. There is no such thing as a "clean" construct. By the same token, methods to establish predictive or concurrent validity will be equally difficult to arrive at, and equally open to criticism.

But despite these limitations, several existing self-report instruments deserve special mention, primarily for two reasons. First, they have achieved a level of validity sufficiently satisfactory to become widely known and used; many of the quantitative studies cited previously have employed them. Second, there is a growing need for efficient tools to assess populations of people facing various life crises. This refers to the reluctant but growing awareness in the psychological health care profession that existential issues are, in fact, clinically real. Due to advances in medical technologies and changes in demographics, lives are being extended, however tenuously, under conditions that have not existed previously (AIDS, cancer, etc.), and the numbers of elderly people are continuously growing. One might even argue that the deterioration of social order is also creating an ever-increasing population of trauma survivors. Further discussion of some of these and additional instruments can be found in Chamberlain and Zika (1988), Ellis and Smith (1991), Klinger (1998), Reker (2000), and Reker and Wong (1988).
The Purpose in Life Test (PIL)

Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964) created the PIL, a 20-item test that is at present probably the most widely-cited self-report instrument devoted to plumbing existential domains. While most psychometric properties are satisfactory, it has received criticism regarding its construct validity (e.g., Yalom, 1980) but remains highly popular and has played a role in many studies (Reker, 2000).

Life Regard Index (LRI)

This is a 28-item rationally-derived scale (Battista & Almond, 1973) which was intended to improve upon and avoid as much as possible the a priori construct assumptions of the PIL, and which succeeded in these respects according to some reviewers. Psychometrics have been thoroughly reviewed by Debats (1998; see also Van Ranst & Marcoen, 1997; Yalom, 1980). Importantly, the device was specifically developed with regard to “an individual’s belief that he is fulfilling his life as it is understood in terms of his highly valued life-framework or life-goals” (Battista & Almond, 1973, p. 413), and there is thus no reason to assume direct applicability in measuring meaninglessness (Debats, 2000; Reker, 2000).

Life Purpose Questionnaire (LPQ)

This was designed to be a short general-purpose instrument similar in nature to the PIL or LRI, but aimed at elderly institutionalized populations. Reker (2000) has made favorable comments but it has received relatively less attention.
Life Attitude Profile-Revised (LAP-R)

Reker's (2000) own 48-item device is aimed at revealing discovered meaning and purpose and motivation to find meaning and purpose in life. Six dimensions are measured (Purpose, Coherence, Choice/Responsibleness, Death Acceptance, Existential Vacuum, Goal Seeking), and two composite scales result (Personal Meaning Index and Existential Transcendence). Reker reports that the Personal Meaning Index in particular is a valid and reliable measure of having achieved a sense of meaning, but this test has apparently not yet been used much by other investigators.

Meaning in Life Depth: The MILD

Ebersole and associates (Ebersole & Quiring, 1991; Ebersole & Kobayakawa, 1989) created an instrument which they claim shows no statistical relationship to the popular Purpose in Life Test (PIL; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). Its aim is to assess strengths of personal meaning by accessing the "cognitive side" of life meaning. Rather than relying solely on individual subjects' own personal evaluations of a priori meanings, it requires personal narrative descriptions of meaningful situations. These are then rated by external evaluators according to criteria previously established by the developers.

Sources of Personal Meaning Profile (SOMP) and Sources of Life Meaning Scale (SLM)

This is a recent instrument developed to measure the sources of current personal meaning in one's life, the published studies on its development coming from Prager and associates (Bar Tur & Prager, 1996; Prager, 1997, 1998a,b; Prager et al., 1997; Prager et al., 2000) and Reker and associates (Reker, 1994; Reker, 2000; Reker & Wong, 1988). It provides 16 items as potential sources of meanings, to be rated on a seven-point scale.
Factor analysis resulted in a grouping of four categories: self-transcendence, collectivism, individualism, and self-preoccupation (but see Van Ranst & Marcoen, 2000). It has been used in several studies (see Reker, 2000 for a review) with various age groups ranging from young adults to advanced old age. It has detected some differences in sources of meanings for various parameters such as community-living vs. institutionalized elderly, and discriminated between strengths of meanings for depressed and non-depressed individuals, promising some clinical usefulness. Prager et al. (2000) have recently reported on ongoing efforts to develop an instrument that they consider to be an improvement on the SOMP, namely, the Sources of Life Meaning Scale (SLM).

**Seeking of Noetic Goals (SONG) Test**

Crumbaugh (1977) followed his PIL with his *Seeking of Noetic Goals (SONG) Test*, which was promoted as a complementary scale to the former one. The focus of the SONG is on the motivation to find meaning in life, rather than on the achievement thereof. It is a 20-item rationally derived scale employing a Likert format. For comparisons of these two instruments, see Dyck (1987) and Reker and Cousins (1979).

**Other Instruments**

The measurement of life-meaning appears to be an active field, contributors approaching the question from a variety of conceptual directions. Other instruments that are being proposed are the long and short meaning scales of Pargament (1999). These are intended to explore the relationship of life-meaning and spirituality. Another scale that is frequently mentioned in the life-meaning literature is Antonovsky's (1987) *Sense of Coherence* scale.
Populations

Population is an important variable that may be addressed in future studies of sources and/or dimensions of meaninglessness in life. Thus far, variability in population types is primarily seen among nomothetic studies. The majority of these studies in turn are quantitative in nature, but there is a smaller number of qualitative studies that have also aimed at elucidating principles that could apply to entire populations.

It is noteworthy that, despite the abstract nature of the concepts of life-meaning and meaninglessness that are being examined here, a wide variety of populations have been involved. They appear to cover the same range as would be found in any other field involving more precisely measurable psychological parameters. Age groups found in studies of meaning in life cover the complete gamut: children, adolescents, the usual college undergraduate populations, midlife individuals, and the elderly, including even the "old" as compared to the "very old" (Reker et al., 1987). Certain restrictions apply, such as, for example, children's understanding of the concept (e.g., Taylor & Ebersole, 1993).

Gender differences are predictably represented as in other studies, including gay populations (e.g., Schwartzberg, 1993). Parent-child generational differences is also a reasonably popular topic (Reid & Anderson, 1992). Multietnic populations appear to be represented by studies involving many age groups; prominent are children and college age subjects (Shek, 1992, 1994; Shek et al., 1994).

A large proportion of studies compare meaning in life among healthy versus unhealthy subject groups, the most prominent being the seminal works of Frankl (1969, 1984) and Yalom (1980). The array of both physical and mental illnesses is quite broad, as mentioned earlier. The specific nature of the illness quite often dictates the age of the subject population; for example, drug abusers, war veterans, and Alzheimer's sufferers
are not likely to include children. Where such restrictions do not apply, a large variety is seen.

Various kinds of social roles have been singled out for study since that parameter overlaps so importantly with both self-concept and meaning of life. Caregivers are often targeted for investigations of how their role impacts their own concepts of meaning, as well as the ill populations receiving their care. Occupational types also are sometimes compared for that effect, including criminal offenders (McShane, Lawless, & Noonan, 1991).
PART II
CHAPTER 5

QUESTIONS FOR INVESTIGATION

The problem... is to disengage the meanings implied by an act—by every act—and to proceed from there to richer and more profound meanings until we encounter the meaning which does not imply any other meaning and which refers only to itself.

—Jean-Paul Sartre (1943/1958)
cited in McCulloch, 1994, p.37

In this chapter certain principal deductions from the literature will be summarized, some of which are quite basic but might otherwise be lost among the details. These have been extracted from the mass of material concerned predominantly with positive life-meaning and the relatively few references to meaninglessness that have been reviewed above. By way of an overview, the present purpose is to extend and/or expand the concepts surrounding positive meaning to the converse, to meaninglessness, to see how well they fit. Some "missing pieces" are also discussed. Following a few brief considerations that, from the start, distinguish meaninglessness from the field of meaning, specific experimental questions emerge naturally from this review process.

Principal and Missing Points about Meaning and Meaninglessness

Meaninglessness Gets Very Little Attention

Compared to positive meaning in life, experienced meaninglessness has gotten short shrift. This is most likely due to an unnecessarily exclusive association with psychopathology, as discussed previously, and to the inherently uncomfortable nature of
the construct, which may play a role in deterring popular appeal and research. The biased widespread assumption that meaninglessness is, by default, just the lack of meaning and is therefore "opposite" in all respects, is in fact one of the most important justifications for the current study.

"Cosmic" and "Mundane" Senses

There is a great range of "elevation," or conversely, "depth," attached to the concept of meaning in life. This is not limited to theistic or non-theistic answers to the question; even within the subset of purely secular considerations, there is "higher" meaning, and apparently its "lower" counterpart as well, occurring within individual conceptualizations as well as collectively. It seemed that this approach might be usefully applied to meaninglessness. Could there not also be "cosmic" as well as narrowly "mundane" senses for meaninglessness? How do people think about the role of meaninglessness in the universe, if at all? Does higher meaninglessness necessarily equate to atheism?

Personal Involvement

Meaning in life is a dimension that is inwardly experienced, subjective, phenomenological, and above all, profound. This construct is experienced as an acute sense of personal involvement with the individual's most intimate and vulnerable concepts of self and existence. People are involved either through outward activity, or through inner transformation, insight, and self-actualization. Somehow it is important, it matters. Do people get equally involved with meaninglessness in life? Recall Flanagan's (2000) references to individuality, causalness, l-ness, and relatedness; do these concepts apply to meaninglessness?
Desirability

Though it seems trivial to state, it is universally assumed that because there are life-supporting qualities to meaning, a lack of meaning is "bad"; it is something to be loathed and strenuously avoided. The will to meaning that Frankl (1969, 1984) asserts is a human birthright, is widely assumed to be so powerful that thwarting it invariably produces neurosis (see also Reker & Wong's, 1988, Fundamental Postulate). This assumption should be challenged. Is the will to meaning synonymous with a flight from meaninglessness? Can there be positive aspects to the experience of meaninglessness? Are these alternative points of view cultural artifacts?

Freedom of Attitude

Consistent with a fundamental existential principle, and notwithstanding the intrinsic drive towards meaning, one's attitude towards meaning or meaninglessness in life is ultimately a choice; it is decided through one's individual and idiosyncratic freedom of will. One's attitudes of "responsibleness" and authenticity are related to meaning, but do people agree that they are free to choose between feeling that life is meaningful and feeling that it is meaningless?

Creation of Meaning

The common theme that life-meanings are created by the individual also springs from the individual's inherent existential freedom referred to above. It allows a person a great latitude of self-expression in deciding in what ways personal meanings will manifest. Although it is a valid question, applied to meaninglessness the creation of meaning has less to do with idiosyncratic ways in which it can express. The deeper issue is that if
life-meanings are created, then it logically follows that what lies underneath must be its absence, a void, meaninglessness. This become a particularly compelling suspicion in the face of, e.g., Yalom's (1980) "antidotes" for people experiencing meaninglessness, because it presumes that meaninglessness still underlies activity. Do people ever suspect that they are creating meanings just to keep from facing underlying meaninglessness? Does meaninglessness lie behind the facade of activities all the time, becoming visible when "cracks" appear in the facade? (Cracks would be life events that shatter the phenomenological world of meanings by their incongruity, as in trauma.) What does this say about "ultimates"? If normal activities are simply "meaning-making," then does it follow that meaninglessness must be equivalent to "Ultimate Reality"? To God?

Dimensional Models

Interesting multidimensional, factorial, and hierarchical models of life-meaning are being proposed to elucidate its structure and relation to other broad constructs. Though relatively ill-defined constructs such as this are intrinsically difficult to work with, results are promising. Can similar models also apply to meaninglessness? Can different dimensions of meaninglessness be distinguished? How do Joske's (1982) four elements of meaninglessness activity (worthlessness, pointlessness, triviality, and futility) fit in? Can Baumeister's four "needs for meaning" (purpose, value, efficiency, and self worth) also be viewed as "deficiencies" that will dispose towards meaninglessness? Can the O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996)/Reker and Wong (1988)/Van Ranst and Marcoen (2000) model apply? Consider for example (Structural) Components of meaninglessness ("how meaninglessness is experienced") as phenomenological cognitive, motivational, and affective dimensions; Sources of meaninglessness ("where it comes from") as areas where meaning fails (see above: many possible sources); Breadth of meaninglessness
("the diversity with which it is experienced") as the number of sources of meaning which are failing (see discussion of O'Connor and Chamberlain, 1996, p. 464); and Depth of meaninglessness ("the degree of self-transcendence involved") as how close the person comes to experiencing total cosmic failure, i.e., within a range of meaninglessness from trivial/upper to total/lower.

Sources of Meaning

A large proportion of the literature on life-meaning is devoted to identifying specific sources of personal meaning. Though individual studies tend to focus on particular populations or conditions, there is clearly the hope that much of the findings will be generalizable. Can similar sources of meaninglessness be identified? When this is experienced is it because supporting sources of meaning have failed? A closely related direction of inquiry would involve specific situational variables that are associated with experiences of meaninglessness.

Anticipated Differences Between Meaning and Meaninglessness

The foregoing reveals some ambivalence in possible approaches towards exploring the construct of meaninglessness. On the one hand, it is tempting to apply to it some of the tactics already worked out for investigating positive life-meaning. On the other hand, the construct cannot be assumed to be simply the converse of positive meaning. Right from the start there are several inherent differences in meaninglessness that distinguish it.
Time

Time is an important distinguishing parameter for meaninglessness. From common experience it can be observed that for most individuals, experiences of meaninglessness are probably discrete time-limited events or episodes (though this cannot be assumed). This is in contrast to most of the dimensions and sources of meaning which have been explored that may vary developmentally, but can endure across the lifespan. So, whereas time can often be ignored without serious effect in studies of positive meaning, this is not true for a specific experience of meaninglessness with a probable “experiential half-life.”

Causality and Circumstance

By the same token, discreet episodes suggest the possibility of some sort of dependency on surrounding internal and external conditions. Both the causes of the event as well as its causal influence on other areas may be identifiable. Demonstrating causality is beyond the scope of the present study and was not an objective, but this view does insist that future effects, as well as current meaninglessness experiences, be taken into consideration. Specifically, it suggests looking at how such experiences affect the individual’s future Weltanschauung, positively, negatively, or otherwise. As Flew (2000) says, this distinguishes the what of the question (what is the meaning of life?) from the how of the question (how to go on living?). In other words, it might be well to look at people’s sources of meaning after they have experienced meaninglessness.

Another distinction which appears in meaninglessness experiences is between internal and external events. In contrast to long-term or even lifelong positive meanings and values, time-limited events of meaninglessness may also have situational parameters which presumably can be measured. External events may be relatively concrete
surrounding circumstances of place, of social situation, of personal history, or of broader cultural or world history.

Potential Areas for Investigation and Specific Study Objectives

Potential Areas for Investigation

It might be surmised from the foregoing considerations that it is not completely clear even how to ask questions about meaningfulness. However, these same uncertainties suggest rich areas for investigation, in whatever ways may be appropriate, taking into account that efforts will be largely exploratory. The most salient goals might be arranged as follows:

- **Variation in the Experience of Meaninglessness.** The various population-related parameters of the meaningfulness experience, such as age or developmental stage and culture, have yet to be clarified. The basic circumstances or situations of peoples' experiences also fall in this category. Moreover, the fundamental supposition that most subjects do think about meaning and meaningfulness, notwithstanding the abstract nature of this concept, itself demands further clarification.

- **The Nature of the Experience of Meaninglessness.** A true experiential-phenomenological study of the experience of meaningfulness is yet to be encountered in the literature. This approach should not start with a priori theoretical assumptions or constructs such as are embodied in instruments such as the PIL. It would place phenomenological emphasis on the essence of experienced meaningfulness.
- **Dimensions of Meaninglessness.** A very important and needed effort should be aimed at revealing basic, stable dimensions of the meaninglessness construct, and determining the extent to which they agree with the concepts and parameters of meaning revealed in the existing literature.

- **Potentially Causal Relationships in the Experience of Meaninglessness.** Attention could also be directed towards the internal and external circumstances in which people have experienced meaninglessness. Are specific activities or behavioral situations implicated? Do they provide information on sources or other dimensions of meaninglessness? To what extent are traumatic life events involved, or other psychopathology? What are the aftereffects of the meaninglessness experience on behavior and worldview?

### Specific Study Objectives in a Combined Nomothetic-Idiographic Approach

This study purported to address the following areas: (1) Variations in the experience of meaninglessness, (2) Phenomenology of the experience of meaninglessness, and (3) Dimensions and structural components of meaninglessness. In addition, (4) Validity of the construct of meaninglessness was to be assessed in light of the findings. A combination of idiographic and nomothetic methods were used, which can be thought of as the “Opinion Survey” (Part 1) and the “Qualitative Portion” (Part 2), respectively. This combined approach thus allowed by “triangulation” (Arksey & Knight, 1999) an essential view of the phenomenon of meaninglessness that is undoubtedly more comprehensive than what would have been provided by phenomenological case studies alone. A similar philosophy is reflected by Prager et al. (2000) in the development of their *Sources of Life Meaning* scale. Further explanation of these areas follows.
(1) Variations in the Experience of Meaninglessness and Description of the Participant Population. One of the underlying orientations structuring this discussion has been that phenomena of ultimate concerns are necessarily framed within a broad cultural-historical as well as philosophical context. Similarly, an experiential view of the phenomenon of meaninglessness must also give due attention to the population setting in which it is studied. To achieve this goal, questionnaire data on demographics, current depression and trauma scales, and an abbreviated Avoidance of Existential Confrontation Research Scale (Thauberger, Ruznisky, & Cleland, 1981) were utilized.

It was first necessary to classify the population along salient parameters or dimensions, and demographic, clinical, and personality characteristics were singled out as the most important. Gender, age, and ethnicity are essential demographic elements.

The "clinical" dimension takes into account parameters that, for most members of a healthy population, might exist at very low or invisible levels, but are important enough to warrant identifying when they are recognizable. It has been noted by clinicians and historians alike that depression frequently appears to be related to changes in an individual's judgment, and by extension Weltanschauung and spiritual life. The "sadder but wiser" relationship (though more complex than it may appear) is familiar to most adults, at least in Western civilization (Alloy & Abramson, 1979; Benassi & Mahler, 1985; Capps, 1997; Rubin, 1994). Hence, severity of dysphoria and/or a fuller constellation of depression symptoms could be expected to be a marker for a changed philosophical outlook. Trauma can also have the effect of altering one's worldview, the latter effect almost defining the label (Foa, Keane, & Friedman, 2000; Haenel, 2001). The difficulty in studying this lies in relating the trauma experience, residual emotional upheaval, and the current view of life, which may well have been acquired through other means.
The personality parameter of interest includes any relatively stable, long-term characteristics that might predispose toward the experience of meaninglessness. Common experience reveals that individuals are to differing degrees "existentially-minded." By this is meant that some people have a tendency to place experiences into a broad philosophical (sometimes spiritual) frame of orientation, as opposed to thinking in more concrete or "materialistic" terms. It was hypothesized that people who are "existentially-minded" may experience a different kind of meaninglessness than those who are not, or at least express it in importantly different ways. Although measurement of this predilection could be related to social values, intelligence, spirituality, self-actualization, or probably many other constructs, it appeared that one of the most direct approaches to this construct is by way of a construct that Thauberger et al. (1981) have called avoidance of existential confrontation. "An essential ingredient of this approach," they write, "is awareness of reality and the harsh inevitabilities of life. In this context, the avoidance of ontological confrontation is defined as any attempt to escape from the 'givens' of life or the natural circumstances of a human individual. The avoidance of ontological confrontation includes the reality of existence" (pp. 747-748). The instrument created by Thauberger et al. (1981), the Avoidance of Existential Confrontation Research Scale, tentatively seemed suited to the present purpose, with the understanding that their construct was not conceived with exactly the same goal in mind.

It was hoped that classifying the experimental population along these basic demographic, clinical, and personality parameters would give useful structure to the main endeavor which was to examine the nature of and variation in the meaninglessness experience.

(2) Phenomenology: The Nature of the Experience of Meaninglessness. For the present study, it was first necessary to clarify the cornerstone issue, the nature of the
experience of meaninglessness. This objective takes the form of the question, "how do people (subjectively) understand and/or experience meaninglessness for themselves?"

This goal was approached using open-ended Short Answer questions as part of a questionnaire packet, and from individual interviews. The questionnaire material provided breadth, and the interviews provided depth by fleshing out central ideas. The subjective essence of the experience of meaninglessness can only be captured in narrative form. As was reviewed earlier, the classic phenomenological approach as popularized by Van Kaam (1966), Polkinghorne (1989), von Eckartsberg (1986), and others (see *Phenomenological Research in Psychology*), has demonstrated its efficacy in many areas of inquiry similar to the one under consideration. Individual written anecdotes supplanted by interviews have been the time-honored tradition and backbone of phenomenological research. They lend themselves to intense examination of experiential realms that are inaccessible to an equal depth by other means. Since individual experience is recorded, the researcher has wide latitude in selecting population exemplars and sensitive parameters of the experience, such as emotional implications, upon which to focus. See the previous section, "Phenomenological Research in Psychology," for further discussion (see also Seidman, 1998).

The use of focus groups has become quite popular in recent years as an alternative tool for phenomenological research (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990; Morgan, 1993). Among their chief attractions is the use of social interaction to facilitate arriving at a culturally-defined core experience. They can be inexpensive and efficient to conduct, the results can be integrated with other qualitative and quantitative research, and they do not require highly trained or skilled group facilitators. However, preliminary efforts indicated that the nature and sensitivity of the topic, and the cultural peculiarities of the population, made this an inviable approach. In the
present case, initial efforts indicated that the social interaction that is useful in illuminating other areas would be counterproductive. The disclosure of emotionally-charged personal information which constitutes the subjective core of the meaninglessness experience, was not likely to occur in a group composed largely of Asian- and Pacific-American ethnicities.

(3) Dimensions and Structural Components of Meaninglessness. As with the phenomenology goal, it was anticipated that dimensions and key structural components of meaninglessness would emerge from the combined Short Answer questions and interview material. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, it was further decided to lend some degree of structure to this task by making special allowances for the areas listed here. Since at the outset it was uncertain as to what depth the data would support investigation in all of these areas, the following objectives were regarded as hopeful possibilities. Moreover, it was not known to what extent they would adequately cover the breadth of the topic. It should be emphasized that these areas are in no way considered to be independent or orthogonal, because that would contradict the basic intent of phenomenological research.

Although “dimensions” of a construct sometimes suggests statistical modeling approaches, a useful start can also involve a rational qualitative model such as the following. It was unsure at the outset whether the data would permit this, but the qualitative analysis software employed greatly facilitated this process and in fact actually encouraged it. Although causal relationships can be inferred in some parts of the resulting model of meaninglessness (e.g., from situational variables), demonstrating causality is beyond the scope of this work.

- Situational or Circumstantial Variability in the Meaninglessness Experience. An important aspect of the phenomenon of meaninglessness, obvious from the beginning, is the variety of circumstances under which it occurs. This does not refer
solely to external situations, but includes the overall experiential circumstances, trauma, loss, disappointment, and the like. Though this aspect is not considered quantitatively in this study, it is particularly important for evaluating antecedent events which may play a causative role. It would obviously be remiss to examine the phenomenon without giving due thought to circumstances which might play a precipitating role.

- **Cognitive Aspects of Meaninglessness.** This area includes cognitive structures involved in the experience of meaninglessness. In addition to narrative reports, word-association exercises were used to assess the cognitive-semantic domains associated with the specific existential-psychological stimulus term, "meaninglessness of life." Word-association tasks have a long record of usefulness in studies of cognitive operations. They have been used to elucidate both the nature of associations themselves and the influence of other variables on these associative processes. Experiments have frequently measured response latencies, but qualitative associations have also been assumed to reflect cognitive structures of both healthy and disturbed individuals. Hence, they have been used in diagnostic roles, as well as serving as a mainstay of current cognitive research. In the present instance, the word association itself was the object of study (e.g., Cramer, 1968).

- **Affective Aspects of Meaninglessness.** Although it was expected that associated affect would be almost exclusively negative, there was still good reason to look at the relative importance of sadness, anger, fear, and so forth. Allowance was made for the possibility that, since non-Western understandings of meaninglessness may not be entirely negative, there could be some positive feelings of "liberation"
or the like. Word associations were expected to reflect a good deal of the affective dimension, as well as narrative material.

• **Behavioral Aspects of Meaninglessness.** In his discussion of unsatisfied Needs for Meaning, Baumeister (1991) has asserted that when threatened by a lack of meaning, people will usually turn to existing sources of it and try to elaborate them. Behavioral aspects of the meaninglessness experience thus include coping efforts when faced with the threat of meaninglessness (if, indeed, it is perceived as a threat), and observable behavioral changes once the threat has subsided. This data was derived non-quantitatively from narrative accounts.

• **Existential Aspects of Meaninglessness.** One of the most intriguing facets of this research, with both philosophical and clinical appeal, concerns the question of how lives and understandings are fundamentally changed by experiences of a profound nature. This refers to existentially positive and adaptive change, arising from a reshuffling or refinement of the worldview. It would also include being less prone to or dependent on illusion, or (in the terminology of Thauberger et al., 1981) ontological avoidance. Of interest were lasting life changes resulting from having encountered meaninglessness. Data supporting this aspect was extracted from the totality of the narrative accounts and structured into a logical system using QSR N5 (N5, 2000) qualitative analysis software.

(4) **The Validity of the Construct of Meaninglessness.** This question addresses the viability of exploring meaninglessness directly, as contrasted to the widespread assumption that it is the converse of positive personal meanings, and its characteristics can therefore be inferred from the latter. This somewhat philosophical evaluation would be based on an overall view of the findings.
CHAPTER 6
METHODS

This study involved a combination of approaches. Some of the results are reported in simplified quantitative format, but the central and most important bulk of the work was qualitative in nature. Because of this, the traditional quantitative format of Participants, Measures, Procedure will be used to supply the outline, but within these headings certain qualitative concepts will be elaborated. Moreover, although it is convenient to distinguish between "Part 1, Opinion Survey Portion" and "Part 2, Qualitative Portion" in the description of measures and participants, the actual procedures merged the survey, interview materials, and the analyses thereof into a synergistic process, so that this distinction will not be maintained throughout.

Wertz (1984) has concisely summarized the phenomenological method of inquiry in several short phrases: (1) the stance of the researcher, (2) the active cognitive operations involved in the "analysis" by the researcher, and (3) the operations used to achieve generality of understanding. Note the prominence given to the researcher in the first two items, and particularly the researcher's stance, which is placed (no doubt appropriately) first.

Von Eckartsberg (1998a), in a slightly different formulation, labels the four steps entailed in conducting empirical existential-phenomenological research as: (1) Problem and question formulation: the phenomenon, (2) Data-generating situation: descriptions (protocol life-text), (3) Data study procedure: explication (analysis and interpretation), and (4) Presentation of results: formulation.
The problem and question formulation and related background information has for the most part already been dealt with, but there remains the need to describe the pre-existing mind-set and assumptions of the experimenter, which are addressed immediately following. The next two parts, the data-generating situation and data study procedure or analysis (commonly referred to as "explication") are properly part of the Procedure, and will be found under that heading. The difference from traditional quantitative studies is that in qualitative studies these steps are described in greater detail and with consideration to subjective aspects, and that is observed here. Von Eckartsberg's fourth step, the presentation of results (formulation, or "research findings"), covers the same ground as the conventional Results section. The term "Findings" is preferred because instead of the usual "A or B" judgment, a concept is being illuminated, and deference is given to the even more important underlying idea that "one cannot adequately evaluate and interpret research findings without an understanding of how these were arrived at" (Rowe & Halling, 1998, p. 231).

Preconceptions

Fischer (1974) has described the researcher's relationship with the qualitatively researched topic is an evolving dialectic: one pole is the researcher's own presuppositions and preconceptions, which are unavoidable "baggage" that are always brought along, and the other pole is the researched content, drawn out and illuminated from other people. The implications of this concise description are profound and underappreciated in most of science. They have been discussed to some extent in the previous chapter, "The Phenomenological Approach." The researcher's preconceptions affect not only the
analysis of data, but right from the start the creation of questions, and thus the generation of the original raw data.

"Preconceptions" is a vast topic, and cultural assumptions are far too complex an area to be taken up here. Much of the latter are reflected in the foregoing literature review of the many views of "what meaning/meaninglessness is." As for specific conceptual biases of the researcher, the following especially pertinent areas were recognized:

More General Theoretical Viewpoints

- **Western-centric Viewpoint:** Even though long a student of Eastern thought, the foregoing philosophical discussion reveals a Western point of view towards meaninglessness, for the most part (as is true for most of the participants).

- **Humanistic Self-actualization Theory:** As may be obvious from the topic of this study, an existential approach is implicit, and along with that comes a tendency to conceptualize individuals in the terms of Maslow and other humanistic psychologists, allowing for belief in self-actualizing motives and so forth.

- **Eriksonian-developmental Approach:** This awareness did not arise until analysis had begun, but many young adults seem to be struggling with self-expression, actualization, control, and/or frustration of these in some way. These struggles parallel nicely with the various stages proposed by Eriksonian, particularly those of Identity and Intimacy.

- **Original (above) Classification of Umwelt, Mitwelt, Eigenwelt:** This borrowed existential breakdown seemed to work for sources of meaning, and was tentatively held in reserve if it might be able to apply to findings about meaninglessness.

- **Cognitive Viewpoint:** Since existential questions like meaninglessness necessarily involve a great deal of cognitive inquiry as well as emotional activity,
this view is unavoidable. Also, cognitive conceptualizations were invoked as it became apparent that a fundamental aspect was the dissonance in and eventual crumbling of the worldview.

- Clinical Viewpoint: The notion of depression as a well-defined clinical syndrome (although with a Western cultural bias, meaning that the quick estimates used here may not be the best for non-Western populations) suggests also that it may be able to exist as an identifiable synergistic entity with a certain degree of independence, rather than merging seamlessly with the experience of meaninglessness.

More Personal Idiosyncratic Biases

- Personality Characteristics of the Experimenter: Included here are personal expectations, "existential-mindedness," and introversion, and because of these a possible unconscious tendency to discount the importance of Mitwelt which may be paramount to others.

- Personal Belief in the Supremacy of Emotions as the Primary Response Mechanism: The experimenter is sympathetic toward the view that people respond to situations and events (external or internal) primarily in an emotional way, then cognitive operations try to make meaning out of this emotionally colored picture.

- Eurocaucasian Ethnicity: As part of a truly culturally diverse population, the experimenter hails from the U.S. mainland and grew up on the East Coast.

Participants

Participants were students in undergraduate Psychology survey courses at the University of Hawaii who were offered extra credit bonus points and/or cash for their
contribution. To expedite selection, participants in individual interviews were solicited from the body of participants in the opinion survey exercises.

Part 1: "Opinion Survey" Portion

A quota sampling design was used to select 204 females and 68 males of the most prevalent ethnicities at the University of Hawaii, Manoa. Based on previous survey work (Jordan, 1997), these were known to be Caucasian, Chinese, Filipino, part-Hawaiian, and Japanese. Other ethnic groups were also used, and many individuals identify themselves as mixtures of two or more ethnicities. Participants were self-selected undergraduates. Ages were allowed to include both the traditional range of 18 to 25 years, and the growing number of non-traditional students aged 30 through 50 and older. A gender imbalance resulted from the relative unwillingness of males in this population to participate in a study of this type.

Part 2: Qualitative Portion

For the Individual Interviews, 11 participants were selected from the subset of the pool of Survey participants who volunteered. Interviewees were selected on the basis of apparent intelligence, verbal articulateness, compliance, having "interesting" narratives, and providing adequate coverage of the breadth of the experiential domain. Not all potential participants in the volunteer pool were used, and no effort was made to have interviewees represent "typicality" in the college-age group. Further discussion of subjectivity associated with selection will be found in the Discussion section.
Measures

"Opinion Survey" Portion

The several parts of the opinion survey are included as Appendix A. These questionnaires are preceded by an Informed Consent cover-form.

Demographic Form. Participants were asked to provide the usual gender and age information. In addition, they were shown a list of the most common ethnicities among University of Hawaii students, on bipolar scales with "American" at the opposite end (e.g., "Chinese...American," "Japanese...American," etc.). They were asked to rank themselves on the appropriate scale as "about equally," "mostly," or "very" towards either side of the scale.

Word Association Exercise. The purpose of the word-association exercise was to identify various semantic domains associated with the particular ontological term, meaninglessness. In format it is a paper and pencil take-home free-association exercise, specifically discrete free-association. This means that the subject is not limited to any particular semantic or grammatical category of response, but is instructed to quickly supply a single associated word, the first which comes to mind. It is also continued free-association in that the subject is instructed to supply more than one associated word to the same stimulus. In the current case the subject was asked to provide at least three response terms numbered in order (Cramer, 1968). Unlike many word association exercises, there is no normative data. The purpose of this exercise was to generate baseline opinion data for a new area, and the face validity inherent in the list of stimulus terms was deemed sufficient.

Depression and Trauma Screen. A subjective sense of personal meaninglessness in life is often anecdotally associated with clinical depression. This
syndrome is widespread among university undergraduates, and it was therefore important to make allowances for this by employing a quick and simple screening measure. However, a non-clinical population was utilized, and the present aim was not to assess for the presence of the clinical depression syndrome, but rather to identify people experiencing significantly higher-than-average levels of dysphoria. Hence, it was felt that there was no need for a full diagnostic clinical instrument of the style of the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI, Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961; Phillips, 1980). Instead, a nine-item scale was condensed from the Self-rating Depression Scale of Zung (1965), with additions from the CES-D of Radloff (1977). The past tense was used for all items and the time period was specified as the “past two weeks or more.” The result was four negative items and five positive items that were reverse-scored by a 4-point Likert scale ranging from “a little of the time” to “most or all of the time.” Although not clinically validated, this very short scale was felt adequate for the purposes of this study to identify the relative possibility of the clinical syndrome.

There was also the possibility that other potentially confounding common psychopathology might be present, such as the aftereffects of trauma. Past traumatic experience and its ongoing aftereffects are likely to be recognizable by participants and reported in response to a direct question. Since this step was also simply to identify and/or screen out non-typical individuals, a single question addressing traumatic experience (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) was added after the depression screen. Following a one-sentence description of what is meant by traumatic experience, the question asked how much such an event “continues to influence or impact your current life.” Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “not at all” to “extremely.”
It was decided to ignore other possible psychopathological confounds for this study because of their probable low prevalence in the population under study and the likelihood that they would be flagged as comorbidities if high levels of dysphoria existed. Also, for logistic reasons, the use of thorough but cumbersome screening devices like the Symptom Checklist (SCL-90; Derogatis, 1994) was impractical. Investigation of populations with clearly defined problems was recognized as a good future goal.

Avoidance of Existential Confrontation Scale (modified). The Avoidance of Existential Confrontation Research Scale (AEC, Thauberger et al., 1981) in its original form consists of 36 items purporting to reflect an attempt to escape from existential "givens." It has been subjected to various tests of validity and reliability, particularly with respect to other measures of neuroticism (Thauberger, Cleland, & Nicholson, 1982).

In order to increase the probability of full and conscientious compliance by members of this population, an effort was made to reduce the original length of the 36-item AEC. Several statements were omitted because they were thought to be ambiguous or confusing, particularly for this subject population (numbers 4, 7, and 30 of the original). A number of other items were omitted due to being redundant (original numbers 3, 19, 21, 22, 25, 29, 31), appearing to target other difficulties such as anxiety or depression, or just being irrelevant (9, 16, 27, 28, 33, 34). Otherwise, the original order of items, now totaling 20, was maintained.

The authors had formatted the AEC with "bipolar" statements separated by 7-point Likert scales which were variously forward or backward. The version used in the current study altered the polarity of the statements and abbreviated them, such that all scales ranged from 1 to 7. Although this necessitated reverse-scoring on some of the items, it was felt that this system would be more effective in discouraging response bias, and less confusing to the subjects. Though it was obvious that these changes to the AEC in content
and format undermine the validity of this instrument, it was judged that they would nevertheless be an overall net improvement for an exploratory study of this type. There was no visible evidence observed during scoring to suggest that any participants had difficulty with this instrument.

**Short Answer Questions.** One of the most important parts of the questionnaire packet involved seven short answer questions. Subjects were instructed to “Try to think of a specific situation in which you most profoundly experienced *meaninglessness* and then to complete in their own words seven prompts to describe (1) the overall circumstances, (2) important other people involved, (3) their feelings in that situation, (4) if at the time they were experiencing any of a list of nine symptoms pertaining to depression, (5a) their expectations or beliefs before this situation, (5b) how the events of this situation changed their views, and (6) the aftereffects of this experience. After the first batch of questionnaires had been distributed, an additional question was added asking why this experience “felt specifically like meaninglessness, rather than some other emotion.” These topics were derived from an open-ended pilot study (n=52) carried out a year previously by the author.

**QSR N5 Qualitative Analysis Software**

An important aid in the qualitative analysis was computer software designed to facilitate that process. *QSR N5* is the fifth version of the popular NUD*IST series of qualitative analysis software (N5, 2000). It is “designed as a toolkit based on coding text documents—interview transcripts, field notes, and the like—and analyzing and exploring that coding” (Richards, T., 2000, p. 2). It allows the searching and exploration of themes and patterns in masses of text, and coding them in hierarchical fashion. It also allows integration with quantitative data. Basic to the coding strategy is the organization of data into *nodes*, either stand-alone or as parts of a tree-structure; and manipulation of not only
the data within various nodes, but also of the nodes themselves, to arrive at a logical and integrated whole (Richards, L., 2000)

**Procedure—Data-Generation**

This section attempts to explain systematically how data was generated. A few fundamental points bear repeating. First is the key concept from the phenomenological literature, that descriptions reflect the meaning of the situation to the subject; it is the job of the researcher to let that world of the describer shine through. Therefore, the project must guide itself—the direction unfolds automatically from the data. This was in fact a data-driven investigation, with specific intent not to impose a pre-existing conceptual structure. Phenomenological researchers cited earlier have remarked that the aim is to assume and rely on the natural story-telling abilities of people, which are in fact their attempts to make meaning of the topic. The data is thus peoples' meaning-making efforts in the form of personal stories, their efforts to make sense out of experiences they had, which further are being labeled as experiences of meaninglessness. A number of interviewees remarked how the process had helped them clarify their understanding.

A second important point is the iterative nature of a qualitative study like this one. There was a central, continuing question: “what is the nature of the experience?” But in order to flesh that out, the various subquestions that arose on their own had to be allowed to lead wherever they wanted to go, within time constraints. Regardless of software assistance, there is ultimately no substitute for the immersion of the experimenter in the data.
"Opinion Survey" Portion

One year prior to the present study, a pilot study was performed by the author to assess the likelihood of success. Male and female subjects (combined N= 52) from the same population were asked, “In your own words, please describe a specific situation in which you felt most profoundly that your life was fundamentally meaningless.” Analysis of responses revealed a limited number of identifiable themes: (1) the (external) situation(s) or incident(s), (2) the social context, since the situations generally involved other people, (3) the emotional content, (4) an underlying paradox involving expectations or beliefs that were frustrated, a loss, or disappointment of some kind, (5) the expansion or extension of this feeling of specific paradox in space (to life/world/cosmos) and time (to forever, all futurity), and (6) reflection leading to immediate or long-term aftereffects on the participant’s life or worldview. A number of such descriptions of personal reactions hinted strongly at major depressive episodes of varying severity. These categories provided the rationale for the Short Answer questions in the current study, including a depressive-symptom checklist.

The current “opinion survey” consisted of a number of different parts, and participants were asked to complete all parts in order. No attempt was made to camouflage the focal question of the current study (meaninglessness) by including it in a larger set of existential terms, as had been done in a previous pilot study.

Instructions for the word association exercise closely followed the method of Merten (1993). Students were instructed to “please write the three words that come most quickly to mind...” numbered in order. Responses were recorded on the test sheet. These were later grouped and tallied by the experimenter.
The final sheet of the survey packet consisted of five validity questions in which the participant was asked to self-rate his or her responses for accuracy, difficulty, and motivation, and whether the parts of the packet were completed in order.

The Opinion Survey was delivered to participants as a questionnaire packet. They were instructed to take the packet home, complete it on their own time, and return it to the experimenter within a time frame of approximately one week. Incentive was offered as extra credit points in the academic courses from which students were selected. All parts of this questionnaire packet other than the word association portion and the short-answer section utilized simple check-boxes or Likert scales.

Qualitative Portion

The participants for the individual interviews were recruited after having completed the opinion survey. The purpose of this was to some extent logistic; i.e., an attempt was made to select age, gender, and language/ethnicity for the idiographic exercises, and this could be conveniently done while reviewing the results of the opinion survey. Additionally, participants for interviews were selected on the basis of their willingness, probable intelligence, articulateness, expressiveness, interest, awareness, and unique or exemplary value of their atypical as well as normative expressed experiences. Participants were then contacted to arrange an interview.

Interviews were structured only to the extent of having pre-established topical goals. These goals comprised questions about "people in general" and personal involvement, with the latter being explored as deeply as possible (Interview Guide, Appendix B). Goals were also guided to some extent from the evolving data "trees" generated from the questionnaire "Short Answers." An attempt was made to balance the more intrusive questions against the ongoing development of rapport between interviewer
and interviewee, and to maintain a casual and relaxed atmosphere in order to encourage spontaneity among participants and allow some flexibility. Interviews were audiotape-recorded and lasted from approximately 50 to 75 minutes. The interviewer (the author) was a doctoral student in clinical psychology, experienced in individual therapy sessions. Participants received a $20. cash payment on completion of the interview.

Each subject was interviewed or contacted twice, the follow-up meeting or review being carried out approximately one month after the initial interview. A number of these follow-ups were done by mail at the request of the participant. The objective of the follow-up was to confirm with the participant and refine the accuracy of the experiential material gathered from the first session, now reformulated and systematized along tentative hypothetical lines (i.e., thematic or "meaning" units). Participants received a $10. cash payment on completion of the second interview.

**Procedure—Data Study and Analysis: Explication**

The purpose of this section is to describe how the process of *explication* was applied in this study. Explication is the second step in the qualitative process, and consists of active cognitive operations involved in the "analysis" by the researcher. According to Wertz (1984), these are: recognizing the 'existential baseline', distinguishing constituents, reflecting on judgements of relevance, grasping implicit meanings, relating constituents, conceptually guided interrogation, and translation into the appropriate jargon. The guiding objective was to distill out a sense of the whole meaninglessness experience being described from the mix of scenes contributed by each participant.

Van Kaam (1966) has outlined what he believes are the essential steps involved in explication of narrative data, and these formed the blueprint for the current procedure: (1)
Listing and Preliminary Grouping is the categorization of meaning units in the narrative; (2) Reduction, simplification and organization of this structure; (3) Elimination of redundant or irrelevant elements; (4) Hypothetical Identification, in which the structure of the targeted phenomenon is believed to be revealed; (5) Application, checking the tentatively identified structure of the phenomenon against new material for goodness of fit; and (6) Final Identification (of the phenomenon). If there is one common procedural thread throughout this process, it is repeatedly reviewing the narratives.

Qualitative Analysis Software and “Trees”

The N5 Qualitative Analysis software (N5, 2000) was of considerable help in the process of abstracting central themes from the Short Answer data. The manufacturers claim that this software is organized around the concept of the library catalog, which is organized in a hierarchical tree structure. This sort of arrangement is also the basis for file organization on a computer hard drive. They point out that this is the logical and natural way to organize information so that any item of information can be easily found, and every given piece informs or “belongs to” a larger concept (Richards, L., 2000; Richards, T., 2000).

An important characteristic of this tree-forming process is its iterative nature. At each incremental addition of new material, the whole tree is reviewed for logical relevance with respect to both the new and the existing data. Old categories which become inaccurate are modified or deleted; new refinements and subcategories are continually formed and tested. In addition, the N5 software has provisions to create extemporaneous “memos,” or notes on observations, that can be juxtaposed against the experimental data and serve to inform and guide the tree-building. This successive refinement by repeated review and reflection, insured a high degree of integration and logic to the entire final
structure. It was found that the N5 software lent itself almost automatically to revealing dimensions in a nebulous concept such as meaninglessness.

Unanticipated Questions

Another important aspect of explication concerns unanticipated questions that arose during the process. In other words, the dissection of the narrative data did not always progress in a straightforward, linear fashion without problems arising. To cite what appeared as the most obvious example, why is it that participants, when asked to relate experiences of meaninglessness, almost universally recall painful experiences, whether or not they actually involved “obvious meaninglessness” or not? Why do people seem to consider meaninglessness tantamount to pain; or perhaps the inverse question is more to the point: why do people consider pain tantamount to meaninglessness?

Illustration of the Data-analysis Procedure

To illustrate the steps of this process with an actual example of a brief narrative derived from the Short Answer questions, consider the following from a 21 year-old Japanese-American male. Italicized statements are the Short Answer prompts appearing on the Questionnaire:

1. Briefly, the overall circumstances of the situation (what, when, where) were...
   Being rejected over and over again in my each year of middle school and high school by all the girls I liked.

2. The important other people involved were...
   all the girls I had a crush on.

3. My feelings in this situation were...
I felt sad because I thought no one would ever want to go out with me. I was rejected over 10 times before I met my girlfriend.

4. (For this question, please check ✓ all that apply; put more than one check ✓ if it was very strong). At the time of this situation:

I had a low opinion of myself xx_; I felt sad or depressed xx_; my sleep habits changed xx_; my eating habits changed xx_; I was very restless/very sluggish xx_; it was difficult to concentrate xx_; I stopped enjoying things in life xx_; I thought a lot about death or mortality xx_; the future looked bad xx_.

5.(a) Before this situation, I think my expectations or beliefs about this aspect of life were...

uncertain. I didn't know what to expect.

(b) Then the actual events of this situation changed my views in this way...

I thought I was worthless, unattractive, as if something was wrong with me; was I really that bad? Was I not a decent person?

6. The aftereffects of this experience on my external behavior, actions, life are/were...

I grew out of the stage when I started getting active in school. I got my mind focused on other things. Now this kind of stuff doesn't matter to me anymore. There's more to life than just looking for love. I'm happier now just finding acceptance within myself, than by others. I don't care what others think of me no more.

(1) Listing and Preliminary Grouping. The first-level question was "how does the situated structure (context of this experience) tell us about the phenomenon (experiencing meaninglessness) in its generalized form?" This closely matched the idea behind the first Short Answer question, "the overall circumstances of the situation (what, when, where) were...." Some researchers refer to these topics as "situational themes/structures" (von
(2) Reduction. The next question that immediately arose was, “how is this an example of meaninglessness?” Although it is difficult to illustrate with a single short narrative taken out of the context of the rest of the data, this experience hinted at a common thread running through all the situational themes. This thread is a “dissonance” or juxtaposition of external events or experiences against internal representations of how life is “supposed to be.” Although this subject stated that he was not conscious of what to expect in social encounters with the opposite sex, he was clearly stunned when successive failures left him questioning his self-worth: “I thought I was worthless, unattractive, as if something was wrong with me; was I really that bad? Was I not a decent person?” It is here that the experience has been reduced to what is believed to be (one of) the essential elements.

Subsequent levels of structure emerged in a rational sequence. For example, the “overall circumstances of the situation” inquiry produced an array of situational themes that obviously differed in external details. The question that followed naturally was then, “why are they all thought of as meaninglessness?” or “what is the common element that unites
these themes as experiences of meaninglessness?" The answer to this then pointed to the next inquiry, "how is this true—what are the psychological parameters of this experience of 'dissonance'?" Then similar questions proceeded in like manner, such as, "what are the natures of other psychological parameters, thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and possibly more profound existential insights associated with the experience?" It is important to note that this "tree" structure arose naturally from the data.

In this example, the participant's cognitions were obviously ideas of being "worthless, unattractive, as if something was wrong with me... bad... not a decent person." The emotional side of this is also clear in his reference to feeling "sad" with the expectation that "no one would ever want to go out with me." This participant did not elaborate much on conscious life-realizations acquired directly from his series of rejections, but he clearly underwent an important philosophical shift when he was driven to look inside himself: "there's more to life than just looking for love. I'm happier now just finding acceptance within myself, than by others."

(3) Elimination. This narrative is brief and admirably to the point, making it suitable as an example, so there is not much material in the original that needs to be eliminated. This was not the case for some of the longer accounts, and trimming is normally an essential step.

(4) Hypothetical Identification. In this example tentative identification has already taken place at several levels. What is believed to be the fundamental level is the mismatch between internal representation and external experiences. Other possible tentative hypotheses could have been "control," "agency," "self-concept," or similar concepts. Finer levels are examined in terms of cognitive, emotional, and existential experiencing.

(5) Application. Although it is not visible in this brief illustration, the "juxtaposition of external and internal experience" hypothesis was of course applied for goodness of fit to
all narratives. Indeed, it was arrived at in the first place by virtue of its commonality. Two other common themes, the loss of a close relationship and bereavement, were also especially suited to this application step. They provided particularly clear examples with which to test the tentatively identified model of external-internal juxtaposition.

(6) Final Identification. In theory, science is never "final," meaning that "facts" are forever merely hypotheses which can always be questioned. That said, this last step refers to the point where the identified phenomenon appears to be as valid as any other phenomenon. Such was the case for the "external-internal juxtaposition" hypothesis.

This illustrative narrative also reveals an important "unanticipated question." Doubt immediately comes to mind whether this was an experience of meaninglessness, or whether this subject was so hard-pressed to think of something to put on the questionnaire that he just recalled the most miserable time in his life and decided that it should suffice. Evidently there was more to it than the latter. This period in his life must surely have created a dissonance between his social expectations and his experiences, and shaken his self-concept and worldview. Yet another unanticipated question is, "was this just depression?" This remains a possible alternative hypothesis since the participant rated himself highly on the mini-scale (Question 4 above). Since "problem" questions such as these were specifically points outside the confines of the Short Answer questions, they begged to be elaborated in interviews.

The same kind of hierarchical tree was created from the collective results of the word association exercise. With this non-elaborated word data it is not possible to perform further classifications much beyond the denotations of the words. But even this existing structure could be compared and related to cognitive aspects of the Short Answer material.
It is important to stress the iterative nature of the classification process. For example, the Situation classification was revisited numerous times, and all the listings under each classification were reconsidered again when the various cognitive, affective, existential, and other aspects were looked at. Some items were reassigned.
CHAPTER 7
RESEARCH FINDINGS (RESULTS)

This chapter presents the findings of this study. Even with a relatively modest data set, the number of directions that could be pursued in the analysis of a topic of this type is very large indeed. Presentation of results corresponds to the first three goals of this study: (1) variations in the experience of meaninglessness, (2) the phenomenology of the experience of meaninglessness, and (3) dimensions and structural components of meaninglessness. However, the clarification of these areas involved "parallel" rather than "sequential" processing; that is, structures, phenomenology, and variations of the experience were often revealed in a simultaneous fashion. For this reason the order of presentation of results will to some extent follow the actual chronology of operations rather than being artificially compartmentalized into the three categories just mentioned.

Specifically, the components and dimensions of meaninglessness that emerged will be described along with the way they combined into a phenomenological whole. Within each section, differences between males and females will be provided as appropriate.

Variations of age and ethnicity are limited due to insufficient data and have been deferred to a later study. An effort was made to retain as much of the original flavor and accuracy of original narrative material. Most excerpts that appear have been edited by the removal of irrelevant parts in order to condense them and because the order of responses to the Short Answer questions may have been garbled by the subject. English was not the first language of some responders and although spelling errors have been corrected, grammar and syntax have not been changed. The last study goal, (4) an assessment of the validity
of the construct of meaninglessness, is qualitative and will be addressed in the Discussion section.

Some (Von Eckartsberg, 1998a) have called this fourth step of empirical existential-phenomenological research the "Formulation." One important function of this section is to present the findings in a style appropriate to the audience. This is especially true in the present case where survey data form part of the outcome. Another function in the qualitative description of a phenomenon is to formulate what Van Kaam (1966) calls a "synthetic description" which identifies the total experience. In the presentation of this description considerations that arise during its formulation will be discussed, and specific elements used in the description will be supported by and explained in terms of the experimental material rather than according to an a priori structure. The actual developmental stages of the formulation will be examined as well as the final outcome. The underlying effort is towards achieving generality of understanding by identifying commonalities or convergences from a succession of experimental insights. It is implicitly understood that the findings are placed within the "evolving dialectic" (Fischer, 1974) of the researcher's relationship with the researched topic.

**Demographic Overview**

The sample of questionnaire responders is described in terms of demographics in Table 1. Interviewees were selected from this group and consisted of 10 females with ages ranging from 19 to 50 years, and one male, age 22. Interviewees identified their ethnicities as American Indian, Chinese, Euro-Caucasian, Hawaiian, Japanese, and various mixtures of these.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Male (n)</th>
<th>Ages</th>
<th>Female (n)</th>
<th>Ages</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>20-38</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20-41</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19-28</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18-40+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euro-Caucasian</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20-57</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>18-53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20-38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaiian</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18-32</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19-50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19-27</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>19-41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20-26</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20-36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21-35</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20-50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ethnicities indicated in this table are oversimplified for part of this group. Many individuals in the state of Hawaii are of mixed ancestry. An attempt was made to classify them for this list according to the ethnicity of strongest identity.

Rationally Derived, "Prereflective," Situational Categories

Valle (1998) referred to "prereflective categories" as the categories existing before condensation (by the reflection of the researcher) into a synthetic description that holds their "essence." They are examined here not only to bolster validity but to illuminate the process. In the present case the prereflexive categories are being called Situational categories, and were derived with the help of the qualitative analysis software from the circumstances of the meaninglessness experience. This was the first "tree" structure to be delineated from the questionnaire Short Answer narratives, and is given here in its entirety and in its original form, as it unfolded subjectively with the assistance of the N5 software (N5, 2000). As such the following arrangement to a certain extent represents a chronology. Categories are referred to as "nodes" in N5, in an analogy to a plant structure which branches at nodes. An explanation of the gist or core theme of each tree "node" or category follows.

—Internal-External Mismatch

- *Expected Meaningful Experience Leads to Disillusionment*
  - Accomplishment
  - Happiness and Pleasure
    - Platonic Happiness
    - Specifically Sex
- Moderate to Wild Enjoyment

• Pointless Activities
• Frustrated Self-actualization
• Ideological Disillusionment
• Expected Painful Experience Is Flat

- Misfortune Happens

• Misfortune Blocks Anticipated Event

• Interpersonal Tension
  - Conflict of Different Views or Communication
  - Betrayal of Trust by Other
  - Rejection by Others
  - Abuse by Other
  - My Mistake, Wronged Someone

• Bereavement

• (Existing) Relationship Loss
  - with Significant Other
  - in Existing Family

• Traumatic Experience (Personal)
  - Witnessing for Others
  - Close Brush with Disaster

• Personal Failure (or Effort Fails)

- Probable Depression, Loneliness, (Other Psychopathology)

• "Acute Exhaustive Meaninglessness"

—Don't Believe in Meaninglessness

—Unidentified Situations
Internal-External Mismatch. This dialectical tension was an overarching theme that emerged as individual cases were reviewed, and was eventually identified as a core feature of the whole experience. Subcategories represent variations among circumstances. They are not simply environmental-situational descriptions aimed at identifying potentially "causal" environmental variables. They purport to identify the whole circumstantial picture, which may not necessarily have recognizable environmental causes.

This is the "top" level of a top-down approach to the big picture, an attempt to answer "what happened here?" in the most general way. The title "Internal-External Mismatch" seemed to be the one common thread unifying all situations where meaninglessness was experienced. This title invokes cognition, affect, and orientation at the fundamental level of one's internal representation of overt life events—and that it can be out of harmony with what is perceptually experienced. At first this was called "shaken Weltanschauung," an existential term that reflected the profundity of many of the events related and the view of the experimenter that worldviews were being altered. "Mismatch" is perhaps more acceptable to cognitive science, and the difference is probably not important.

The sublevels "Expected Meaning Experience Leads to Disillusionment" and "Misfortune Happens" are really just internal and external points of view (more on this later). The designation so far reflected how the circumstantial narratives seemed to emphasize the internal or external aspects, according to the participants' descriptions. The "Probable Depression..." category is something quite different, since it appeared on the surface that the first thing to happen was some sort of mental dysfunction which then
predisposed the victim to awareness of the "Internal-External Mismatch". Hence all three of these categories were assigned to the same level in the tree.

**Expected Meaningful Experience Leads to Disillusionment.** This was a broad category of narratives which had as a common theme a generally positive expectation followed by disappointment and disillusionment. Although recognizing triggering events, subjects invariably put the emphasis on their disillusionment, i.e., how they experienced a severe cognitive and emotional letdown. One (male) participant described an anomalous situation involving the same main theme, but in this case the meaning had already disappeared from his romantic relationship to the extent that when he expected to feel disappointment from his breakup, he found he felt nothing.

**Accomplishment.** The gist of these narratives goes like this: "I worked hard in the past to get where I am now, only to find that nobody appreciates what I've done or generally gives a damn; so it seems that all that hard work was for nothing." Another lesser aspect of these experiences may be the feeling that the narrator's abilities are going unused and wasted as well as unappreciated: "I don't get challenges that are worthy of all that I've worked to develop."

**Happiness and Pleasure.** A typical summary is: "I acted—sometimes recklessly—in pursuit of pleasure, sexual or otherwise, thinking that by being uninhibited I could experience happiness, and it all ended by being flat." The "day after" effect of these experiences leaves the subject feeling low, in at least two ways. First, the subject's behavior did not bring happiness, even though it may have been exciting; and second, after the experience his/her self-concept has suffered a serious loss of self-respect. Noteworthy also is the tone of guilt or regret in some of these narratives: "Maybe I was a little too wild...."
Platonic Happiness. This was a small category in which the subject's behavior was not aimed at sense-gratification. Seemingly beyond her control, events got so out of hand that they became slightly surreal. There was a feeling of loss of control in situations that were supposed to be blissfully happy, with resulting frustration. Although a single anecdote, it was retained as a categorical representative of non-sensuous happiness-seeking that ended in disillusionment.

Specifically Sex. Generally referring to impulsive sexual encounters, the underlying theme of this group is disappointment after the fact. Also present are feelings of "maybe I was too wild," having made a mistake, embarrassment, and lowered self esteem especially among females. It often appears as if this latter aspect is what shook the participant's worldview: "Why the hell did I do that? I did things I didn't think I would ever do." Often an obvious dissonance exists between the subject's own behavior and the former self-concept.

Moderate to Wild Enjoyment. The common theme in these non-sexual escapades is the after-the-fact feeling of "that was kind of a dumb thing to do." There is commonly disappointment in oneself and lowered self-esteem, but also for some of these disappointment in a an external situation that was supposed to provide happiness but ended rather flat. Some anecdotes may involve disillusionment at the time, while others reflect the thought, "That was a silly way to behave," as seen from the perspective of years later. Some involve a crescendo of wild behavior followed by an emotional crash; but a gradual waning of pleasure can also occur, leaving an empty feeling. The common element is enjoyment-seeking behavior that was expected to provide lasting happiness but which soon fizzled.

Pointless Activities. One thing the narratives in this category seem to have in common is their narrowness: an attentional focus restricted to a narrow place and time,
with little regard for life in a broader sense. There is a relative absence of feelings other than those such as boredom attending the thought that “this activity is stupid.” Boredom is frequently characteristic; secondarily are frustration and impatience. Frustration may reflect the subject’s awareness of human potential in their preference to be doing something else that they think would be productive or life-relevant. There is little or no sense of connection with life-understanding, and the subsequent “life impacts” of these experiences are generally very low. Activities mentioned in these narratives were seen as pointless, purposeless, and not contributing to the subject's goal-oriented efforts. Subjects generally seemed to be people who are focused on completing a task but are reluctant to think beyond that. Some activities are just boring, while others are serious efforts which end up for naught (note overlap with the “Personal Failure” category). With this group the possibility also exists that some of these subjects are just avoiding personally sensitive stories out of fear of disclosure.

**Frustrated Self-Actualization.** There seems to be considerable overlap between this node and the "Pointless Activities" node in that both involve frustration. However, while "Pointless Activities" seems to focus negatively on the current external barrier that is holding the person back, the present group seems to focus positively on the internal feeling of "I could be doing great things." There is the same expectation of significance and disappointment in an event which falls flat, but more important here is the feeling of frustration, of energetic potential that is yet so thwarted that one’s sense of meaning is challenged. The subject’s dominant sense is not being able to push through some constraining barrier to realize the potential that he/she inwardly feels is there and is *supposed* to be expressed. The term “self-actualization” is of course only one possibility; one could as well call this group "frustrated potential." Confusion (e.g., over life- or career-path) can be an important sub-theme.
Ideological Disillusionment. The scenarios in this group appear to involve a "higher" level of disillusionment. It has little to do with goal-seeking, accomplishment, acquisition, or pleasure. Stifled self-actualization is involved to the extent that these people feel their ideals are being offended. Sometimes there is an attendant rejection of (earlier-held) belief systems. The narrator is still seeking but is disappointed, and is determined to not let him/herself be taken in again by ideological nonsense that does not fit life-experience. A possible important component may be social rebellion, rejection of a whole social norm as being without merit and ultimately illusory. These subjects seem to be characterized by the existence of high internal ideals or a sense of justice and what is supposed to be. There may also be some emotional feeling of having been wronged, accompanied by anger, outrage, and a sense of betrayal.

Misfortune Happens. As the second of the original dichotomous divisions of "Internal-External Mismatch," "Misfortune Happens" is characterized by the individual's subjective emphasis on a real or outwardly-perceived negative event. The attention is on "something bad that happened to me," despite the fact that the internal cognitive and affective involvement may not differ much from the previous "Expected Meaningfulness leads to Disillusion" section.

Interpersonal Tension. This is a large heterogeneous group of experiences with the title representing the common theme. A wide variety of relationships are covered (with parents, significant others, spouses, children, social group/friends, coworkers, etc.) which can be close or casual, but the tension is understandably more serious when existing in close relationships. Emotion is a major dimension of these experiences; harmony consists of positive feelings towards or from others, and negative emotions are synonymous with unhappiness. This latter aspect is important to the extent that some participants seem to identify arguing or fighting (as with significant others) as the perfect example of
experienced meaninglessness. Betrayal of trust or faith in others leading to
disappointment are common but not universal themes, as is rejection by others. Many
narratives describe relationships with significant others which seem strained to the point
of breakup, and obviously overlap with the "Relationship Loss" category. Helplessness
and the lack of a personal sense of control is also a frequent theme, prominently appearing
in young people's anecdotes about their parents.

**Conflict in Different Views or Communication.** Two general scenarios were
prevalent in this category. The first common story has an existing friendship or relationship
going through a serious rocky phase due to misunderstanding or miscommunication. The
other people may be intimates, family members, or strangers, but the prevailing theme is
not seeing things eye-to-eye, or perceiving differently how things *should* or are *supposed*
to be. There are often accompanying feelings of having been wronged, losing trust, or
serious disappointment in the other party.

In the second scenario the comment is often made that (in retrospect) arguments
concerned "stupid" or "trivial" things, were a source of regret or perhaps guilt, and never
should have happened. In both scenarios the severity of the event depends on the
closeness of the relationship, the extent of the disagreement, and the relevance of the
topic of disagreement to personal values and so forth or sometimes even to personal
safety.

**Betrayal of Trust by Other.** These stories specifically focus on the betrayal of the
narrator's trust by someone of personal importance. Often cited are empty or broken
promises, frequently in love triangles. The common theme is that by having been betrayed,
the speaker felt demeaned and injured. The clash with the self-concept, the sense of being
or feeling personally *wronged*, appears to be the direct link with the perception of
meaninglessness: the victim was worth more than to be betrayed like that. Since it is hard to trust the offending person again, the effect on the relationship is often lasting.

**Rejection by Others.** Rejection by or separation from what is felt to be one's own group is a similar topic. Although occasionally this may involve the loss of a single special relationship such as with the father, more often cited are cases involving rejection by more than just one individual. There is the sense of being denied love and social intercourse with the result of that one is forced to doubt one's worth: "there must be something wrong with me... am I really such-and-such?"

**Abuse by Other.** Cruel treatment in relationships formerly close or not yet fully formed may produce much hurt, resentment, and *bewilderment*. Helplessness and a personal sense of lack of control seems to be common in these cases. Marital abuse situations may involve fear for children as well as self. Abusive situations arising between strangers and felt to be totally uncalled for, may also leave people feeling confused. Abuse appears to be most often verbal but there are occasional implications of other types. There is clearly much potential overlap among these events, loss of close relationships, and social rejection.

**My Mistake, Wronged Someone.** Another, smaller, category of anecdotes involves individuals being wronged but in a different way. This is when the narrator confesses to having "wronged someone else." Most often he or she has committed a serious social error or breach of trust, often in a love triangle situation such as stealing a friend's significant other, or pushing away other people later to discover that it was a mistake.

**Bereavement.** Death of loved one (often a family member) always seems to come as a totally unexpected shock, the narrator having previously taken for granted that life would go on in its usual comfortable way. Unexpectedness and shock is a major theme,
since this is commonly the first forced encounter with mortality, which was never previously considered. The sense of "not supposed to be this way" is especially strong when the victim was young. There is obvious emphasis on sadness and other negative emotions. Aftereffects seem to be long and profound, causing philosophical reflection like no other category of stories in this survey. One reporter said it well: "I needed answers." The major personal change that results is to no longer take relationships for granted, and to express affection to others before it's too late.

**Relationship Loss.** The important point in anecdotes involving loss of a relationship is that it has to have been established and be significant to the speaker. In other words, it is a "relationship," and not just the parallel or simultaneous existence of two people. What is experienced is not a rejection, though that could be part of it, nor does it really match any of the previous categories of "interpersonal tension." The key word here is *loss.*

*(Relationship Loss) With Significant Other.* This category includes most romantic "breakups," and one of its most obvious characteristics is that it is dominated by female responses. Meaninglessness is most evident here in the crash of future fantasies and the resulting revelation that the universe is uncertain. This disorienting uncertainty seems to be one of the elements most existentially troubling to the narrator. It seems to be related to not feeling in control and the accompanying distress, and secondarily to changes in peoples' self-identity. Diminished self-esteem and self-blame are predictably very common. Frequently cited as a major contributor to meaninglessness is a feeling of helplessness as the narrator watches an existing relationship gradually succumb and feels unable to save it; the associated hopelessness is also common and distressing. Visible in some episodes is the idea that the past relationship should have meant more to the other person, and that this lack of appreciation even in the past was a kind of ideological failure
as well as a personal rejection. Another occasional cognitive aspect is relief at having a
worrisomely ambiguous relationship finally resolved, albeit unhappily. Interestingly, in
these prime examples of crumbling castles in the air and dashed illusions, there seems to
be a lot of cosmic generalization: “life is more uncertain and unpredictable than I ever
expected....” At the same time, serious philosophical lessons are learned and world-views
reshaped.

Emotional aspects predominate in the descriptions of events, especially sadness
at the loss of attachment object, and loneliness. Meaninglessness also appears in ideas
like "I can't go on without him/her" which convey the sense of "my life has been maimed or
destroyed." Often visible are anger directed against the other person and feelings of
having been betrayed or at least treated unfairly. Frequently well-developed depression
syndromes are apparent.

There are often marked social aftereffects from the continuing hurt, the fresh
wound making people reluctant to start new relationships soon after or to open up with
others. However, many young adult subjects mention a positive rebound, more so here
than in some other situations. Even though the emotional pain is so severe at first, they
admit that, “I got over it... it was a good thing....”

(Relationship Loss) In Existing Family. Narratives frequently reveal that the
family structure is the bedrock of many young adult’s worldviews. When this internalized
structure, that is expected to be solid and reliable, crumbles, the uncertainty and attendant
upset may become cosmic in extent. As one male subject recalled the divorce of his
parents in his youth: “[I] wasn't sure of anything. Felt that even though my parents were
once in love, that nothing is certain, therefore what's the meaning of anything.” Parents
and marriage are supposed to be a happy and stable institution; failure of this is not only
the loss of a close person, it is an ideological collapse.
Uncertainty about the future may be a large part of this despair, that is, survival-fear arising from the loss of one of the pillars of the family. Gloom thickens from the implications of the parents' unhappiness (in the case of divorce) for the future marriage of the narrator. Young people seem to be extremely invested in their parents' happiness or unhappiness, as witness one participant who wanted to kill herself because her parent were always fighting.

**Traumatic Experience (Personal).** Some of the events in this category are physical trauma, while others are just threatening situations. Serious traumatic illness or injury seems to have the same profound life-altering effect as bereavement. Prominent themes are disruption of one's plan of the future (the representation of how "the world" is supposed to be) and forced confrontation with mortality. As the result of trauma a radical change in lifestyle may also occur which requires a shift in thinking and values. At least one such event involved a physical injury whose main reported effect was to thwart a hoped-for and presumably meaningful goal. This is an example of an experience that involved both failed expectation as well as actual misfortune; it was classified as a traumatic misfortune because that seemed to trigger the meaninglessness, even though the narrator's emphasis was on the expected meaningful experience which did not materialize.

**(Traumatic Experience) Witnessing for Others.** The main characteristic in this group is shock at witnessing the traumatic suffering of others where the narrator may not have been directly affected. After the September, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, this was the most common reference. Part of the shock over the terrorist events was at witnessing some aspect of human nature seeming to violate "the way it is supposed to be," and this was expressed in other kinds of anecdotes as well. These illustrate the importance in the individual's worldview of expectations and assumptions regarding human nature.
(Traumatic Experience) Close Brush with Disaster. This small group is distinguished for involving trauma to a loved one, not to self, and usually involves the threat of death, although not bereavement. This combination of vicariousness and death awareness was felt to represent a unique category with a powerful effect of shaking the narrator's representation of "the world."

Personal Failure. This category depicts striving followed by failure. The existential "wake up" surprise is at least twofold. Part of this is having future plans not materializing as previously expected. More importantly, there occurs some surprising and disappointing discovery about oneself in terms of abilities, determination, motivation, or some other sort of perceived weakness, resulting in a diminished self-concept. There is frequently also pain at disappointing other people and a diminished social image, which are reflected back into the lowered opinion of oneself. Some of these anecdotes depict failure after intense striving, and reveal the close connection between the constructs of disappointment and meaningfulness. They suggest that if disappointment becomes severe enough, especially if directed at oneself, it can upset the whole worldview. This category illustrates well how self-image is an important part of the worldview; when self-image crumbles, so does the whole structure.

Probable Depression, Loneliness, (Other Psychopathology). This group of narratives occupies a somewhat unique position, largely because many of the somatic as well as psychological symptoms characteristic of clinical depression (as a Western-centric syndrome) are visible in the descriptions. One prominent characteristic of many of these accounts is the sense that the reporter did not know why or how it started, but that somehow he or she ended up in this melancholic "hole." Sometimes other complaints or triggers are articulated; various other aspects of life seemed to fall apart and receive the blame. To the observer it appears that the first thing to happen is some sort of mental
dysfunction, which then results in a sense of meaningfulness that is associated with various areas of life. These profiles should not be assumed to reflect "pure depression," and for some reporters in this group there are hints of other possible psychopathology. Most narrators are female, and though this is consistent with the epidemiology of depression, it may in this case be artifactual.

The affective emphasis is on the extremely dysphoric feelings. Loneliness is a common complaint here as part of the feeling and was thus included in the node title. Complaints of deterioration or absence of social support are characteristic. Subjects focus on the meaningfulness of life and not just of an isolated event. There seems to be a superficial association with thoughts of suicide and/or death, which are also typical of depression. Also characteristic of these thoughts is the idea that, "I don't know what else to do... can't think of any other solution." Cognitive confusion which hinders other coping strategies, appears common.

"Acute Exhaustive Meaninglessness." Not entirely tongue-in-cheek, this small group includes several reports of a condition sounding more like exhaustion than dysphoria, and much more acute than what would be expected from a normal episode of depression. Otherwise they clearly state a chronology that says, "First I found myself in this strange state, and then it seemed to me that I couldn't find any meaning...." Rather than dysphoria, the key emotional descriptor would be "numbness," and it seems to be quite temporary.

Don't Believe in Meaninglessness. Predictably, a subset of people tended to summarily reject the validity of the topic. Although some of these claims were probably the excuses of resistant individuals who did not want to disclose personal anecdotes, there also seemed to be a number of sincere responders whose philosophy simply does not include the concept of meaningfulness. When given, reasons for this view generally
revolved around the conviction that human life has intrinsic purpose and that all experiences, however negative, contribute to one's growth in some way, albeit obscurely.

**Unidentified Situations.** Some subjects were so vague in their Short Answer responses that the actual circumstances of the experience were not recognizable. These answers were still retained for evaluation of other dimensions.

**Interpretive Ordering of Situation Categories**

The original dichotomy of *Expected Meaningful Experience Leads to Disillusionment* and *Misfortune Happens* was recognizable at the initial review of the material. The ordering of circumstance categories within this dichotomy as narratives were assigned to them, was haphazard. It merely followed the order in which such themes became recognizable during review of the narratives, and hence has no significance.

Subjective reflection on what these polarities mean, however, reveals that they represent subjects' construals of their experiences. *Expected Meaningful Experience Leads to Disillusionment* reflects subjects' emphases on inner experiences of expectation and subsequent disappointment so severe that it left them questioning the meaning of it all. Likewise, *Misfortune Happens* indicates subjects' perceptions that "something bad happened to me," an event so severe that it disrupted previous notions of how life was "supposed" to be.

As the subcategories (nodes) described above became clearer with the continuing addition of data, re-examination showed that they actually formed a coarse but recognizable continuum between these two principle poles. This continuum therefore represents the direction in which attribution of "responsibility" was assigned by the reporter: the focus on either his/her *inner* experiencing, or the *outer* events that appeared
to befall him/her. In other words, it is likely that none of the assigned nodes are either exclusively internal or external; they really lie on a continuum.

It may be useful to alternatively refer to *triggering circumstances* and the prominence of their role in the perception of the subject. It seems unavoidable that there is always a set of circumstances surrounding an experience of meaninglessness. When they are only marginally or peripherally perceived and attended to, subjects may assign emphasis to their inner experiences of disillusionment, that is, the collapse of an inner representation. They would thus retain their normal sense of being responsible for their disillusionment. When the outer triggering circumstances are more strongly attention-getting, they may be perceived to bear the responsibility for the current feeling or experience. Subjects thus feel themselves to be acted upon by unfortunate external events that are perceived as outer information about the environment. Hence, rationally rearranging nodes between the two poles of *Inner Representation* and *Outer Information* into a rank-ordered continuum, the Internal-External Mismatch can be presented as Table 2. Note that the titles of some nodes have been modified slightly in an effort to improve accuracy.
### Table 2.

**Rank-Ordered Listing of Situations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INNER REPRESENTATION, EXPECTATION</th>
<th>Expected Meaningful Experience Leads to Disillusionment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Probable Depression, Loneliness, (Other Psychopathology)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Acute Exhaustive Meaninglessness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ideological Disillusionment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Accomplishment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Happiness and Pleasure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Platonic Happiness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Specifically Sex</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Moderate to Wild Enjoyment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Frustrated Self-actualization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Pointless Activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Personal Failure (or Effort Fails)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Interpersonal Tension</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Conflict in Views or Communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Betrayal of Trust by Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Rejection by Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Abuse by Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- My Mistake, Wronged Someone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• (Existing) Relationship Loss</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- with Significant Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- in Existing Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bereavement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Traumatic Experience (Personal)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Witnessing for Others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Close Brush with Disaster</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUTER INFORMATION, EVENTS</th>
<th>Misfortune Happens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Don't Believe in Meaninglessness</td>
<td>[outside the continuum]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Agency-Responsibility: Ranked "Prereflective Categories"

The bipolar continuum of situation categories seems to reflect something more than just participants' subjective emphases on either inner disillusionment or outer catastrophic events. This emphasis includes not simply a locus of causality, because even for an inner-focused narrative, for example like (unrecognized) "Accomplishment," the subjective cause of meaninglessness may be construed as "those people who didn't acknowledge my accomplishments."

At one pole the dichotomy seems to principally reflect subjects' perceptions of having taken responsibility for the "error" or the sense of violation that exists, having been the agent of, or ultimately having had some control over their experience. It is in these instances, in which the reporter seems to have focused on his or her own inner experience of disillusionment, that may be related to the perception, at some level of consciousness, of retaining control.

At the other pole subjects seem to have felt that they had been acted upon, that what went wrong with the world was a fault of the world, and control was attributed to external circumstances. In the cases of traumatic experience or bereavement, for example, the reporters feel themselves to be "victims" or objects of external agencies which have acted upon them to upset their worldviews to the extent that it has. The "violation" of logical order or meaning is external in origin, as is the subject's focus of attention.

It became clear from the narratives that this attribution of agency may be a specific case of a broader phenomenon of attributions that have long been prominent in social psychology and have also been suggested to be important in depression (Abramson, Alloy, & Metalsky, 1989; Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Buchanan & Seligman, 1995; Hewstone & Augoustinos, 1998; Miller & Moretti, 1988; Miller & Norman, 1979). The
progression from "I experienced disillusionment" to "some misfortune overtook me" is a generalization from the internal or personal to the external or universal. This conceptualization allows us to avoid using ambiguous terms like "inner causality" vs. "outer causality" and "control vs. helplessness." It is important to note that, so far, only the gross circumstances of the narrative events have been categorized.

Table 3 is a tabular representation of the "prereflective categories" that have been the topic of this discussion. The table represents gender-divided relative frequencies of respondents in each category, where percentages are based on the total number of identifiable Short Answer narratives. This gives an approximate indication of gender characteristics, but beyond the subjective assignments other possible biases exist and will be discussed later. Real prototypical excerpts are provided for each. "Unidentified Situations" and "Don't Believe in Meaninglessness" nodes are not included.
Table 3.

Table of "Prereflective Categories"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Probable Depression</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>&quot;I was not interested in anything but staying home in my room by myself. I was constantly crying and missing school. I just hated life* [suicide attempts]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acute Exhaustive Meaninglessness</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&quot;when I am overwhelmed and stressed out with life obligations... that it seems suddenly meaningless and unimportant*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Disillusionment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>&quot;Jury duty for a DUI incident... very disturbing, how a guilty man can be set free because of irresponsible people. I felt my part [as dissenter] was meaningless and unimportant*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplishment</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>&quot;I was asked to play in a league (basketball) and all the people I was playing with were good... [felt] useless. No real effort was needed to win&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness and Pleasure, Platonic Happiness</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&quot;my fiancé and I were going to plan our wedding together... my in-laws did everything and I felt like I wasn't part of my own wedding... I felt like I didn't exist and whatever information I had to offer, it was meaningless*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness and Pleasure, Specifically Sex</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>&quot;Having a one-night stand, a popular, handsome guy from my town... [felt] I can't believe I'm doing this; it can't get any worse than this. I expected a lot more out of the encounter. The entire event was very insignificant*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness and Pleasure, Moderate to Wild Enjoyment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>&quot;my first 2 years in college... too much fun, not enough priorities and studies... I had to start thinking seriously about my life, future, and career*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustrated Self-actualization</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>&quot;When I turned 22 years old... I was upset that I didn't feel like more of an adult than when I was 18. I'm doing the same thing now that I've been doing for 4 years, school and part-time job. I felt like I had hit a glass ceiling and there was nothing I could do to change it... I felt trapped and hopeless and helpless*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.

Table of “Prereflective Categories”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pointless Activities</td>
<td>6 10.5%</td>
<td>16 8.9%</td>
<td>“sitting in class one day listening to... the droning prof and... wondering what the point of everything was, why I was studying and reading and writing, thinking that this wasn't what living was about, this use of my time cramming and going from class to class”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Failure</td>
<td>4 7.0%</td>
<td>8 4.5%</td>
<td>“When my daughter was taken away by CPS in Hawaii...”; “I got fired from a job and the experience made life feel meaningless...”; “Enrolled in college and attend class full time for 6 years. No degree earned yet!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Conflict in Views or Communication</td>
<td>5 8.8%</td>
<td>24 13.4%</td>
<td>“I was having a conversation with my father when I went home for the past summer vacation... there was no sense in me talking to him. What I said was not going to impact his or my own future. I felt as if there was no point in talking to him at all, no point in trying to reach him”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Betrayal of Trust by Other</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
<td>7 3.9%</td>
<td>“I gave 2 years of my life to the dedication of this one person. I found out through his carelessness that he was cheating on me... I felt that everything we had meant nothing to him”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Rejection by Other</td>
<td>3 5.3%</td>
<td>9 5.0%</td>
<td>“In Hawaii for the 1st time, sophomore year of school, first experience of being minority, completely alone, no friends or loved ones around. nobody is courteous or reaches out”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Abuse by Other</td>
<td>1 1.8%</td>
<td>3 1.7%</td>
<td>“When I was 21 years of age, my partner was violent towards me. During this time, I felt life was meaningless and that love, life, reality was not all that I had dreamed of”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Mistake, Wronged Someone</td>
<td>2 3.5%</td>
<td>4 2.2%</td>
<td>“I started going out with this guy that a friend of mine had a crush on”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Table of “Prereflective Categories”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Loss with Significant</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>“My girlfriend and I ended our relationship, or rather, she ended the relationship without any say from me”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
<td>“All I could really do was follow my husband's lead... very depressed and saddened that my marriage had to be resolved”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Loss in Existing Family</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>“Parents divorce, Mom left. I had to take care of my younger brother”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>“holding a family together just for the sake of being together (saving [my parents and their marriage] and family that is doom to failure even in the beginning)”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bereavement</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>“My brother's death at age 43-it was sudden and unexpected”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>“At my fathers funeral”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“My mom passed from an aneurism”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traumatic Experience (Personal)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>“I was robbed at Pearl City... while working. Two... males came in to the store and robbed me. One male wore a bandana on his face and had a knife”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>“After my second knee surgery and I lost my job due to it”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traumatic Experience, Witnessing for</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>“A fire chaplain was killed after he took his helmet off to perform last rites, 9/11/01 Manhattan, NY”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traumatic Experience, Close Brush with</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>“when my dad thought he was having a heart attack, about 2 years ago. I was shopping when I got the call and everything in life seemed pretty meaningless. All that mattered was him and my family”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disaster</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Generic Structure of the Meaninglessness Experience

The experience of meaninglessness appears upon subjective analysis to consist of at least two distinctive core components and several recognizable dimensions. The two most salient core elements have been labeled dialectical juxtaposition and relational components, and these are described next.

Dialectical Juxtaposition: Inner Representation vs. Outer Experience

This is a defining feature of the meaninglessness experience. This concept describes an opposition or tension between two fundamentally incompatible ideas within the individual: the inner representation of how the world “ought to be” (one’s prior expectations) and outer experience which is in conflict with that. The cognitive term dissonance would be applicable here, but the tension extends far beyond cognitive operations alone.

Table 4 contains samples of material that are intended to illustrate the incompatibility of the participants’ presuppositions and the overt “facts” presented by the situational events. It frequently happened that participant presuppositions were not stated explicitly in participants’ narratives. This seemed to be because the presuppositions were either universal to all humankind (e.g., “things should make sense”; “good people should not be punished”) or at least culturally embedded (e.g., “every person has a right to freedom of expression,” or the like). In such instances the presupposition was inferred from the narrative and appears bracketed in the table.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Inner Representation</th>
<th>Outer Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Probable Depression</td>
<td>[I should be happy]</td>
<td>[no specific experience]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acute Exhaustive Meaninglessness</td>
<td>[my life is purposeful]</td>
<td>“I felt like I didn’t understand or know why I was there... I wasn’t sad, just felt no purpose”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Disillusionment</td>
<td>“trying to connect with all the emotions expressed through the paintings/ sculptures etc.”</td>
<td>“With my first step out of the store, I felt hopeless/empty when substance-less clamor of the shoppers replaced the calm of the paintings... things mean more than words, feelings, and self-expression”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplishment</td>
<td>“aim for the highest in what I do”</td>
<td>“I spent long hours and it was all a waste... I poured my heart for a great cause and I was rejected by the top of this island”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness and Pleasure, Platonic Happiness</td>
<td>[this should be a happy experience]</td>
<td>“...frustrated, upset, I had no control on my own wedding plans. I felt like I didn’t exist and whatever information I had to offer, it was meaningless”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness and Pleasure, Specifically Sex</td>
<td>[sex should be an emotionally euphoric pleasure]</td>
<td>“I took a girl home for a one night stand... in the morning she left and I've never seen her since... there really weren't too many feelings involved... [The aftereffects of this experience on my external behavior, actions, life are/were...] no real change hence the ‘meaninglessness.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness and Pleasure, Moderate to Wild Enjoyment</td>
<td>[pleasures provide genuine satisfaction] “partying after high school... going to clubs, drinking, etc; immediate self-gratification; live in the now”</td>
<td>“I soon learned or felt that my life was heading nowhere... I felt down, inadequate, ashamed; I didn’t know where to start to get my life back on track”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4.

Dialectical Juxtaposition of Inner Representation and Outer Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Inner Representation</th>
<th>Outer Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frustrated Self-actualization</td>
<td>[I have great motivation and potential for success; I should have clear goals]</td>
<td><em>I had been set on a biology degree, but I realized I did not enjoy it anymore. My entire college career was based on becoming a doctor and it all seemed useless... I did not know what to do with my life if I was not becoming a doctor. I felt like I didn't know who I was anymore</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pointless Activities</td>
<td>[my effortful activities are purposeful and benefit somebody]</td>
<td>*I felt like nothing. I felt stupid and pointless. This was the first time I didn't feel at least average... I am not learning anything so why am I here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Failure</td>
<td><em>I would never go down. I was always right and doing the right things</em> [I felt...] <em>good and I felt hopeful. I felt as though I could do anything and succeed</em></td>
<td><em>I then realized that there were things in life that I could not have control over... I felt worthless and I felt like a failure</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Conflict in Views or Communication</td>
<td>[we have a good relationship and similar values] <em>I thought I was a pretty decent person and certainly not someone who is shallow and wrapped up in trivial things. I expected that other people saw me as I did</em></td>
<td><em>The argument challenged my sense of self. The person I felt closest to was telling me that I was too self-absorbed in little things to notice or listen to him... the exact opposite of the person I thought I was</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Betrayal of Trust by Other</td>
<td><em>I felt... that he was the one... I gave 2 years of my life to the dedication of this one person</em></td>
<td><em>(he was cheating on me)...I felt that everything we had meant nothing to him... I really felt bad and like I was a failure. I lost what I cared the most about</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.

Dialectical Juxtaposition of Inner Representation and Outer Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Inner Representation</th>
<th>Outer Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Interpersonal Tension, Rejection by Other | [Before this situation, I think my expectations or beliefs about this aspect of life were...]  
  "Optimistic, I didn't think people could treat others like this, so I never expected it to happen to me" | "Other people, whom I thought were my friends, turned out not to be. In fact, I felt, and was being used by those people, for car rides and other activities... I felt worthless, and pity for myself because I believed they really liked me, and truthfully they did not... I felt my whole existence up to that point was to amuse and be used by others" |
| Interpersonal Tension, Abuse by Other | [Before this situation, I think my expectations or beliefs about this aspect of life were...]  
  "Bright. I had a lot of plans to do many things that would be significant, and that would help many people" | "Feelings of fear for my children's future and what they are learning from the abusive environment... but also a feeling of numbness or 'not being in the moment'... I felt that I was going to disappear without making any difference for someone else" |
| Interpersonal Tension, My Mistake, Wronged Someone | "I didn't think I was disloyal and I think that I thought I was more respectful and sensitive" | "I started going out with this guy that a friend of mine had a crush on" |
| Relationship Loss with Significant Other | [Before this situation, I think my expectations or beliefs about this aspect of life were...]  
  "not going to happen to me. I thought my future was certain" | "My boyfriend of three years broke up with me while we were at the end of our sophomore year in college... I felt my life was meaningless because I thought of myself as "his girlfriend" and my future was supposed to include him" |
| Relationship Loss in Existing Family | [Before this situation, I think my expectations or beliefs about this aspect of life were...]  
  "Certain, sure of what things were with a stability and backing" | "Parents divorce, Mom left. I had to take care of my younger brother... wasn't sure of anything. Felt that even though my parents were once in love, that nothing is certain, therefore what's the meaning of anything" |
| Bereavement | "Work your butt off and achieve lots of material things and to prove your success" [life lasts a long time] | "My brother's death at age 43—it was sudden and unexpected" |
Table 4.

Dialectical Juxtaposition of Inner Representation and Outer Experience

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<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Inner Representation</th>
<th>Outer Experience</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traumatic Experience (Personal)</td>
<td>[Before this situation, I think my expectations or beliefs about this aspect of life were...]“non-existent. I never thought someone as young as me could or would get this ill”</td>
<td>“In December of 1998 I was diagnosed with Guillain-Barre syndrome. I was completely paralyzed, intubated, and in ICU for about 2 months”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Traumatic Experience, Witnessing for Others</td>
<td>“I have never really pondered on the impact of the terrorism. But overall, perhaps what I thought and believed was based on faulty foundations. I truly believed that my expectations were righteous, true, and correct— I found out otherwise”</td>
<td>“This event just happened, September 11, 2001— the plane crash in the NY World Trade Center... [My feelings in this situation were...] a sense of void. I questioned my existence, my beliefs, my life, what I had done so far, I realized how little I really had lived life, how little I knew about life, the world. I questioned the future... It made me question my belief system, I have to reassess my way of living, my relationship with myself and other people”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Traumatic Experience, Close Brush with Disaster</td>
<td>“Before this situation I took what I had for granted, I didn’t appreciate the relationship that my mother and I have, as much as I should have”</td>
<td>“Two years ago I almost lost my mother to a severe heart attack. She was very healthy and doing well. I didn’t understand how one day my mother could be so healthy and the next she could be so sick in the hospital... why my mother?”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Relational Components

The relational aspect of meaninglessness is another core feature and involves those components which provide structure to a person's inner representation of the "world." These elements are related to in such a way that when the relationships are violated, the experience of meaninglessness ensues. Hence these things provide "grounding" or support to one's inwardly represented world. But it is a person's relationship to them (also internal) which gives structure to that world. Besides supporting the person's world, these lines of relationship therefore represent the vulnerability of that worldview. Although the purport of this study is not to build bridges between the constructs of meaninglessness and meaning, it is tempting to assume these categories of relating "support meaning" in life (see the "Discussion/Implications" chapter). It appears that these could also be thought of as "components of failure," this awkward term serving to emphasize that these are the internal relationships that fail in the meaninglessness experience. It bears repeating that they are not values and not objects.

These relational components were rationally derived by utilizing "memos" (the experimenter's notes and observations created in the N5 software [N5, 2000]) which accrued during the compilation of the Situation classification. Memos for each node of the "tree" were reviewed with a focus on the principal relational entities in each node. For some nodes the relational component of obvious importance was other people; for others, it was their self-concept, for still others, it was some external reward, and so on. It is interesting how few salient components emerged for all the different nodes. The relational domains revealed by this process included: (1) Other people /relationships; (2) Self-concept; (3) External reward or threat; and (4) Cosmos/Life.

Given the finite size of the dataset in this study, this domain presently appears categorical, but it is tentatively suggested that the relational components probably
collectively represent a continuum. That is, each reported experience appears to involve some of these aspects and not reflect some others, but it is likely that every experience could be seen to involve them all to varying degrees, and this would become clearer if enough in-depth data were obtained. Even in the limited sample of this study, most Short Answer episodes will be found to include most relational components; as such there is a great deal of overlap. This could be represented pictorially as a Venn diagram of intersecting conceptual spheres. Any meaninglessness situation could thus be positioned as a point which reflects the simultaneous and correct amount of influence of all relational components.

Table 5 reflects preponderances of gender for each relational category as subjectively evaluated by the experimenter. Since this was the next data breakdown done after the N5 (N5, 2000) Situations tree, the table is presented in terms of that arrangement. The categories and genders indicated reflect the entirety of the data and not simply the example cited, which most often provides only a partial view.
Table 5.

**Relational Components**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>External Reward or Threat</th>
<th>Self Concept</th>
<th>Other People</th>
<th>Life or Cosmos</th>
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<tr>
<td>Probable Depression</td>
<td>&quot;I honestly can't remember any details or reasons why I would get that way, all I know is that little things would trigger episodes of meaninglessness for me. I couldn't do anything except sleep and cry... I felt extremely desolate, alone, and worthless. Nothing mattered. I just did not want to live any more... I was afraid of life and change.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acute Exhaustive Meaninglessness</td>
<td>&quot;I woke up one morning after 5 finals and 3 papers and clients and housework were done and I felt like I didn't understand or know why I was there for 2 or 3 days.... I wasn't sad, just felt no purpose... I felt kind of blank. I knew people needed me but I didn't feel purposeful the way I usually do. I didn't feel like there were a hundred things I'd like to do that day... I felt like a cup that had been emptied. I wondered about the real meaning of life beyond my everyday life, my little world.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ideological Disillusionment</td>
<td>&quot;Went to church with a friend. Preacher was fire and brimstone, talking about how great Jesus is in our lives. Preacher praised an A student saying how hard it is to make A's. [My feelings in this situation were...] Disgust. I walked out to get some air. Felt oppressed by praise of Jesus who was simply a carpenter who did good deeds.&quot;</td>
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<td>Accomplishment</td>
<td>&quot;First day in college when I found out that no one really cared about what you did in High School. This continued throughout my freshman year. [My feelings in this situation were...] Deflated because no one cared about all the hard work I did in high school. It was like going to High School and doing well was meaningless... [Before this situation... my expectations or beliefs... were...] Optimistic that all my previous accomplishments would be with me throughout my life. I thought everything you did in life would always benefit me.&quot;</td>
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Relational Components

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<tr>
<td>Happiness and Pleasure, Platonic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Happiness</td>
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<td>Happiness and Pleasure,</td>
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<td>Specifically Sex</td>
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<td>Happiness and Pleasure,</td>
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<td>Moderate to Wild Enjoyment</td>
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*The planning of my wedding... everyone telling me what to do, how to plan for it, what my color scheme should be, who to invite, where my reception should be, flowers, dresses, etc... my in-laws did everything and I felt like I wasn't part of my own wedding. I was worthless. [My feelings in this situation were... ] frustrated, upset, I had no control on my own wedding plans. I felt like I didn't exist and whatever information I had to offer, it was meaningless.*

*maybe a couple of guys I have slept with.... When I was 16 before I came out and I don't know his name but I brought him back to my parents' house and messed around with him... I felt ashamed and dirty. I felt I had made the wrong choice. I burnt the clothes I was wearing when I met him... It was more a bad decision that I did not have the experience or self-esteem to stop it before or while it happened. I always knew I was gay... but there is a possibility that my feelings of guilt were heightened by being closeted and 16.... It is like eating a high caloric high fat dessert and it tasting gross. You wish you didn't waste your caloric intake on it*
Table 5.
Relational Components

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frustrated Self-actualization</td>
<td>&quot;10th grade transition to high school.... The school counselor pretty much told me my English academic level was not good enough. The result, she denied me a chance to even try what I thought I would be good at or interest in math... she put me in a home-ed class instead. [My feelings in this situation were...] I'm not good enough, not even given a chance to try. My English and love math suffers, I began a sense of I don't care about education afterward. I felt the teacher did not care....&quot;</td>
<td>m,f</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pointless Activities</td>
<td>&quot;last semester I had a final exam, which was a take home exam that took 2 whole days to complete. However, in the end the professor did not even look at the exam, but instead graded us on another exercise. I was upset and I felt that I wasted my time. Time that I could have spent with my daughters&quot;</td>
<td>m,f</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Failure</td>
<td>&quot;In one year I was laid off after 13 years employment with same company; 2nd marriage of 5 years broke up; and my close grandmother died. I tried to stay positive, dealt with the grief, but after many, many, many job interviews and rejections the compounded feeling of meaninglessness crept in... at my age life was supposed to be going in a certain direction, not one of confusion with no job, unsuccessful relationships, no children, etc., a lot of nones&quot;</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>m</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Conflict in Views or Communication</td>
<td>&quot;I was in high school and had a big fight with my father who was often drunk. I ran away from home, but my mother found me and wanted me to come home. I was upset and had a fight with her. I told her I did not care about life and I did not ask to be born into my family&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Situation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Betrayal of Trust by Other</td>
<td>&quot;I was upset with my boyfriend for cheating on me for the third time so I decided to go out with a guy to the park and my intent was to have sex but I chicken out and started crying that I wanted to go home... the guy didn't mean anything to me but I really want to do something bad so that I myself could feel like I got him back even though he never found out&quot;</td>
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<td>Interpersonal Tension, Rejection by Other</td>
<td>&quot;When I first moved to Hawaii and some called (relative) me &quot;haole&quot; boy from the mainland. I felt a little low and betrayed by my own family... hurt and a little upset&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Abuse by Other</td>
<td>&quot;A stranger pointed out a deformity in my physical appearance. Made fun of how I looked!&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, My Mistake, Wronged Someone</td>
<td>&quot;I dated my best friend's ex-girlfriend and lost my best friend&quot;</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Loss</td>
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<tr>
<td>with Significant Other</td>
<td>&quot;the break up of a long-term romantic relationship several years ago. [My feelings in this situation were...] despair, confused... I felt that I was no longer in control of where my life was going. I just went through my day like a robot not showing feelings. My identity was so thoroughly connected to the relationship that, when it ended, I lost my identity/purpose&quot;</td>
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<td>m,f</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship Loss</td>
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<tr>
<td>in Existing Family</td>
<td>&quot;Parents were at a point in their marriage where they were constantly arguing, yelling and such. I felt hopeless and would cry. [My feelings in this situation were...] helplessness, despair, loneliness. [Before this situation... my expectations or beliefs... were...] didn't ever think about killing myself before to solve a problem&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bereavement</td>
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<td>&quot;Death of my grandfather (who raised me from 3 years old).... He died within a week of being diagnosed with colon cancer... [My feelings in this situation were...] ‘How? He was so strong a few days ago, before the biopsy (test).’ ‘Why God? Did you take away possibly the most important (role model) in my life?’ ‘Why didn't I spend more time with him after he told me what may occur?’&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Traumatic Experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Personal)</td>
<td>&quot;I found out that I needed surgery to remove a cyst from my spinal cord. This changed my life because I was unable to do athletic activities, a very central aspect of my life at the time. [My feelings in this situation were...] sad, depressed, lost; I didn't know what to do. I lot of how I identified myself was taken away&quot;</td>
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### Table 5.

**Relational Components**

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<td>Traumatic Experience, Witnessing for Others</td>
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<td>&quot;Sept. 11, 2001, I experienced that the loss of many innocent people meant nothing to the terrorists broke my heart. All of these innocent lives meant nothing to the terrorists and it made me angry, hurt, confused, and helpless... [My feelings in this situation were...] Angry, sad, hurt, confused, I wanted answers... I was shocked, I cried about it by myself&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Traumatic Experience, Close Brush with Disaster</td>
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<td>&quot;when my dad thought he was having a heart attack, about 2 years ago. I was shopping when I got the call and everything in life seemed pretty meaningless. All that mattered was him and my family. Everything seemed small in comparison to my dad&quot;</td>
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Besides the core elements of dialectical juxtaposition of inner representation vs. outer experience and relational components, other dimensions of meaninglessness were also identifiable from the narrative material. These also form part of the generic structure of experienced meaninglessness. They are the cognitive, affective, behavioral, and existential dimensions, each tentatively envisioned as a continuum on which every meaninglessness experience is represented as a point. Following is an examination of each of these dimensions.

**Cognitive Dimension.**

By the term "cognitive dimension" a distinction is being made between the fundamental dialectical juxtaposition referred to above and cognitive phenomena that accompany that clash. The cognitive dimension of the meaninglessness experience appears to have at least three distinctly recognizable aspects: disintegration of the existing inner representation, a sense of disorientation, and a simultaneous tendency to generalize from the immediate experience to expanded space and time.

It is not possible to tabulate quantitative aspects of disintegration and disorientation. Unlike emotions, which can be labeled by specific familiar words, the former concepts are much more abstract and ambiguous, and more importantly, they had to be subjectively inferred from the general sense of the participants narrative experience. Therefore, listing and comparison of actual counts of "identifiable" instances was not feasible. The following cognitive aspects of meaninglessness are accompanied by narrative material excerpted mostly from interviews.

**Disintegration.** In the dialectical model of meaninglessness that emerged, the cognitive aspect of the experience appears to be central. The main feature of the meaninglessness experience appears as a drastic disintegration or shattering of the
individual's internal representation of "the world." Most visible as a set of expectations, their disjunction with external information or events was described previously as a "juxtaposition." The breakdown seems to occur when the dynamic balance between internal and external has been strained beyond a person's mental ability to reconcile it.

If this is model is accurate, then meaninglessness is an essentially cognitive event resulting from a mismatch or disjuncture of old and new schemata. Interview data tend to support this. There are several aspects of the worldview that may suffer the resulting fracture. One way to look at this is by way of the letdown that seems to immediately follow the experience.

When I see it, mostly the outer appearance is a lot of depression, because they have no control or, they think they're, they're going in the right path but you know, they take the path traveled by most of the people and it doesn't work out the way that they need-or wanted it to. And so in that sense I think that it's a disappointment and, and it tends to bring down like, for women especially is self-esteem. Yeah, it brings the self-esteem way down. And so even more so they feel in a sense that there's no meaning you know?

*Interviewer: Okay, so what is bringing the self-esteem way down?*

Just the disappointment of things not working out how they're supposed to be. Or how they envisioned them to be... you know, relationships, possibly, failure at school. Just disappointments that would probably be disappointing to almost anybody.

*Interviewer: Expectations?*

Right.

*Interviewer: Plans, hopes, dreams?*

Definitely. I think especially, or, speaking for myself, um, this whole divorce that I'm going through now. I had a hard time because it was a lot of my dreams and my hopes for the future. These are thing that, you know, I had, not implanted in my mind, but, just because this society. Visions of how my life is supposed to be, that I felt like, my god, this is a
disappointment. I mean it's a big downhill from, okay, you got married, you had a child, and now all of a sudden it's all falling apart. That's not exactly the, the route that I was envisioning for myself... I think it's, you know, when you put all your energy into one thing and you're, how they say, putting all your eggs in one basket.

(Female, Age 23, Caucasian-Chinese-Hawaiian-Japanese)

Here is an example of disintegration which pertains directly to social roles, as related by a 26 year-old Caucasian female:

I have a lot of peers who are women and a lot who are sort of my age group which would be like 20s to 35s, trying to figure out working and family and things like that, and identity, and how that works. And there's a tremendous amount—especially I deal a lot with—first time moms. Mothers. And they lose a lot, they have a lot of meaninglessness, talk about it a lot. And their loss of self to roles, gender roles, so forth.

Interviewer: Loss of self?
Yeah. Yeah, like a meaninglessness at the core of who, who am I, now? You know, this sort of.... It seems like it might happen at major changes or stages, changes in life that people come across and a reevaluation of all. It's hard to talk about this. It is very abstract. Um, ages and stages of, major times of change, which I think that, an idea right now, at the moment, with the change of becoming a parent from being, not being a parent. And at that change, or other changes, and becoming an adult like when you first get into the college, seeing now that you're your own person and tremendous amount of, what shows up as maybe depression, or lack organized goals or maybe unconstructive behavior. Sometimes. Um, changing your major a lot, or you know, getting into a bad relationship. Things like that maybe are consequences of this sort of general feeling of um, identity crisis or meaninglessness that we've been talking about.
Disorientation. Disorientation describes the sense of bewilderment and confusion that people seem to experience in situations that they refer to as having been very meaningless, and is fairly obvious in written and spoken accounts. Although plainly not present to psychotic degrees, disorientation is recognizable to (1) place (e.g., the external world as supplying positive/negative reinforcers, or in social relations), (2) time (future expectations), and (3) person (self-concept or role, implicated by many people). In all appearance, it seems that at the time of one's experience of meaninglessness, the *inner* world seemed to be falling apart, corresponding to the failure of major relational aspects of one's inner representation. These cognitive characteristics can be observed in most of the short-answer selections cited above. Note for example how a 43-year old Caucasian female participant who, losing over a short period of time a job, husband, and grandmother, experienced the failure not only of important personal relationships, but also her former concept of self, leaving her reeling in confusion and disorientation:

[My feelings in this situation were...] those of sadness, helplessness, lack of direction—no clicking, self-doubt, anger, frustration, jealousy—at my age life was supposed to be going in a certain direction—not one of confusion with no job, unsuccessful relationships, no children, etc.—a lot of nones.

For some individuals the disorientation can be more perceptual than metaphorical. Consider the following two female narrators:

Well, like when my friend died, it was, I guess it was, I mean there are the standard five phases you go through when you're grieving, I suppose it was just a lot of despair, a lot of grief, and then anger, and I didn't think I could ever go through the denial phase, because you know, I think about death all the time, so to me that wasn't a big deal, but I found myself feeling really *numb*, which in a sense to me was like a certain kind of denial, like, I don't know, but I felt very disembodied; well, especially after September 11th [terrorist attacks
on the U.S.], I mean, weeks, I walked around and I felt literally like my head and my body were detached, and like where people describe their out-of-body experiences, like my, I could see myself out here [gestures to the side] and I was really just kind of emotionless, and um, crying all the time, I mean just, at the drop of a hat, all the time. (Age 36, Asian-American)

How's it feel to have meaninglessness in your life? I think, you know, like sometimes an analogy is the best thing to do with something as abstract as this but with sort of like walking in a fog sort of, I mean, slightly aimless.... Um, can be very lonely and not necessarily that you're without other people but maybe perhaps you feel, you feel alone, you feel isolated.

Interviewer: Lonely? And the first....

Isolated.

Interviewer: Isolated. The first thing you said sounded like, confusion.

Disorganized. Disorganizational thought, um, skipping around from thought to thought, and um, maybe... like disorganization. Sort of a slowed down feeling.

Interviewer: Mentally you mean?

Well, just every—you know sort of, like you know when you're walking in a fog, it sort of feels like, um, but you sort of feel like you're, everything looks a little bit different. You're vantage point is, your sensory perception is, feels warped from how you usually go through your life. Something like that... like either colors are more dim or more vivid or, or different to you. (Age 26, Cauca

**Attributions.** (1) **Causal Attributions.** Causal attributions in meaninglessness experiences have been referred to previously. They may be related to the varying appearance of "responsibility" in the original experience reports, that is, the subjective perception of being either the agent or object of the events. It is important to note that both extremes of attributed agency are observed in meaninglessness situations, as well as many degrees in between. Experienced meaninglessness, in other words, is not tantamount to a lack of attributed agency.
(2) Generalization Attributions. Another quite visible attribution in meaninglessness experiences is the apparent tendency for individuals to generalize from one's internal representation of the current moment across space (everywhere and everyone else) and time (now and forever into the future). This is reminiscent of some of the cognitive processes in depression that have come to light by way of attribution theory (e.g., Abramson et al., 1978; Abramson et al., 1989; Alloy, 1988; Buchanan & Seligman, 1995; Miller & Moretti, 1988; Miller & Norman, 1979).

Before the "triggering" event of a meaninglessness situation, one's internal representation of the world is generalized and appears as the expectation that the status quo will continue indefinitely into the future. When the internal representation shatters, that disintegration is generalized from a specific to a global disaster, which in turn is generalized from personal to universal (for all futurity and everywhere).

Although this was not quantified, the extent to which individuals vary in their tendency to generalize tentatively appears across the sample as continua of specific-global and personal-universal involvement. This also seems to depend on the nature of the triggering event. Thus meaninglessness seems to be experienced, depending on the individual, in a way that can range from simple personal relevance to cosmic generality. This can best be understood through illustration. The loss of an important relationship, for example, for some people seemed to have earth-shaking dimensions. They weren't just sad; the loss was an affront to life: it wasn't "supposed" to be this way. However, at this point in the research it cannot be concluded that personally circumscribed experiences are less adequate representatives of meaninglessness than those felt to be cosmic generalities.

Interviewer: You mention that in connection with your friend, you said your friend felt an absence of a future, and you said you also felt that way yourself. What do you mean by
that? This was before you said your reasons for you living disappeared at that time. Before that you said an absence of future.

Well, when I say future, I'm talking about something in the present forward, and I think usually the people when they think of their life ahead of you, they're thinking of your goals, motivations, they're kind of, they're like the forces that keep moving forward. And through depression those forces begin to disappear. And these other forces seem to appear. Like the ability to think positively. At first you try to, you know say, ok I'm thinking negatively, I should think more positively. But when things go really bad and it gets worse, it's almost like you lose that capacity to think like that... when you're in the state of meaninglessness you don't see reasons to live... I would say that's a certain level of consciousness because I could not see it back then, but in the big picture, years down the road, I do see.

*Interviewer:* When you say level of consciousness you mean, are you referring to the state of mind you were in when you were depressed?

Uh hmm. That's part of the inability to see a future, to look beyond.

(Female, Age 39, Japanese)

Serious personal loss in particular tended to be highly generalized. In the following excerpts, relevant sections are italicized.

I knew that what was to be talked about would hurt and that the only way to begin to get out of that situation would be to talk about it even if it was extremely meaningless.... Half of me was feeling extremely sad and depressed because I knew what was going to happen and how my life was going to change without that person in it. The other half of me was anxious to just get it over with so I could stop stressing and actually feel free of the weight of the relationship. My heart was already so beat up that it almost didn't matter any more.... I began to feel like there is no such thing as a perfect relationship or person and that maybe there is no such thing as true love. When you believe you have found something special and for it to tell you that you don't matter to them anymore makes you think differently about
everything. My views have changed in the way that I let people inside of my heart now, I am more reluctant to fall for someone or the idea of love now. (Female, Age 19, Caucasian)

A loved one (boyfriend) was diagnosed with a disease... he made the decision that it was best he let me go. He felt that I needed to be with someone who I can grow old with and who is healthy... his disease is incurable.... I lost grip of the purpose of my life since everything was happening in a negative way. I felt that life was cruel to me. I felt that life has no value if hardships is all I will be experiencing. The word happiness is just a dream to me.

(Female, Age 23, Filipino)

**Word Association.** A different, more objective, aspect of the cognitive dimension of meaninglessness is revealed in word association data. Table 6 (condensed version; the full version is Appendix C) classifies words associated with “meaninglessness” by empirical category. No attempt was made to distinguish the ages of subjects due to the large number of categories.
Table 6.

Word Association Data for *Meaninglessness*
(Condensed Version)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tr>
<td>n%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cosmos, Life, Reality</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death, Non-being</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions, including &quot;Hopeless&quot;</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack, Loss</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Adjectives</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helplessness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions, Events</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material Things</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Confusion, Boredom</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>13.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
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<td>19.1</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personality, Social Attitudes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose, Importance, Goals</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semantics, Grammar, Language</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stupidity</td>
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<td>10.3</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>Value</td>
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<td>33.8</td>
<td>70</td>
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<tr>
<td>Void</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>61.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Numbers reflect the word entries, not the number of subjects; Percentages are based on numbers of male [N=68] and female [N=204] subjects.
Participants with English as a first language provided 3.8 association words on average. The entire range of signification of "meaninglessness" appears to be covered, from material things and semantic meaning, through abstract cosmic and existential terms. Word association data fell into 16 rationally derived categories, which include "General Adjectives" and "Miscellaneous" categories. Table 6 gives a complete breakdown for male and female participants.

Using percentages based on the number of male and female participants, "Void" was the highest category for females, at 62%, while "Purpose, Importance, Goals" was the highest male category at 46% (compare 29% for females). "Void" was second highest for males (43%), and "Value" was second for females, though the percentage for this was the same for both sexes, 34%. "Emotion" words also gave the same percentage, 31%, for both sexes. Though samples are small, the category "Institutions, Events" tentatively appears to show a heavy male dominance.

Affective Dimension

As it has been presented so far, this model has emphasized the shattering of the worldview as being primarily a cognitive phenomenon. Tentatively, it appears that emotional involvement arises, at least in part, as a reaction to this crumbling of one's sense of reality. Of course, there is also the possibility that an emotional event of sufficient magnitude might also precipitate the experience of the disintegration of the worldview. It is very difficult and not really possible to tease apart "causal" or chronological relationships between the cognitive and affective dimensions, because there is no real evidence one way or the other. It is possible, however, to differentiate between them, as has been done
here. It should be emphasized that most participants would describe their meaningful experiences *first* in terms of emotions. This does not reflect any chronological significance; rather, the affective aspect embodies the *felt impact* of the meaninglessness experience.

It is difficult to quantify even approximately the proportions of various possible identifiable emotions that appeared in the collection of narratives that were gathered, for reasons that are elaborated in the Discussion section. Nevertheless, it is possible to form a rough outline of common emotions appearing in the Short Answer narratives, according to gender. Table 7 presents the major emotions identifiable at the time of the reported meaninglessness experiences. An attempt was made to exclude secondary emotional results, that is, emotional reactions to the event which arose later. For example, cases of meaningless arguments over trivial matters were identified as most often attended by anger, and *not* the shame that frequently followed a little later. Another important case is the "Bereavement" category, in which many participants revealed underlying feelings of outrage, injustice, or rebellion against life or God. This anger was *not* labeled as a major emotion in these situations. Similarly, anger was rated in the trauma categories only when specifically made a point of in the narrative, although the feeling of "injustice" could be seen in most responses. "Fear" is a label that includes anxiety, however non-specific it may have been. "Numb" is not generally recognized as an emotional reaction, but is included because some participants specifically named this response to their experience, or a synonym.

Affects were subjectively abstracted by the experimenter from Short Answer #2 (My feelings in this situation were...) and from other parts of the responses that relevantly expressed emotions. Conclusions based on quantitative estimates are dubious at best, since they are largely inferred; some subjects wrote at length, so the likelihood of using a
recognizable keyword was higher; others were quite laconic in describing basically the same situation, so interpretation was more inferential.
Table 7.

Affective Dimension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sadness</th>
<th>Fear</th>
<th>Anger</th>
<th>Disgust</th>
<th>Shame</th>
<th>Numb</th>
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<tr>
<td>Probable Depression</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acute Exhaustive Meaninglessness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Ideological Disillusionment</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Happiness and Pleasure, Platonic Happiness</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Happiness and Pleasure, Specifically Sex</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Happiness and Pleasure, Moderate to Wild Enjoyment</td>
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<td>7</td>
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</table>
Table 7.

Affective Dimension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Sadness</th>
<th>Fear</th>
<th>Anger</th>
<th>Disgust</th>
<th>Shame</th>
<th>Numb</th>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Rejection by Other</td>
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<td>F 9</td>
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<td>Interpersonal Tension, Abuse by Other</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, My Mistake, Wronged</td>
<td>M 1</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Someone</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship Loss, with Significant Other</td>
<td>M 9</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F 24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship Loss, in Existing Family</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F 6</td>
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<td></td>
<td>F 4</td>
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<td>Traumatic Experience, (Personal)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F 5</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F 6</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Traumatic Experience, Close Brush with Disaster</td>
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<td></td>
<td>F 2</td>
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<td>Unidentified Situations</td>
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<tr>
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<td>F 6</td>
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<td>2</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
More information on emotions is reflected in the word association table (Table 6), in the "Emotions, including 'Hopeless' " category. Emotional content can be inferred from other categories such as "Lack, Loss" and "Helplessness." Contributing to the difficulty in classification was the fact that many words like "loneliness" are affect-laden regardless of category.

Sadness is on the whole the most predominant emotion in Table 7, and is most noticeable in the categories of "Probable Depression," "Relationship Loss...," and "Bereavement." Categories that involved aversive situations, either threatening (e.g., some "Interpersonal Tension..." scenarios) or frustrating (e.g., "Pointless Activities"), tended to reveal more anger and sometimes disgust. Fear was also a part of threatening traumatic experiences. Circumstances involving injury to the self-concept (e.g., "Interpersonal Tension, My Mistake..." or "Personal Failure") showed the presence of shame. Traumatic experience data may be skewed in the direction of anger responses due to the proximity of the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001, which were cited by a number of participants. The most reliable features of Table 7 are tentatively believed to be the qualitative gender proportions and the differences in emotional balance between the various situation categories.

Behavioral Responses

It is important to recognize that behavioral "aspects" of experiences of meaninglessness really concern responses to internal events. The entire group of replies to the Short Answer questions, without regard to situational category, underwent the same subjective breakdown procedure as in other parts of the analysis. Each reply was assigned a short phrase capturing the essence of the behavioral response to the
meaninglessness experience. In a second review, the behavioral responses were empirically grouped according to no pre-existing plan.

The final Short Answer question about the meaninglessness experiences recounted in the survey was, “The aftereffects of this experience on my external behavior, actions, life are/ were...” It was not always possible to identify a behavioral response from either this question or previous parts. This was because the deliberately open format of the guiding questions purposely avoided compartmentalization into thought-feeling-action format in order to get at the most salient and personal features of each participant’s reaction to his or her experience. For some participants this was evidently understood in an existential rather than behavioral way. A number of responders departed from the requested format and this question was apparently not really focused on at all. Other difficulties were differentiating an immediate behavioral response from longer-term behavioral sequelae (which could even be opposite), and differentiating these from changes in attitude. Although specific effort was made not to focus on attitudes, participants frequently appeared to confuse these. In fact, although attitudes are not behaviors, changes in attitudes often suggest that altered behaviors accompany them.

During the categorization it was noted that participants tended to report behavior in two rough groups. The difference between them may be mostly semantic but aids in organizing understanding. The first group describes behavior generally in terms of an “object,” that is, other people or overt experiences. This group of descriptions includes behaviors that were essentially either approach or avoidance. More than one, but generally not more than two such “objects” may have been reported, and in such cases both appear in Table 8 according to situational category. Table 8 does not try to
distinguish between approach and avoidance behaviors; that breakdown is too complex for this study and would require a larger sample. The second group's descriptions are more "subjective" in terms of changed motivation, behavior towards oneself, personal styles of interacting, or "depression" symptoms.
Table 8.

Behavioral Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Other People</th>
<th>Overt Motivation</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Personal Depression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Probable Depression</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acute Exhaustive Meaninglessness</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Disillusionment</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplishment</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness and Pleasure, Platonic Happiness</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness and Pleasure, Specifically Sex</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness and Pleasure, Moderate to Wild Enjoyment</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frustrated Self-actualization</td>
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<td>Pointless Activities</td>
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<td>Personal Failure</td>
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<td>Interpersonal Tension, Conflict in Views or Communication</td>
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<td>Situation</td>
<td>Other People</td>
<td>Overt Experiences</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Self Styles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Rejection by Other</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F 5</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Abuse by Other</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F 2</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, My Mistake, Wronged Someone</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship Loss with Significant Other</td>
<td>M 2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>F 13</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship Loss in Existing Family</td>
<td>M 4</td>
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<td></td>
<td>F 3</td>
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<td></td>
<td>F 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Traumatic Experience, Witnessing for Others</td>
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<td>F 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Traumatic Experience, Close Brush with Disaster</td>
<td>M 1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>F 2</td>
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<td>Unidentified Situations</td>
<td>M 1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>F 11</td>
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</table>
Other People. Behavioral responses to meaninglessness involving other people included people in general, loved ones, new romantic relationships, peer or other groups, authority figures, or specific individuals. Subdividing these was not feasible in this study. Typical changes in approach behaviors were becoming nicer, kinder, or more open with others; expressing affection, reaching out to, seeking help or support from, or spending more time with others; being more protective or patient with others, or following their example, and having more harmonious or generally improved relationships. Avoidance behaviors included withdrawal from or avoidance of others; being more isolated, reserved, cautious; or being less kind, trusting, or sympathetic with others; expressing more anger or hostility towards others, or becoming more rebellious or resentful. Occasionally there were reported what appeared to be trauma symptoms of fear avoidance or hypervigilance of specific others.

Overt Experiences. Behaviors in this category were often described in terms of new experiences, but also included customary routines. Positive behaviors included becoming more open, less risk-taking, more free and uninhibited, or simply "resuming" previously avoided activities. Negative responses included avoidance and withdrawal from experiences (often in the context of apparent depression), becoming more cautious and less inquisitive about experience, or avoidance of specific situations.

Motivation. Motivation was frequently cited in a positive way as a reaction to some negative experience of meaninglessness. This category of behaviors usually involved specific ambitions, efforts, or goals. Typical statements mentioned working harder, becoming more goal-oriented (or more balanced), making efforts to improve a situation, or trying other inventive coping paths. There were also a significant number of reports of losing motivation, usually in conjunction with apparent depression.
Self. A rather large number of participants described important changes in the ways in which they were accustomed to treating themselves (behaviorally). Positive changes included being kinder, nicer, or giving more time and attention to oneself or to one's inner happiness, controlling negative emotions or being more positively self-disciplined or patient, and becoming more principled or self-reliant. Some "depression" symptoms were included here, such as weight gain or loss (implying changed eating habits), hypersomnia, or suicidality.

Personal Styles. This category is intended to group a number of broad behavior patterns whose objects were often ambiguous but were frequently interpersonal, and which appeared to be based on some change in personal values. Positive behaviors included becoming more obedient, controlled, or sexually restrained; or less uncontrolled, wild, or arrogant. Negative changes included increased general rebelliousness or more unrestraint in socially dubious ways.

"Depression." This is a somewhat problematic category because few individuals described enough of a behavioral response profile to warrant inclusion with any kind of certainty. Various symptoms of what was suspected to be depression were included in other categories. However, the syndrome did seem to appear fairly often in many situations, and over the whole sample most major symptoms were covered, so it was felt that it should be included in this table. Some individuals had received this diagnosis from health care personnel.

Of the 127 identifiable behavioral entries in Table 8 (corresponding to fewer participants, because of double entries), by far the majority (74) involved some sort of social approach or avoidance. Behavioral effects on motivation was next most prevalent (24), followed by alterations in personal styles (16) and overt experience behaviors (13).
Existential Insights

In one sense existential "awakenings" comprise an experiential dimension that was simultaneous in time with the accompanying meaninglessness experiences, and in another sense can be viewed as a set of potentially life-altering responses. At the cognitive level these changes were more than construals or attributions because they created a sudden, more or less permanent, alteration or expansion of the worldview.

For this dimension all the Short Answer responses that were judged to describe some existential insight were assigned brief descriptive phrases by the experimenter; one particular phrase was selected that was believed to capture the principal immediate existential awakening. This was done without regard for situational category, and thus involved a "fresh start" with the data. An attempt was made to specifically avoid long-term changes in non-philosophical attitudes or later coping responses that seemed to follow upon the existential realization. Nevertheless, the profound eye-opening nature of the existential insight was assumed to have a lasting effect and to become a more or less permanent part of the individual's worldview. As with some other dimensions, it is interesting that a relatively few categories were distilled by this qualitative analytic process, but a certain degree of overlap inevitably exists among them. Table 9 lists principal existential awakenings according to situational category, as in previous tables. The explanations which follow elaborate the category titles somewhat to assist in understanding.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Death</th>
<th>Uncertainty</th>
<th>Choice &amp; Self</th>
<th>Spiritual</th>
<th>Unspecified</th>
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<td>Probable Depression</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acute Exhaustive Meaninglessness</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ideological Disillusionment</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Accomplishment</td>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Happiness and Pleasure, Platonic</td>
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<td>Happiness and Pleasure, Specifically</td>
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<tr>
<td>Happiness and Pleasure, Moderate to</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Failure</td>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Conflict in</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Betrayal of</td>
<td>M</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 9.
Existential Insights
### Table 9.
**Existential Insights**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Death</th>
<th>Uncertainty</th>
<th>Choice &amp; Self</th>
<th>Spiritual</th>
<th>Unspecified</th>
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<td>Relationship Loss with Significant Other</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Traumatic Experience, Witnessing for Others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Traumatic Experience, Close Brush with Disaster</td>
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</table>
Death Awareness (Brevity of Life). Death awareness was the immediate existential insight accompanying many experiences of meaninglessness. Later aftereffects frequently involved altered values regarding the use of time, the rewards of friendships, attempts to live more fully in the present moment, and the relative merits of humanistic versus materialistic considerations. Not surprisingly the situational category most involved in these insights was bereavement; secondarily were various traumatic experiences.

Uncertainty of Life (Unreliability of Events and Plans). This category is a large one which could have easily been broken down into subcategories. This was not done because the common theme seemed to be disillusionment, failed unrealistic expectations in some aspect of life. This was quite distinct from Death Awareness which seemed to involve bringing to light a realization that for most people is repressed. A prominent subgroup in the present category could be labeled “Unreliability of Human Nature and Relationships” and would include the large number of reported meaninglessness situations involving relationships with others. In reality this appears to be similar if not identical to the existential dilemma of isolation, because many such situations are marked by a sudden realization of the “differentness” of people, the experiential chasm that to some extent separates all people. Separate subgroups could have additionally been made from “fallibility of dreams or ambitions” and “loss of faith in social/political institutions” scenarios. Frequently the participant volunteered “growing up” or acquiring a more mature life-attitude as part of the scenario; this was clearly a longer-term aftereffect or change in attitudes, and one that could also be shared with the next category.

(Awareness of) Choice and Consequence (of Actions). Some participants described a sudden realization of having made a choice (usually a poor one) that led them into the meaninglessness situation they related. This implied understanding the freedom
that goes with choice, that of selecting other options, and it also involves a new awareness of the consequences of actions. As might be expected this understanding most often accompanied having made a mistake which caused pain to others.

**Self-Concept (Changes).** Changes in self-concept, most often negative, were commonly reported. This generally took the form of some sort of disappointment about oneself or at the least a new questioning of one’s value or role. This was predictably common in that subset of experiences that has been tentatively labeled “Probable Depression.” It also appeared in situations where effort resulted in “failure” and in social situations of rejection or loss of a significant relationship. It should be noted that not all such changes were negative; some participants reported a feeling that their sense of self, self-reliance, or self-understanding had been strengthened. Better self-understanding was also often reported as a longer-term aftereffect.

**Spiritual Beliefs (System Changes).** A small group of individuals experienced changes in their spiritual belief system accompanying meaninglessness experiences. There were too few such reports to identify a pattern, and Table 9 does not count longer-term alterations in this area, if they occurred.

**Unspecified (Life-) Lessons.** This group consisted of participants who reported recognizable life-changes or awakenings which were not specified or comprehensible.

Of the 118 identifiable existential lessons gleaned from the Short Answer responses, 60 belonged to the most prevalent group by far, “Uncertainty of Life.” Next most important were “Self Concept” (24), and “Death Awareness” (22). Only relatively small numbers of responses, 4 each, fell into the remaining categories of “Choice and Consequence,” “Spiritual Beliefs,” and “Unspecified Lessons.” Gender differences were not apparent in this limited sample.
Integration of Main Findings

Following is an outline overview of the general structure of experienced meaninglessness as it has emerged so far:

- Dialectical Juxtaposition of Inner Representation and Outer Experience
- Relational Components
- (Dimensions) —
  - Agency-Responsibility
  - Cognitive Dimension
    - Disintegration
    - Disorientation
    - Attributions
  - Affective Dimension
  - Behavioral Responses
  - Existential Insights

Synthetic Description of Experienced Meaninglessness

The purpose of this section is to offer an empirically-derived summary definition of the experience of meaninglessness. Some researchers (Valle, 1998; Valle & Halling 1989) have expressed summaries of similar topics in the form of synthetic narratives, i.e., longer, complete, artificially-constructed narratives which more fully illustrate principal points of their topics. However, in the present case it was felt that the complexity of the construct was not suited to that approach. The apparently great variation along several dimensions in ways that people can experience this phenomenon suggests a more concise "dictionary definition" format which nevertheless attempts to incorporate this variation:
Meaninglessness is experienced as a cognitive-affective-existential Gestalt that may be preceded by immediate and recognizable triggering conditions in connection with one's environment and accompanied by the perception of varying degrees of agency-responsibility.

Its essence is a disintegration of the individual's inner representation of "the world" in the face of an untenable mental dialectical juxtaposition formed by perceived conflicting (outer) information or experiences.

The disintegration of the worldview is due to the perceived failure of internalized, assumed relationships primarily with one or more elements of that world: (1) social relations, (2) self concept, (3) external reward or threat, and/or (4) the cosmos.

The disintegration is subjectively generalized from specific to global, and from personal to universal, depending on variable attributional styles of personality, the circumstances, and affective interactions.

Emotions account for a large part of the felt impact of the experience, which also carries over into limited arrays of behavioral response areas and changed existential views.

Additional Variation in the Meaninglessness Experience

A number of topics came up in the course of the research that were widespread enough to be of obvious significance, but could not be included as part of the universal or general phenomenon. They were individual differences, disbelief in the construct of meaninglessness, and the role of depression.
Individual Differences in the Perception and Understanding of Meaninglessness

The nomothetic evidence is that people vary quite a lot in their understanding of this topic, their willingness to contemplate matters of this sort, and hence their perception or experience of meaninglessness. In addition, a number of participants expressed their belief that this concept is widespread but variable. Note the following interview excerpts:

*Interviewer: You mention an interesting point there that people may have... individualized understandings of this?*

Yes, I think so. I think things happen to people that are unfortunate to them, tragic to them, whatever. And I think that's a very personal and private event. And I think they deal with it to try and maybe learn it... try to find meaning in something.... If I can refer to the situation I talked about on the paper [death of her father]. There was intense feeling of sadness with no direction. It's kind of you're stuck; until you kind of arranged your life again to adapt to this thing that's happened. And I think it takes time, I think some people don't ever kind of get out of that. You need something to drag yourself out. If you don't, you can't do that yourself. Or I think you have to be in this place for a certain amount of time to gather enough strength to get out of it.... And I think for other people who are in that situation, there was really not a triggering event, I think. Some people in that situation still linger, and it becomes almost a part of the personality. And it's kind of a little black cloud that follows them around all the time. It becomes a part of them.... This event that happened to me influenced a lot of my family members too, and I think we all handled that situation differently, very different ways, and that might be because of our personalities. It might be because of the relationship we had to this person who passed away. And all our situations, age— it could be all kinds of things....

(Female, Age 41, Caucasian)

I don't think everybody's on the same level of the knowledge and the experience. And this is the part where you have to—I have to ask myself, do you get it all in one lifetime or is there
really something that lets you recycle and learn more, or if what you get in one lifetime is all you get. And, I don't think people... I mean, they're not looking for that. I'm searching for the meaningfulness. And not the meaninglessness. But not everybody's looking for it. Not everybody wants to know. It might be too much of a responsibility to have to look for it and then once you have it, to deal with it, because some people don't like to deal with it. All those emotions....

(Female, Age 29, Caucasian)

As for cultural variations of this construct, even a cursory treatment is beyond the scope of this study. But occasional reference was made to this by participants, as for example this 26 year old Japanese-American female:

My mind just keeps going back to loneliness or rejection or something like that, when you feel kind of out of the circle, not accepted, or something like that. Then they feel that they're meaningless.... I think in Japan... there is a high suicide rate for that type of rejection and kind of loneliness.... from my experience I've seen a lot of experiences regarding meaninglessness in Japan. One thing is in school. Schools in Japan, a lot the schools in Japan are very tough... and every student must be, must do their best, and if you cannot then you're not accepted. In other words, you're rejected.... And, you know, a lot of people who can't take the pressure from school, they'll drop out. And once they drop out, it's very hard to go back to school because they won't, most likely they won't accept you. And so for the rest of your life, if you drop out in junior high school, you're just a junior high drop out, and that's how the society will look at you. And... I think that leads to meaninglessness and loneliness and rejection and a lot of stressful situations.... It's true over here also, but they way people deal with it is different, very different. And I think it has a lot to do with cultural differences as well.... The difference is I think things are more diverse over here in terms of you know some people may go into drugs some people may go into different types of things because there are more things offered over here. There are more options that
people can go into. In Japan, it's either stay within the "norm" of the society or kind of drop out.

**Disbelief in the Construct of Meaninglessness**

Perhaps even more important than variations among individuals was the opinion expressed by a subset of participants that "there is no such thing as meaninglessness."

I don't think that I've ever experienced anything that did not have meaning. I believe that everything serves a purpose, or has the ability to teach me something. Everything happens for a reason. The concept of something that is "meaningless" is not something that I can identify with. I don't know how I could experience "meaninglessness" because if I'm "experiencing" something, I'm obviously finding meaning in it or possibly learning something. (Female, Age 24, Japanese)

I don't really experience meaninglessness. Sometimes I feel meaninglessness or disappointed when I don't find any meanings in what people are doing. I try to find some meanings though.... When I think that something is wrong or something doesn't have meaning I need to see it from a different point of view. I need to separate myself from the person who are doing something which seems meaningless to me. I also need to think about timing. Sometimes meaninglessness will have a meaning later. I try not to think about "universal meaningfulness." I think everything can have meaning or be meaningful to me, but I cannot apply the same principle to other people.

(Female, Age 35, Japanese)

Data on this group of participants is limited because, while acknowledging negative experiences, many tended to say little about what they believed the difference was or to give examples of experiences that were unpleasant but not meaningless. Also notice that
at least some of them made a distinction between specific experiences and "universal
meaninglessness."

Quantitative treatment of responders who fell in this category is problematic at the
very least. First is the noticeable difference between male and female questionnaire
responders in terms of conscientious answers. Secondly, there is a high probability that
many responders (probably of both sexes) refused to admit that the concept was foreign to
them. Despite assurances to the contrary, they may have had a fear of not getting
academic credit points if they did not respond with some sort of testimony to
meaninglessness. Thirdly, some participants took various ambiguous positions to the
effect that although an individual could have an experience of meaninglessness, life as a
whole had meaning; or alternatively, that there was "higher meaning" in all things, even
though one might feel an experience was meaninglessness. With these caveats in mind,
Table 10 gives a brief summary of relative numbers of subjects who did not subscribe to
the meaningfulness in life construct.

Table 10.
Disbelief in the Construct of Meaninglessness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male (N=68)</th>
<th>Female (N=204)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subjects</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Depression

What has been previously identified as probable depression (or something similar) bears further explanation, because this experience appears to be a variant of the more typical scenario which involves an identifiable environmental trigger event. Again, this refers to the meaninglessness situation reported in the Short Answers, which is unrelated to the nine-point scale on the questionnaire. In the situational category of apparent depression, it appears that the first thing to happen is some sort of mental dysfunction, which then results in a sense of meaninglessness in various areas of life. It should be made clear that the fundamental mismatch of inner representation and outer information or experience still applies. What suggests placement of this group in a peculiar category is the process of cognitive distortion that appears to be occurring first. Some participants in this group had sought professional help and were diagnosed as depressed, and are thus more informed and reliable historians; with others, the condition was inferred. The following excerpts illustrate cases in this category:

Three and a half years ago I was at home (Maui) by myself. I was very upset about my life and a poor breakup. I overdosed on some pills (purposely). It was a buildup of weeks of depression. [My feelings in this situation were...:] lonely, unloved, desperate, uncaring, mad, confused, self-loathing; it was all a mixture of emotions. Meaninglessness is one way to describe how I felt. I felt, as a person, worth nothing and I guess it would be accurate to say without meaning... I would never try or want to die. I had thought I would not feel any worse, but I seemed to feel worse everyday. I didn't think my life would ever be so pathetic. I learned I was very depressed. I was always self conscious but after this incident of trying to O.D. I realized I hated myself and wished I could change. I still hated myself after the O.D. and was still depressed. The O.D. didn't really change my views about myself. I was still upset. My behavior changed more. I went to a shrink and then was prescribed an anti-depressant which made me very sleepy and I started to ignore homework. I went off the
drug after a couple months. I was still depressed for a long time. I also stopped going to the shrink. My life was chaos."

(Female, Age 19, Caucasian)

I can't think of a specific situation. Instead many times I've felt that way. [My feelings in this situation were...] Sadness, worthless, depressed, tired, wanting to die. ... slept a lot, either ate more or less, "spaced out."

(Female, Age 20, Chinese)

Another possible role that depression may play in the meaningfulness scenario, however, is as an aftereffect or product of the feeling of meaningfulness precipitated by some other event. The only way to distinguish these very different phenomena is from the narratives, and this method is imperfect. So there is an inescapable degree of uncertainty as to where depressive symptoms enter into the picture, both chronologically and causally.

"Depression" data were derived from replies to the Short Answer question (#3) which listed the following symptom descriptions, to be checked as applicable by the participant: "At the time or soon after this situation:

- I doubted my self-worth;
- I felt sad;
- my sleep habits changed;
- my eating habits changed;
- I was more restless or slowed down;
- it was difficult to concentrate;
- I stopped enjoying things;
- I thought more about death or mortality."

Data represent sums of different symptoms endorsed by the participant. Although they were given the option to double-check in the event the symptom was "very strong," this
difference is ignored in the table. Since this was a symptom checklist, results in Table 11 are reported as average number of symptoms checked per participant, for males and females, by situation category.
Table 11.

Self-reported Retrospective Depression Symptoms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Males Symptoms/Subject</th>
<th>Females Symptoms/Subject</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Probable Depression</td>
<td>15 7.7</td>
<td>15 7.7</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2 2.0</td>
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<td>Ideological Disillusionment</td>
<td>2 3.5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pointless Activities</td>
<td>6 1.7</td>
<td>16 1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Failure</td>
<td>4 5.8</td>
<td>8 3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Conflict in Views or</td>
<td>5 2.0</td>
<td>24 4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>7 5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Betrayal of Trust by Other</td>
<td>3 4.7</td>
<td>9 5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Rejection by Other</td>
<td>1 2.0</td>
<td>3 7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, Abuse by Other</td>
<td>2 4.0</td>
<td>4 4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Tension, My Mistake, Wronged Someone</td>
<td>9 5.8</td>
<td>24 6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Loss with Significant Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 11.

Self-reported Retrospective Depression Symptoms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>symptoms/subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Loss in Existing Family</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bereavement</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traumatic Experience (Personal)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traumatic Experience, Witnessing for Others</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traumatic Experience, Close Brush with Disaster</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is necessary to be aware of several cautions. First, participants' retrospection may be flawed, especially since some incidents were being recalled from years earlier. Second, although the simple symptom checklist that was used possesses face validity, it is hardly a rigorous measure of the syndrome of depression that may have occurred at the time. Whatever validity it possesses is due to its similarity in content to the modified Zung self-rating scale used earlier in the questionnaire (see "Methods" section). Third, because block sizes are small, interpretations must be tentative.

Nevertheless, some simple observations can be made from the general picture of this data. First, the "Depression" Situation category singled out individuals who appeared to be reporting something similar to clinical depression existing at or before the meaninglessness experience, and this group (all females) had the highest number of reported symptoms per subject (other groups being too small to compare). "Pointless activities," had the lowest number of symptoms. "Relationship loss" and "Bereavement" showed rather high scores, but due to the nature of the situation the probability is greater that the reports of these groups are contaminated by post-event symptoms.

Ambiguity of Meaninglessness vs. Negative Emotion

A specific problem arose during the course of the research which had not been anticipated. Mention has been made that the suspicion arose that some participants might not have been making an effort to discriminate between experiences of actual meaninglessness and those of intense emotion, usually negative, like sadness, fear or anger.

When this became apparent, two possibilities presented themselves. The first was whether the participant was simply not discriminating due to a lack of motivation; that is,
could he or she really tell the difference, but it was simply easier and/or safer to discuss intense sadness, for example, rather than to “get intellectual” about meaninglessness? The other possibility was whether it was actually difficult for the participant to detect the difference; for example, can intense sadness actually be construed or experienced as meaninglessness?

This problem first made itself visible during analysis of the first batch of questionnaires. In order to explore the issue further, this topic was targeted in succeeding questionnaires as a specific Short Answer question: “This felt specifically like meaninglessness, rather than some other emotion, because....” In addition, the question was specifically addressed during interviews, and these became the best source of data for clarifying the matter.

*Interviewer: Is it possible for us now, cause these kinds of examples are coming up, the ones that are striving for something and then perhaps failing and calling that meaninglessness? I can understand disappointment, and sadness, and maybe a lot of other emotions at failing at an endeavor. How can we distinguish meaninglessness from some of these other emotions?*

I think of meaninglessness as being a little more empty. I'm not sure how I have that definition or why that comes to mind. But to be really meaningless, to not... you're not disappointed. You thought that your whole endeavor had no meaning. It was completely void. And that disappointment...

*Interviewer: Okay. Emptiness.*

Yeah. That it, it has, it had no purpose. That whatever it you either who you are, or what you were trying to do which ever example you'd like to put it in, that it's just void.

(Female, Age 29, Native American-Caucasian)
Interviewer: Some people feel meaninglessness is a sort of sadness, and one of my questions is, what's the difference? ... in terms of meaninglessness, are we making a distinction here?

I think that brushing your teeth every day is a meaningless experience. It's something you do—I mean, it doesn't have any meaning... it's just your routine.... Meaningful experiences are things like getting a phone call that your grandfather has cancer. It's something that you have to look inside yourself. You have to pull from your emotional pool what's the way to feel about this, what does this mean to my life? What did it mean to him to pass away? You know, I mean you're asking the questions about life. Or when you get the call that you got a raise, or you got the job you've been waiting to get. Those things exhilarate you and are happy high times but each experience has meaning. Having the most exquisite dinner is a meaningful experience to me. If the elements are all right, you get connected cognitively, and you get connected emotionally... a great chicken piccata, or something. I mean, it just depends what meaning is to the person too. And if they're pondering it. They're eating a bologna sandwich and that's the greatest thing, they love it, it has meaning for them. You know for me, it might be a different dish, but they're pondering what's going past their lips; and what is happening in their daily....

(Female, Age 29, Caucasian)

Interviewer: ...Sounds like a terrible experience. Why are we specifically calling this meaninglessness?

...because it was so meaningful and all of a sudden, I put all this trust into this group of friends and really believed that this bond couldn't break, but you know with the use of drugs, they just dropped everything. They said okay, they didn't consider the fact that we've been friends for a long time and we had spent a lot of time together, and the friendship was very intimate and very close. But all of a sudden, none of those things which I thought meant a lot, didn't mean anything to them. So they dropped all that and it became meaningless to them. To the point that they would harass me. And it was horrible.
Interviewer: It was an experience of meaninglessness for you because you lost something.

You lost a bunch of meaningful relationships.

Yes. Right.

Interviewer: The loss of their friendship was the meaninglessness to you.

Yes. (Female, Age 26, Japanese)

The foregoing excerpts make it fairly clear that (under interview conditions) at least some participants appeared to have no problem making the distinction between intense emotion and meaninglessness. However, this does not eliminate the possibility that under the more relaxed conditions of filling out a take-home questionnaire, some participants may have been somewhat liberal in choosing an appropriate experience to report.

Other Data Statistics

Clinical Parameters.

Table 12 presents statistics for scores on the "current depression" symptom checklist and the trauma scale. No normative data is available for the "current depression" checklist scores because of the synthetic nature of the checklist. Again, this checklist is not a clinical measure of depression. The same is true for trauma scores. This data awaits further analysis.
Table 12.

Scores on "Current Depression" Checklist and Trauma Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Depression (n)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mean</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>std dev</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trauma (n)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mean</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>std dev</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Personality Parameters.

Table 13 presents a frequency distribution of scores for male and female subjects on the abbreviated version of the Avoidance of Existential Confrontation Research Scale (AEC, Thauberger et al., 1981). Since it became apparent that these scores would not be useful to the immediate purposes of this study, no further action was taken with this data.
Table 13.

Frequency Distribution, *Avoidance of Existential Confrontation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AEC Score</th>
<th>Male (n)</th>
<th>% / 62</th>
<th>Female (n)</th>
<th>% / 204</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-64</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65-69</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-74</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75-79</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80-84</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85-89</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-94</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95-99</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-104</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>105-109</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>110-115</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Refers to the 20-item scale.
CHAPTER 8

DISCUSSION / IMPLICATIONS

Many qualitative studies put most of their energy into clarifying the structure of whatever phenomenon is under examination, and relatively little emphasis on later discussion of it. In the present case that would be a mistake, because of the nature of the construct and the fact that so little has gone before to set a precedent in the study of meaninglessness. Those qualitative studies that do undertake further rumination on their topic after presenting results, often title that section, "Implications." Its purpose is the same as with conventional quantitative studies: to discuss various aspects of what has been done and what has not been done, and how these bear on what has yet to be done. In the present case, major subsections to follow will examine issues relating to the validity of methods and procedure, the validity of the meaninglessness construct, and implications of how the observed structure of meaninglessness relates to topics previously discussed in the literature. Discussion will terminate with recommendations for future work.

Validity Issues Relating to Methods

In the Introduction of this study, the multitudinous ramifications of meaning and meaninglessness were discussed at some length. In summary, there are a great many different applications and implications of these constructs. In addition, meaninglessness is a very difficult concept to talk about in lay terms. Because it is such an abstract term, the repertoire of comprehensible vocabulary that can be applied to it seems very limited, even by scholars who are accustomed to such things. It quickly becomes apparent in interviews
that lay people are somewhat frustrated by this limitation and have difficulty finding other words to use when something is without meaning. The popular acceptance of the term meaninglessness is the very thing that upsets discussion of it, because the speaker assumes that a mutual understanding of the concept exists.

**Procedures**

The overall design of the study proved itself to be very satisfactory. As a survey study, the design was essentially aimed at establishing the breadth and depth of a difficult and abstract topic. The breadth came from the questionnaire survey of hundreds of university students. It established the approximate limits of variation among the circumstances in which meaninglessness can be experienced, as well as demographic and selected psychological parameters of the population being sampled. The depth came from intensive interviews of articulate representatives of that population. By “depth” is meant the exploration of the ramifications of this experience in different psychosocial dimensions of life. Such data is not normally accessible using questionnaires because of the time and volume of material involved, the motivating effects implicit in person-to-person interviews, and the ability to customize the interview investigation to go in spontaneous directions which appear to be fruitful at the moment.

**Questionnaire Measures:** AEC, “Depression,” Word Association, Short Answers. Measures used in the survey questionnaire, although having previously-established validity in the literature, were altered to some extent from their original forms. The main reason for altering these instruments was largely logistical: to be able to incorporate them all into a questionnaire that would appear non-threatening to university undergraduates already burdened with studies and jobs. It was further rationalized that modification of the original forms of instruments of established validity
would not detract from the intent of the present study. This intent did not include a claim to quantitative validity or accuracy in its results, given the newness of the topic of investigation.

The Avoidance of Existential Confrontation Research Scale (AEC) (Thauberger et al., 1981) was reduced in size down to 20 questions from the original 36. It was hoped that this reduction would not alter the function of the scale, but a cursory examination of results indicated that this was a moot question. Contrary to expectations, the scale did not appear to differentiate those subjects especially possessing an existential or philosophical mind-set and comfortable with existential topics. This determination was arrived at by the subjective and comparative judgment of the experimenter during analysis. It was tentatively concluded that the avoidance of existential confrontation and existential-mindedness constructs were substantially different, and the matter was not pursued further for this study.

The very brief nine-item checklist of depression symptoms was used to identify questionnaire responders who could be suspected of having clinically-identifiable depression. It was believed to retain all of the face validity and most of the criterion-related and clinical validity of the original measures from which it was abstracted (the Self-rating Depression Scale of Zung, 1965, and the CES-D of Radloff, 1977), since it still captured the major clinical markers recognized in depression (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Again, the purpose of this checklist was simply to identify such individuals as belonging to a group whose responses should probably be treated differently from those of the majority. This scale is not a clinical measure of depression.

The background of the word-association exercise was discussed earlier. Unlike most applications which present several word stimuli or at least camouflage the one of interest, the current procedure was weakened somewhat in that it employed a single target
word (meaninglessness). Another conspicuous confounding variable that may be important in the interpretation of this dataset is that at the time of responding to the questionnaire, few if any participants were experiencing extreme meaninglessness, as judged by the fact that few reported meaninglessness experiences were current. The word associations obtained were therefore removed in time and circumstance from past experiences, and thus might be considered "residual" associations based on past experience. Future investigation should control for these two conditions. Finally, the categorization of the word-association data was subjective. Assignments of words to categories was necessarily somewhat speculative since, like the target word itself, associated words may have multiple connotations. Other observers might disagree on how certain words were assigned.

The open-ended Short Answer questions at the end of the questionnaire purported to cover most of the important aspects of meaninglessness experiences, as described earlier. The point could be made that, other than being based upon a previous pilot study, there is no assurance that these questions really did encompass the fundamental breadth of meaninglessness experiences of participants. Based on analysis of subsequent interviews, however, which had the luxury of exploring unanticipated directions that opened up, the original assumption seemed upheld. The breadth of the Short Answer questions did after all appear to be quite satisfactory in providing a rough but content-valid outline of the meaninglessness experience for this population.

During the course of data collection, a single addition was made to these Short Answer questions to better confront the problem that had arisen of distinguishing meaninglessness and emotional experience. This was the addition of the following question: "This felt specifically like meaninglessness, rather than some other emotion, because..." (Question #4 in Appendix A). As it has been presented herein, narrative
material from the Short Answers has been selectively edited by moving parts around when necessary to make a clear story to the reader. This is because subjects would occasionally not adhere to the Short Answer format, instead replying in a “stream of consciousness” style. The content has not been changed, nor has the gist of what the participant intended. The editing is no different than what is normally done with tape recorded transcripts.

A more serious potential validity issue involves the problem of some participants not really having an understanding of meaninglessness or having an experience that would qualify for that description. However, wanting to get academic credit for the questionnaire, they might have been motivated to simply write about “something bad that happened to me.” The problem that this raises concerns the quality of data and is no different than that faced in any empirical study. In the present case it ultimately fell to the experimenter’s best judgment to decide if the incident was inauthentic and should be rejected, or if the subject was interpreting meaninglessness in an honest way, albeit a different and seemingly “trivial” one.

**Individual Interviews.** Individual interviews provided the depth dimension to this study. They added detail, depth, and richness to the broad array of personal narratives of meaninglessness experiences. They provided the investigator an opportunity to gather non-verbal information as well as overt material. In addition, they served the role of enhancing validity. Participants are under much more inducement to be authentic in a face-to-face interview; put bluntly, it is more difficult to dissimulate or falsify information, if that were a motive. The result is more accurate and reliable data.

**Potential Weaknesses of Interview Methods.** Nevertheless, there are certain limitations which are inevitable with this kind of data gathering. The first, which is built in to this form of data collection, is the fact that participants are to some extent self-selected for the interviews. Even though a relatively small number of willing interview volunteers were
approached, they were all previously self-selected from the mass of questionnaire recipients. This clearly introduces the possible bias of unaccounted-for personality parameters in the interviewed sample, one of the most obvious being extraversion or a similar derivative. Another source of bias is cultural. Although Eurocaucasian students are not a majority group in the overall student body of the University of Hawaii, they did represent a conspicuously large subset of interview volunteers (though not necessarily chosen). Conversely, students of Asian ancestry were noticeably absent from the interview volunteer list. The task may have been understood to have them assert their opinions in a (seemingly) public forum, the unpopularity of which is not unfamiliar to cross-cultural researchers (Leong, 1986; Sue & Sue, 1987). An additional problem lies in the temptation of the experimenter to select emotionally dramatic incidents for the purpose of best illustrating key concepts. Although this may not introduce substantial bias, it opens the way for more serious distortion originating with the experimenter.

**Experimenter Presuppositions and Effects**

Potential presuppositions or preconceptions of the experimenter were introduced briefly above. But since these formed an *ongoing* dialectic with participants' narratives during the course of the procedure, some of them (italicized below) deserve another word in the context of the interviews and conceptualization.

The experimenter was reminded of his *western-centric viewpoint* by one participant who had held a long interest in Buddhist thought which he felt was unavoidable when considering meaninglessness. The interviewer became acutely aware that his viewpoint was simply inadequate to give due credit to this alternative point of view. That should be a topic of future research. Moreover, this audience-effect bias combined with the *personality characteristics of the experimenter* likely influenced the affective content of the
narratives, as was noticeable even in the Short Answer questions. Males were much more reluctant to present themselves as emotionally affected (sad, afraid, etc.) by meaninglessness experiences than females. This is in keeping with a rather typical Western gender stereotype. But there was likely another sociocultural effect at work here also, in that in all interview cases the interviewer, a Caucasian male, could have exerted a one-sided effect on other males, and a different but equally biasing one on females.

The cognitive viewpoint was difficult to avoid during interviews with intelligent and articulate subjects. This is simply to say that attention was given to the cognitive dissonance ("dialectical juxtaposition") apparent during personal narration of meaninglessness experience, and this undoubtedly colored conceptualization. However, this is not necessarily the preferred viewpoint of the experimenter, who holds a personal belief in the supremacy of emotions as the primary response mechanism. By this is meant that situations/events (external or internal) first trigger emotional responses of varying degrees of adaptability, then cognitive operations immediately start trying to make meaning from both stimuli and responses. This view may have to be modified somewhat since the prominence of cognitive operations was very apparent while talking to participants. Finally, the experimenter's clinical viewpoint revealed that no person actually interviewed showed any evidence of being depressed at that time.

Data Evaluation. An important potential problem lies in the inclination of the experimenter to select emotionally dramatic incidents for the purpose of best illustrating key concepts, and in the selection of subjects to interview. Although it is excusable and perhaps even desirable to use graphic tales as exemplars of meaninglessness, it is undesirable to represent this topic as consisting entirely of melodramatic incidents. At best this may be no more than an annoyance, but it opens the way for the more serious distortion that the conceptual structure developed by the experimenter may be unduly
derived from this bias. There is no certain safeguard against this problem which exists in all research, and the point is raised as a potential weakness only.

Related sources of bias may have been introduced in the classification of situation categories and word association categories. Similar subjective processes were the assignment of narratives to relational categories and the assignment of affect to narratives. These sorts of operations should ideally be performed by panels or groups of people in order to reduce individual biases.

**Validity of the Meaninglessness Construct**

One of the original objectives of this study focused on the question of whether it is legitimate to talk about the construct of meaninglessness at all. The uncertainty stems from the fact that the bulk of the material in the literature concerns meaning and seems to assume that the present topic is merely its absence. This question of validity of the meaninglessness construct seems to break down into two sub-issues: first, the popular validity or understanding of this concept, and second, its scientific or experimental validity. Following examination of these sub-issues, some comments will be made regarding the dimensions and sources of meaninglessness that have been suggested and how they may relate to the literature.

**The Meaninglessness Construct**

The first sub-issue concerning popular understanding of the construct seems to be upheld. The data appear to reflect that meaninglessness, though a complex concept, exists among this population, is acknowledged as real, and is familiar to young adults as well as the middle-aged. The question whether this understanding parallels the
assumptions hitherto held by researchers in the field of life-meaning was an objective of this study. An empirical investigation of meaninglessness purports to address the fundamental question: how do people in general understand it?

Regarding this point, none of the questionnaire respondents suggested that they did not understand what was meant by meaninglessness. Those who did not return questionnaires cannot be assessed, and those who denied the existence of meaninglessness seemed to have a definite understanding of the concept also. The conclusion is that most people have a fairly well-defined cluster of notions in their minds surrounding this term. Since the variety of these notions has not received much attention before, this conclusion provides considerable satisfaction as to the merit of the study.

Due to the relatively small sample size of those participants who claimed that there is no such thing as meaninglessness, clarification of their point of view must await further experimentation. It would be highly desirable to interview this subgroup in depth regarding their philosophy. It would be especially useful to find out whether they have experienced loss, disillusionment, and so forth, like other subjects, and then explore how they experienced these things. For the various situational categories, how do these subjects compare to the others with respect to the construct parameters reviewed above? It should be remembered that these subjects represented less than perhaps one person in twenty in the survey population.

The second sub-issue with respect to the validity of the meaninglessness construct concerns the question whether meaninglessness can stand on its own legs as a scientific construct. In other words, can meaninglessness be considered independently, or does the evidence indicate that the conventional assumption of researchers is true, that meaninglessness is equivalent to the “absence of meaning”? In response to this, it first of all bears repeating that this study was entered into without pre-existing expectations of
what was to be found. Except for the plan to study cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of this construct, an open and empirical approach was aimed at. Two important findings are directly relevant to this sub-issue.

The first important finding bearing on this question is the group of relational aspects appearing to be central supporting structures of an individual's worldview. Upon reflection, these look suspiciously similar to the sources of meaning proposed by various other researchers (see the next section below).

The second finding in this study of meaninglessness is the idea of disintegration of the worldview; that is, the collapse of the internal representation of the world subsequent to the dialectical juxtaposition of external experience against it. This model was not a prior goal or expectation, but its reliable presence also bears a strong and consistent resemblance to the idea of "failure" that has been implied by other researchers. It appears that what can fail in everyday meaningful experience, causing the whole worldview to go awry, is one or more of those relational supports of meaning, much like knocking out one or more legs of a table.

So it would appear that this study has come to support, quite inadvertently and by a back-door approach, some of the important concepts previously proposed in the literature on sources of meaning. By shedding light on the fact that meaninglessness can in fact be interpreted as failure, and that what fails are apparently sources of meaning, it seems that the present study lends support to the conventional assumption that meaninglessness is tantamount to absence of meaning.

Dimensions and Sources of Meaninglessness

Since multidimensional models have been applied to life-meaning, there is no reason not to look for parallel applications regarding meaninglessness. At the outset it was
not even clear whether different dimensions of meaninglessness could be distinguished, but qualitative analysis software assisted in this endeavor. In the end, interesting comparisons emerged with respect to the literature on positive meaning. Because of the exploratory nature of this study it is not possible to draw firm conclusions, but there appears to be a large degree of overlap with several existing conceptualizations, particularly those of Joske (1982), Baumeister (1991), and Reker and Wong (1988).

Joske. Joske (1982) described two aspects to the personal meaning of activities: the intrinsic value (of the performance) and the derivative value (of the result). Both aspects, inverted to apply to meaninglessness, are visible in the current data. Some situations describing “Pointless Activities” seem to reflect frustration over a lack of intrinsic value:

... going to church when I was younger... a traditionally Vietnamese church... mom forced me to go. I was unhappy because I was force to do something I did not like. What was the point of going to church if you believe in God?

(Female, Age 19, Vietnamese)

the events with the least meaning would entail doing nothing (lounging) alone and doing mindless things like watching TV or playing computer games all day.

(Female, Age 21, Caucasian-Korean)

Other situations, while reflecting the same sentiment, could be seen as frustrating because they appear unconnected to future goals:

...in college classroom- poorly taught class, no point in being in it; I have less than no free time and this class was wasting my time. I am not learning anything so why am I here?

(Female, Age 31, Hawaiian)
...sitting in class one day listening to a professor thinking of the reading and assignments that were due... wondering what the point of everything was, why I was studying and reading and writing; thinking that this wasn't what living was about, this use of my time cramming and going from class to class to class.

(Female, Age 19, Japanese)

Though these examples lack dramatic impact, they do reflect an understanding of meaninglessness that is fairly prevalent in this population. They also capture Joske's (1982) four elements of meaninglessness activity: (1) **Worthlessness**, the lack of intrinsic merit; (2) **Pointlessness**, not being directed toward the fulfillment of an end; (3) **Triviality**, lacking in sufficient worth to justify its performance; and (4) **Futility**, obstruction in the achievement of the required end. These four elements are visible in the frustration conveyed by these excerpts. Joske regarded these as defects in life-meaning, and he appears to have been correct in the assumption that meaninglessness is the lack of that.

**Baumeister.** Can Baumeister's (1991; Sommer & Baumeister, 1998) “four needs of meaning” apply to the results of this study if they are inverted into “deficiencies” that are lacking in cases of meaninglessness? These four needs, which are conceived to be comprehensive, included (1) **Purpose**, the relation to future possibility and fulfillment; (2) **Value**, which appears to refer to a connection to moral principle; (3) **Efficacy**, a reflection of one's own potential, capability, and control; and (4) **Self-worth**, a feeling of positive personal value. Baumeister felt that failure to meet these needs was tantamount to meaninglessness and they could thus provide a dimensional framework for that construct.

The current process of decomposing the meaninglessness construct from the point of view of itself, rather than borrowing from the construct of meaning, led to a slightly different system, but one that still seems to verify most of Baumeister's views. Lack of
purpose, as pointed out above, was prevalent in "Pointless Activity" situations, in (male, especially) word associations, and in the numbers of goal-oriented subjects. Lack of value, in that it reflects a personal sense of moral worth, probably most closely resembles the relational categories of "Self Concept," and "Other People." The latter was not further parsed into subcategories of social approval, although they were visible. "Life or Cosmos," since that was mostly invoked in times of death-awareness or trauma, is less relevant to a lack of value, but does in these instances suggest a lack of efficacy. Lack of efficacy also appears to be closely related to the fundamental theme of "Agency-Responsibility" which appears to underlie the situational classification. Lack of self-worth is of course closely equated to what has been called self-concept in this study, and appears to be a major relational theme.

Where Baumeister's (1991) schematic may fall short is in those situations such as bereavement and trauma which go beyond daily life and confront existential realities. Though touching on the need for efficacy, they seem to introduce a whole new set of considerations regarding sources of meaning in life, which may not have received adequate coverage by Baumeister's treatment. This points out the value of approaching this topic from the direction of meaninglessness. It is significant that Fry's (1998) conceptualization closely parallels that of Baumeister in terms of meaning-needs.

**Reker and Wong.** Reker and Wong (1988) envisioned a personal meaning system based on values as the primary source, and which can be described in terms of cognitive, motivational (referring to values), and affective dimensions. They went on to suggest a series of postulates and hypotheses which they felt captured the dynamics of the system. Though postulates cannot be derived from the current study, there is obvious involvement of the aforesaid three dimensions. The essence of the meaninglessness experience has been described as involving a cognitive-affective-existential Gestalt.
Further, values seem to be necessarily involved in the ranking of relational components which are being threatened by collapse, and they additionally may undergo change as a result of existential insights arising from the experience. In the current model of meaninglessness the relational components would seem to be more correctly called "sources" or "supports" of meaning, rather than individual value systems. Reker and Wong's statement, "the personal meaning system of an individual who faces major value changes will become temporarily dis-integrated" (p. 231) is interesting in that it seems to hint at existential upheaval.

With the inclusion of O'Connor and Chamberlain's (1996, 2000) different views of sources, breadth, depth, and components of meaning, it will be clear that there are a variety of ways to conceptualize different structures, though some of this variety may be merely semantic. Perhaps most important at this stage is to adequately cover the territory suggested by these authors: "how meaning is experienced (structural components), where it comes from (sources), the diversity with which it is experienced (breadth), and the degree of self-transcendence involved (depth)" (O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996, p. 462).

Though there is much to be done to refine them, these areas have all been addressed in the current work. "Depth" is being reflected in existential changes, various affective aspects, and the cognitive tendency to generalize.

Use of N5 (NUD*IST) Qualitative Analysis Software: Pros and Cons.

Employing commercially available and widely-used qualitative analysis software was undoubtedly a net advantage. There is little doubt that time was saved by doing so. This software is intended to assist the user in organizing the content of a narrative database into tree structures that readily lend themselves to conceptualization, as described earlier. This is undoubtedly useful and optimal in many situations, but it is somewhat more
debatabl[... whether this is necessarily the correct approach for a given dataset, an assumption which seems to have been made by the manufacturers.

N5 (N5, 2000) was useful in that it lent itself almost automatically to generating dimensions. This was not a goal at the outset, since the original intention was to avoid all possible presuppositions about structure and related inferences about causality that would have been inappropriate for this study. Nevertheless, since these dimensional trends unfolded so readily, they were incorporated, it is hoped, fruitfully, as a large part of the results. Because of the inevitable channeling of the investigative mind-set by software tools of this sort, it remains to be seen if other approaches might have been even more successful. Use of qualitative analysis software has been widely accepted in the social sciences and is generating a literature of its own (Richards, L., 2000; Richards, T., 2000; see also many internet resources under “qualitative data analysis/research”).

Further Implications of the Observed Structure of Meaninglessness with Respect to the Literature

The intent of this section is twofold. The first goal is to examine some further similarities and differences between selected domains of the literature and the present empirical model of meaninglessness. The second goal is to explore some of the implications of this. Some of the psychological dimensions of the meaninglessness construct are particularly elaborated upon. Again, the meaninglessness experience is seen as arising from an untenable mismatch between an individual's inner representation of "the world" and conflicting outer experience.
Reconsidering "Linguistic and Philosophical Usages of Meaninglessness" and "Varieties of the Question"

It is interesting that the concept of a continuum between the purely linguistic-semantic meaning and the existential, which has been applied to meaning, seems also to have validity also to have validity for the domain of meaninglessness. This continuum was illustrated clearly in both the word-association data and in the scope of the short answer data obtained from the questionnaires. At one end, the word association breakdown showed sizeable categories for "Semantics, Grammar, Language" as well as "Material Things," "Mental Confusion, Boredom," and "Stupidity." Similarly, a subset of participants related meaninglessness experiences like, for example, sitting in class feeling bored with a confusing lecture. And at the other end of the continuum appeared such existential word-classifications as "Cosmos, Life, Reality," "Death, Non-being," and "Void," and a group of correspondingly profound narratives.

The several levels of interpretation of "meaning of life" (Klemke, 2000) is also seen paralleled in the meaninglessness data. Few subjects talked directly about meaninglessness in the universe, or the topic of meaninglessness of life, of mankind's existence. Most commentary centered on the question, "How can (my) life have any significance or value?" From the remarks of some individuals regarding their own private reading and exploration, however, it can be inferred that their questioning extended beyond their own lives.

So there indeed seems to be a similar kind of gradient from semantic to existential in the concept of meaninglessness, which may reflect individual differences in the tendency to universalize. It is suspected that this may also account for the range of relational components that normally support meaning. Concrete, linear thinkers relate to external rewards, and perhaps self-concept. For those inclined to more abstract thought,
the Cosmos is included as part of their value system. With respect to the subset of individuals who claim to have never experienced meaninglessness, perhaps the conclusion to be drawn is that they represent one extreme end of the distribution. Is it really that their worldview has never fallen apart? Then perhaps they are more skilled than most at holding it together, i.e., at coping. Alternatively, they may not have encountered enough destabilizing life experiences to trigger the disintegrative sense that seems to be familiar to many.

Reconsidering "Relational Components," "Values," "Self-Concept," and "Society as a Context of Meaninglessness"

The model of meaninglessness that emerges from the present study is of considerable help in clarifying the ambiguity that exists in the literature between values and meanings. To begin with, meaninglessness appears to be fundamentally a disintegration of relational structures that provide cohesiveness in the worldview. This is evidently different than a disintegration of values per se. The role of values in this model appears to be that of ranking these relational structures such that their importance to the worldview is lesser or greater. We could expect, for example, differences in the relative importance of external rewards and a spiritual framework in highly mercenary people compared to monastics.

On the other hand, values are a prominent and recurring theme associated with meaning or its absence. The category of "Value" (in the sense of valuation, relative worth or utility) was one of the largest and most noticeable in the word-association data. The problem is that this category may owe some of its strength to the common association of meaninglessness not to "life" but to more mundane material situations. This complication pervaded this study, even though its primary intent was to investigate the existential sense
of meaninglessness in life. In other words, when given the term meaninglessness, it appears that a sizeable segment of the population will first associate this term with material, non-existential situations, if not directed otherwise (and sometimes even then).

A number of writers mentioned earlier (Hare, 2000; Singer, 1992) have mixed and mingled these two terms, values and meanings, apparently confining themselves to the first sense mentioned here. The present study emphasizes the perception of meaninglessness that occurs at the disruption of the relationship between an individual's sense of "self" (as ego or awareness) and a number of other "objects." It follows that this disruption of subjective relations to "objects" could have more than one aspect: the objects themselves could be changed, and/or their relative roles to the person could be changed. It is suggested that previous discussions of the relationship between "values" and "meaning" actually refer to the relative roles of these "meaning objects."

One such meaning-object is the conceptualization that an individual has of his or her own person, that is, one's self-concept. Though Baumeister (1991) discussed the Self in the context of meaning and meaninglessness as a global phenomenon, based on the present idiographic findings it appears that his emphasis was well-placed. The importance of the self-concept, as one of a small number of salient relational aspects of meaninglessness, has been strongly upheld by the present study. Narrative data suggest that it has such a position of prominence in supporting an individual's worldview that when it fails, the whole worldview begins to crumble. It is most apparent in social contexts, that is, as the reflected valuations of other people. This seems to be equally so for both genders and for younger as well as older adults in the sample population.

My boyfriend of three years broke up with me while we were at the end of our sophomore year in college in California. I was really depressed and I felt my life was meaningless because I thought of myself as "his girlfriend" and my future was supposed to include him.
I was totally depressed. I lost about 15 pounds in about one month. I hardly ate and I slept all the time. I cried at work and it took a lot of effort to smile. I had a hard time getting back on my feet for a long time. I had a very low opinion of myself and acted accordingly.

(Female, Age 23, Japanese)

I once got fired from a job and the experience made me feel meaningless. This led to a bout of depression. I could not believe it was happening to me. I felt sad, anger, and humiliated.... it made me think of the big picture in life. That there was someone out there greater than myself (God in this case) who I could lean on and have a purposeful lifestyle.

(Male, Age 32, Hawaiian)

Although this would seem to bolster the large existing literature on the importance of the self-concept in alienation, helplessness, and the like, it should be remembered that this is but one of several important “objects” that were illumined in this study.

A number of earlier references were made to the widespread view that society or culture is a major incubator of meaning, and that learned social values make up the stuff of worldviews and value systems, both individually and collectively. The data from this study supports the role of society as indeed a fundamental player in an individual’s experience of meaninglessness, but in a different way than the earlier discussion centered on. The current conceptualization suggests that when an individual experiences meaninglessness, key supporting structures in his or her worldview are in the process of collapsing. One of those directly-supporting structures is the individual’s relationships with other individuals.

The collective term, “society,” as used by other commentators, seems to play a more indirect role in this model. Society is the larger “family” of the person, but remains influential in the sense that it has implanted those attitudes which are reflected in the
individual's relative ranking or valuation of meaning-structures. Further, society is also the family of both those individuals who are immediately important to the person in question, and thus also indirectly the nourisher of that person's self-concept. Yet another indirect aspect of society's role in the experience of meaninglessness is that it normally provides the individual positive rewards or punishment, in certain contexts, in the form of approval or condemnation. When this valued approval is withdrawn for whatever reason in a context in which the individual has learned to expect it, meaninglessness can result.

The Cognitive Psychology of Meaninglessness

Besides shedding light on the dialectical juxtaposition, relational components, and the various dimensions of meaninglessness, this study unearthed a number of secondary mental characteristics associated with this phenomenon. They are secondary in the sense that they seem to be related together specifically as aspects of cognitive operations involved in the experience of meaninglessness and/or positive meanings. Some have been considered directly or indirectly by other researchers and/or in earlier sections of this dissertation. Results have reemphasized the subjective, projective nature of this phenomenon, its dependence on cognitive dissonance, evaluation, and attribution, the role of time, and the central importance of disintegration of constructs and the resulting disorientation.

Reconsidering "Meaninglessness as Projection and Creation." In the minds of several authors cited previously, meanings are apparently not intrinsic but created by attribution; in other words, they arise from interpretation of events. These abstract generalities cannot be supported or refuted on the basis of the limited results of this study, but in any case in the matter of meaninglessness the argument seems to be inherently different. The model that has been suggested from the results herein concerns a
worldview that may very well be constructed of projected (and hence somewhat arbitrary) meanings. But there seems to be a core foundation of that worldview, which has been labeled "relational components" here, that supports the entire structure. There seems to be little that is capricious about these core elements, because of their uniformity across the sample. There may indeed be projective processes in how these core elements come about, but it tentatively looks as though their presence is not nearly as fluid and arbitrary as the previous discussion of meanings suggested.

**Cognitive Dissonance Theory.** A theory which has helped to explain many cognitive phenomena is dissonance theory. This theory rests on the supposition that it is somehow alien and uncomfortable to hold two incompatible or dissonant ideas concerning an experience, particularly when one's self-concept is involved. So uncomfortable are contradictory thoughts, goes the theory, that adjustments in viewpoints and even value systems are made quite readily in order to re-establish coherence in the worldview (Festinger, 1957).

This notion of dissonance has explanatory value to the present topic. During review of the data it appeared from the start that every meaningless situation could be explained as a dissonance between two conflicting views of life: what is inwardly represented as a built-in assumption and hence expectation, and what has just been experienced. It is for this reason that the original "Prereflective Categories" were seen as cases of "Internal-External Mismatch" (i.e., dissonance), "Expected Meaningful Experience Leads to Disillusionment," and "Misfortune Happens." Meaninglessness, in other words, is born at the dissonant interface of these two internal and external domains.

The interface can be approached—and still experienced as a clash—from either side. Actual or experienced life may be unusually bad, or represented life may be so far from "reality" that it can never even be approximated. Contrary to positive expectations,
experienced events can be disappointing and produce a mismatch, or dissonance, between expectations and experience. Alternatively, and perhaps more rarely, one's inner representation may be an expectation of misfortune, and outer events will not conform. In this case also the resulting dissonance may produce feelings of unreality which will be described as meaninglessness. One college-age participant reported that his expectation was to be hurt when he broke up with his girlfriend, but instead he experienced a peculiar and apparently distressing flatness or lack of feeling.

**Evaluation.** Part of this model is that both aspects of internal representation and external experience must first have undergone an evaluation as to appropriateness of fit. One is reminded of the theories of Arnold (1960) and Lazarus (1966, 1991) regarding cognitive appraisal of the environment and emotion. It is not unreasonable to extend this model and suppose that, in the interests of survival, one's experiences are continuously being appraised and at the same time compared to one's inner representation of how that environment "ought to be." In addition, even though the whole representation may be comfortable to the person, parts of the internal representation must be valued as good or bad. The valuation must exist in order to serve as a basis of comparison. All experiences may thus be appraised for goodness or badness as part of an instinctive, adaptive process.

**Attributional Style.** On introducing a talk by Seligman about depression, Yapko once remarked that "life is an experiential Rorschach," and that "reality is ambiguous... and basically what we do is project onto it our understanding of things" (Seligman, 1989, p. 5). Seligman went on to discuss what have become familiar dimensional terms in cognitive theories of depression: the "internal-external" dimension ("did I cause it, or is something outside responsible?"), the "unstable-stable" dimension ("is this going to occur every time,
or is it just a fluke?"), and the "specific-global" dimension ("will it occur in every situation, or is it peculiar to this one only?").

"Experiential Rorschach" is a wonderful expression with great applicability to the topic of meaning and meaninglessness, for it is not hard to see how attributions or "projections" are related to the interpretation of experiences. Indeed, the broader concept of attributing meaning does not seem very removed from how cognitive attributions apply to depression. The internal-external dimension (did I cause it?) may clearly be grounds for some uncertainty when an individual experiences an unfortunate event; the doubt concerns that person's self-concept, which is being suggested as a fundamental supporting component of a meaningful world. Both the unstable-stable dimension (is this going to occur every time...?) and the specific-global dimension (will it occur in every situation?) concern generalization. And this seems to be exactly the same construal that individuals apply to an event so that it is not just an isolated anomaly in an otherwise coherent worldview, but becomes in fact a generalized characteristic of the whole world and world to be. In other words, the whole worldview is threatening to fall apart, based on a specific incongruous experience.

Of equal importance to the dimensions of construal is the fact that these appear to be characteristic or personological attributional styles which may be applied in many situations. For example, just as habitual global attributions may predispose towards depression, they could also predispose towards a perception of meaninglessness. To return to the "experiential Rorschach" metaphor of life, it now becomes clearer that a certain attributional style may in fact play an important role in the outcome of any particular experiential stimulus, or perhaps determine whether it will remain just a shapeless "experiential inkblot" without further connotation (Yapko, 1989).
Individual attributional styles may explain why some people understand and experience meaninglessness in very concrete terms, like semantic confusion, while others seem naturally oriented towards a "cosmic" frame of reference and experience it as a universal event. The abbreviated form of the *Avoidance of Existential Confrontation Research Scale (AEC)* (Thauberger, et al., 1981) was intended to identify this very difference between individuals. However, based on an apparent lack of correlation with the scale scores and a subjective assessment of participants' understanding, the measure appeared to fail in that purpose, and this effort was tentatively postponed. Differences in intelligence may also affect or exaggerate this characteristic. It would be interesting to further pursue this possible relationship of cognitive styles and existential attitudes.

**Reconsidering "Time As a Context of Meaninglessness."** Time was suggested (Beike & Niedenthal, 1998; Reker & Wong, 1988) as an important element of personal meanings in that it forms the framework for self-evaluation both backward and forward, and also underlies changing value systems across the lifespan. In the present study the worldview and the experience of meaninglessness also seem to be placed in a context of time. Both internal and external aspects have a time element. Internally, the representation of how the world "should be" exists across the span of time as well as space, and this internal time exists as expectation. Externally, experienced incongruities clash in the present moment but are perceived to have ramifications into the immediate and/or extended future. An automatic generalization of one's personal experience seems to take place to the global and universal, that is, into the future. Personality theorist Kelly summed up his view of this matter as a basic postulate, "a person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he *anticipates* events" (1963, p. 210, emphasis added).

This time-consciousness is also an important dimension of the emotional impact of the experience (see below): incongruity will obviously have more impact if it appears to
signal permanent change. When we sometimes speak of past events as having become meaningless, we usually mean their emotional significance has faded. But an experienced event or situation of meaninglessness, in which networks of meaning-associations have been violated, occurs now in the present moment and into the future. That this disruption that is experienced in meaninglessness appears to color the whole future representation dark is perhaps where the "cosmic sense" originates. The representation process is constantly "future-making" into time as well as potential space. When events go awry now, it appears that will always be "wrong" everywhere.

The Disintegration. Throughout the chapters on the results and discussion of this study, references have been continuously made to the "worldview," Weltanschauung, "inner representation of reality," and so forth. It should be clear by now that these various labels are applied to the same mental phenomenon. Another model coming from the cognitive viewpoint of Kelly (1955, 1963), constructive alternativism, also provides a very useful conceptual framework for understanding how people prepare internal images of how the world "should be." Kelly's fundamental ideas have more recently been elaborated in more specific contexts such as depression by such prominent researchers as Beck (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979), Seligman (1989), and Yapko (2001). It is mentioned here because this cognitive model seems very applicable to certain aspects of the present formulation of meaninglessness that is being proposed, in particular the idea of "disintegration."

Disintegration of an individual's internal representation of the "world" is envisioned to occur due to imbalance, "dissonance," or incongruity in the dynamic equilibrium between it and externally perceived information or events. This assumes that during most of waking life, there exists a fairly complete and harmonious correspondence between these two aspects of consciousness. Whatever differences may appear can be readily
absorbed by assimilation of new perceptual material into the "world-representation" and/or by the accommodation of perceptual modalities to the inner representation. The latter operation, selective filtering or screening during perception (akin to perceptual defense), is an activity that is probably universal (Singer, 1990).

In addition, a number of participants, when given a chance to elaborate on their own views of the meaninglessness experience, stated with varying degrees of emphasis that they thought one's worldview collapses first in terms of its logical structure (i.e., cognitively) and that this is then followed by a complex emotional reaction:

I don't think that sadness is the same thing as meaninglessness. I think meaninglessness is way more fundamental to, like the truth of existence. I think that sadness, most of the time in the more normal people, sadness comes from a specific thing that happens which causes a specific loss in that person.... So that for me, from a very early age, there was no connect. There was a very obvious disconnect between the feeling of meaninglessness and the feeling of sadness.... you realize that meaninglessness is a very separate category. I think that if you're in a state of sadness, you're more reflective and that might make you notice that the meaninglessness is there. But the sadness is not part and parcel of the meaninglessness. The meaninglessness is there first and then the sadness, maybe as the light shining on the fact.

(Female, Age 26, Caucasian)

[talking about severe depression]
I think that's when the sadness begins, because part of you is dying, part of your inner self.
And that's where you become sad.

Interviewer: Okay, and then how do we distinguish that from meaninglessness?
Well, I think that the unawareness that part of you has died... like when I think of meaning, I think of connections. Okay, because of this, this happened. It interlocks. Things, events in
your life, people interlock. But if you lose that connection with yourself, that survival mode, that fight, fighting part of you comes out. I think if you lose connection of that, you lose the ability to connect with things outside of you as well and then that meaning, the connections begin to break apart and they get all mixed up and that's where the meaningless is.

(Female, Age 39, Japanese)

This opinion of the order of events was not unanimous. It is reflected to some extent in the survey material, but due to the format of those responses it is very difficult to tease these two aspects apart, let alone assign them a chronological order. The situation is reminiscent of the current model of depression as reflected in the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) and the current clinical literature. Depression is considered to be a "mood disorder," but it is popularly conceptualized and approached cognitively, partly because it is very difficult to separate the cognitive aspects from the affective ones.

**Disorientation.** A recent radio story interviewed a woman whose middle-aged and presumably healthy husband suddenly dropped dead on the tennis court from undetected coronary artery disease. The widow remarked that during her immediate shock, she didn't even know "what universe I was in." This is a rather typical impression conveyed by study participants who have experienced meaninglessness, particularly that attending a sudden tragic event, and is a dramatic characteristic that is difficult to overlook.

In certain individuals this seems to approach derealization. On the surface it looks as if there may be some relationship with the suddenness of the event. The popular term, "shock," seems to reflect this idea that there is insufficient time to make mental adjustments to the new reality. Moreover, it cannot be concluded that this state is necessarily the same that accompanies depression, with difficulties in concentration and sleep, and other symptoms. One possible difference stems from the observation that the
disorientation can evidently be immediate, as if one has not had time to adjust to the change.

The overall shape of the data seems to provide a good fit with Baumeister's (1991) concepts surrounding the universal "expectation of meaningfulness," the ubiquitous assumption of an accessible, understandable "grand design." Particularly relevant is his mention of people's tendency to "selectively edit" their worldviews in order to maintain coherence and thus sustain the illusion or "myth" of this higher meaning. By extension, when confronted by experiences that cannot be inserted into the worldview, no matter how drastic the editing and adjustment, people at that point experience meaninglessness, as has been suggested in the present study. Baumeister's closely interrelated corollaries, seem to apply very well to meaninglessness as well as meaning, specifically defining mental sets that are violated and pushed beyond their limits. In the meaninglessness narratives surveyed, all of these mental myths are violated in one way or another, the situation determining which is most prominent. The following four corollaries are Baumeister's own terms.

(1) The **Corollary of Completeness** is the assumption that everything should make sense:

I guess we're all taught there has to be a reason to something, a purpose of something, a reason for something and I guess you're trying to struggle with why would this happen to us. And there are all these other questions that you start to ask yourself later, and if there's no purpose and there's no reason, it just happened, that things just happen, it doesn't seem to be enough.... I mean it's not fair. Why did this happen?.... No, there are no answers.

(Female, Age 41, Caucasian)

(2) The **Corollary of Faith in Consistency** is the wish that answers to questions do not contradict each other (this appears to be similar to the previous corollary).
(3) **The Corollary of False Permanence** is people’s expectation that the rules and principles they learn will remain constant. This is often seen violated in the loss of important relationships:

My first marriage there was only a friendship and no love. I often was sad because of the lack of meaning... once you got married it was supposed to be forever and that you should be connected by love that is indestructible.

(Female, Age 29, Caucasian)

Parents divorce, Mom left. I had to take care of my younger brother... Wasn't sure of anything. Felt that even though my parents were once in love, that nothing is certain, therefore what's the meaning of anything... Nothing is certain, that life is changing, that we are still important, life is ongoing and that we learn from every situation.

(Male, Age 21, Filipino)

(4) The **Corollary Myth of Fulfillment** is the sense of entitlement towards feeling good on a regular basis.

Speaking for myself, this whole divorce that I’m going through now. I had a hard time because it was a lot of my dreams and my hopes for the future. These are thing that, you know, I had, not implanted in my mind, but, just because [of] this society. Visions of how my life is supposed to be, that I felt like, my god, this is a disappointment. I mean it like a big downhill from, okay, you got married, you had a child, and now all of a sudden it's all falling apart. That's not exactly the route that I was envisioning for myself.

(Female, Age 23, Caucasian-Chinese-Hawaiian-Japanese)

**The Affective Psychology of Meaninglessness: The Impact of the Question**

Previous subsections under “The Cognitive Psychology of Meaninglessness” only indirectly referred to an aspect of this phenomenon that is so central to it that it merits
separate consideration. Researchers agree that positive meanings in life represent a dimension that is inwardly experienced, subjective, and above all, profound. It is experienced as an acute sense of personal involvement with the individual's most intimate and vulnerable concepts of self and existence. People are involved either through outward activity, doing, or through inner transformation, insight, and self-actualization. In view of the centrality of this aspect with respect to meaning, it is important to assert that the question whether people get equally involved with meaninglessness seems to be clearly answerable in the affirmative.

Results reflect equal percentages for males and females of emotion-words associated with the keyword “meaninglessness.” This came as a surprise since the well-established (Brody, 1993, 1999; Doka & Martin, 2001) gender-related difference in emotional expression would predict a higher number for females. However, in the Short Answer narratives, there was a comparative reluctance of male participants to discuss their emotional reactions in specific meaninglessness situations, and this is gender-consonant. Perhaps even more significant was the general reluctance of males to participate in the exercise at all when they were asked to describe what were usually potentially emotional situations. The implication is that males are just as emotionally involved as females. The word-association exercise, being non-specific, allowed an emotional association in a format less threatening to the self-concept.

However, it was difficult to quantify the proportions of different emotions that appeared in the narrative material for several reasons. First, there still exists quite a bit of disagreement among researchers as to the labeling or classifications of emotions (Greenberg & Paivio, 1997; LeDoux, 1996). Secondly, there is much ambiguity in the degree of overlap even among emotions that are generally accepted as being distinct, e.g., sadness and shame. When a person commits an act which has sad consequences,
it will likely also leave a residue of shame or guilt. A third problem was the difficulty that is almost universal among lay people in labeling their own emotions (the immediately preceding example also serving here). And this discussion has not even mentioned the intrapsychic defensive dynamics that often discourage the recognition or identification of one’s emotions. This was particularly evident, for example, among male subjects who were obviously reluctant to admit hurt feelings (sadness) because doing so would clash with social expectations of “macho.”

Now to consider a more complicated question: if it is accepted that the affective dimension of the meaninglessness experience is an important one, it is less clear how a person’s emotional response is triggered by something so abstract as meaninglessness. Flanagan (2000) refers to “I-ness,” or “causality” (see also Baumeister, 1991; Sommer & Baumeister, 1998) as being a fundamental component of personal meaning. A similar concept appears in social learning theory as “self-efficacy” (e.g., Bandura, 1995). These ideas appear to have a close parallel in the theme of “agency” that seems to thread through the variety of meaninglessness situations collected in this study. Though this needs to be explored further, it would tentatively appear that the more disruptive an experience to an individual’s worldview, the more it involves a feeling of losing that sense of agency. Flanagan likewise mentions “relatedness” as another basic component in personal meaning. Though his sense was much broader, the current study certainly confirms that the collapse of social relations appears to be a common contributor to the feeling of meaninglessness. Since the social structure constitutes an important aspect of a person’s sense of security, its collapse would seem to trigger some very deep anxieties (e.g., Fromm, 1947; Maslow, 1970a).

In an earlier reference to the “impact” of the meaninglessness experience, it was emphasized that the power of the experience lies in its ability to disrupt lifestyles and alter
behavior and attitudes. As mentioned, the difficulty in distinguishing cognitive and affective aspects of the experience led to its description as a *Gestalt*. As one subject put it, "It's kind of... the chicken and the egg. Is it the feelings that are leading you to think there's nothing, and is it the nothing that makes you have the feelings? Um, it's hard to say... for me it's not a clear separation; difficult dividing the idea and the emotions." This was further complicated in that different individuals appeared to respond to different aspects of the experience.

To speculate a bit on this model, if meanings are envisioned as cognitive networks of associations, then perhaps situational variables combined with individual styles of attribution would give rise to different degrees of associative generalization. In other words, from the interface where perceptual experience clashes with the inner representation (or expectation), meaning-connections will ramify out in many directions. Different situations and individual differences in attributional style may account, at least in part, for the extent of the ramifications, and the accompanying linkages to deeper arousal structures in the brain may account for a wide variety of emotional involvement. From common observation it is seen that fundamental values, self concept, and such "vulnerable" themes (e.g., religion and politics) seem to be intimately tied to emotional processing. When corresponding areas of the brain are activated, the emotional impact would be expected to be greater than for other themes. Though there is a temptation to emphasize the logical, cognitive aspects of the phenomenon of meaninglessness, in practice it seemed very difficult to keep the emotional flavor of the data segregated. As many of the previous excerpts reflect, the "felt impact" is certainly emotional.

LeDoux (1996) describes at length the elements of emotional arousal upon perception of stimuli. While one may be used to thinking of concrete objects (e.g., grizzly bears) or even abstractions (e.g., death) as emotional stimuli, arousal may not be
object-dependent. The process could in fact be more equilibrium-dependent, in line with the concepts of homeostasis and the stress response (Lovallo, 1997; Selye, 1993). Thus a condition in which the inner cognitive representation and outer experience are not in accord may have an immediate triggering effect on the amygdala and arousal systems in the brain, like any equilibrium-threatening perception. It is not difficult to imagine that the crumbling of one's sense of reality, or worldview, is indeed a threatening event. A related point is that it is not necessary to think of the emotional component of the meaninglessness experience as resulting from a cortical or analytical appraisal (i.e., a “this doesn't make sense”) process. It may involve direct and speedy “precognitive” pathways such as the thalamus-amygdala system believed to account for the speed of the fear response LeDoux (1996).

Emotional involvement may thus arise, at least in part, as an automatic reaction to a cognitive mismatch, strictly speaking, but again, it is impossible at this stage to assume a particular order of events. Trauma, for example, is often defined in terms of its emotional impact. At the same time it embodies a threat to the internal organization of “reality” which says that the person is invulnerable.

This tie between cognition and emotions is one of the most speculative areas of this discussion so far, and the relative primacy of affect and cognition in experience, which constitute a long debate among psychologists, far exceeds the present topic (Ekman & Davidson, 1994; Lazarus, 1984, 1991; LeDoux, 1994; Zajonc, 1984, 1999). It is probably best to halt these speculations at the idea of a multidirectional Gestalt of cognitions and feelings. Given the available data, the inability to systematically relate the “severities” of emotional impact and logical disruption is a considerable frustration in this study. That ability would seem to get right to the phenomenological core of the experience, but may be addressable in future research.
Meaninglessness and the Dynamics of Adaptation

Many study participants not only related an experience of meaninglessness; they also revealed a repertoire of strong coping responses and a high degree of adaptability. It was therefore decided that this area was worthy of a brief separate discussion of several topics formerly touched on, and which will continue the speculative concept of "disequilibrium." This section covers the subtopics of the cognitive shake-up (disintegration) and how it relates to coping and adaptation, unhappiness, psychopathology, and goals, according to the model of meaninglessness formed in the course of this study.

Consider a dynamic model of meaning-making. Assimilation of and accommodation to new information is a constant, ongoing process during normal states of consciousness. When the rate of acquisition and the associative breadth of new information overwhelms one's mental ability to adjust, internal representations crumble faster than they can be reformulated. Old associative connections break down faster than new ones can be built. The resulting paucity of connections may be what is experienced as meaninglessness.

As was suggested previously, the emotional impact may arise partly in response to the disruption of associative networks. In this event it may be a mistake to view the emotional response as due solely to external perceived stimuli. Similar to automatic monitoring of proprioceptive cues, there may be a continuous monitoring of the integrity of the internal representation of the "world." When this cohesion is threatened, emotional alarms are triggered, and this would explain why anxiety is a typical concomitant to thought-disruptive mental disorders such as depression and schizophrenia. If, as is suggested, the meaning-making process is envisioned as being inserted between the
stimulus and response, then the emotional response is to the internal representation of the external information, or to the breakdown of that representation if it becomes overwhelmed by contradiction. This emotional response may derive its fundamental impact by threatening *Existenz*, the potentiated sense of *becoming* that defines humanity; the result would be an equally fundamental terror of being out of control.

**Freedom of Attitude and Coping.** Choice, however, does seem to play a role at some deep existential level. Choice will have entered into the experiential formation of associations in the first place, but it is most apparent in what people will do when confronted with a crumbling world. Numerous excerpts could be given of subjects first recoiling from the experience of meaninglessness, then working to rebuild meaning in their lives. This, in fact, was a difficult confound when analyzing behavioral outcomes of these experiences, for many people would discount their “withdrawal” response and focus on subsequent coping behaviors. The following example, from a 34 year-old Caucasian woman who felt on the edge of divorce, illustrates both:

> I feel horrible and feel as though he may not truly love me. If you love a person you don't say or do things that may harm them. This has happened on more than one occasion along with other acts on his behalf. I am married to him but believe that we may not be together for as long as we had planned.... He's my new family and I believe that he treats me like crap.... I do feel somewhat depressed, but my life will go on. I will continue my education, land myself that job and look out for myself. I now believe that you can't give your all in a relationship. You can't reveal your true self, because if you let yourself open, you're going to get hurt. Emotionally, and possibly physically.

Human ability to absorb, learn, and adapt is virtually miraculous. The dynamic model that tentatively seems to work with the data in this study would have it that when one's worldview is overwhelmed by conflicting experience, it is only because events
happen faster than the inner representation can adjust to them. But to put things in proper perspective, it must be remembered that all study participants, by the nature of their life-stories, were eventually able to fit their experiences into their own (past) histories. This certainly suggests that though the adaptive ability of consciousness may have been temporarily overridden, the equilibrated interface between inner representation and experiential information will ultimately re-establish itself.

It is tempting to suggest that all coping, no matter how behavioral or physical, is just an attempt to hold together the worldview. Recent exchanges between Cramer (2000, 2001), Erdelyi (2001), and Newman (2001) have highlighted the intertwined relationships between coping, defenses, and various levels of consciousness. Inasmuch as psychological defenses operate to protect against threats, it is difficult to imagine a greater threat than the sense that one's meaning-systems are crumbling.

**Reconsidering Meaninglessness and “Unhappiness,” Well-being, and Psychopathology.** The widespread assumption that a lack of meaning is “bad” may make more sense in light of its role as a potential threat, and thus appears not to be entirely a cultural phenomenon. Frankl's (1969, 1984) will to meaning may be more readily understood as an organic response to serious cognitive disruption. On the other hand, as outlined in an earlier section, the majority of researchers agree that the state of meaningfulness is not necessarily identical to a state of happiness.

From the current data, the clearest answer to the question of whether experienced meaninglessness necessarily involves “unhappiness” lies in the results of the word-association exercise. Despite a predominance of negative associations, there are yet a number of classes of neutral concepts which cannot necessarily be labeled “unhappy,” such as stupidity (“Mental Confusion, Boredom”), (absence of) “Value,” unimportance (“Purpose, Importance, Goals”), and emptiness or nothingness (“Void”).
The latter three categories actually had the highest percentages of male endorsements and this was virtually parallel for females. In the category of "Emotions," however, hopelessness, a term clearly associated with unhappiness, rated highly. It should be remembered that the data is skewed towards Western philosophical thinking. At least one participant dared to venture towards the Buddhist concept of emptiness as nirvana, a state to be strived towards. This is a Caucasian male, age 22, who, feeling responsible for the death of a friend, attempted suicide:

Emotions are very closely tied with the idea. And I think the idea is there regardless of the emotions. So you can have opposite feelings and still the idea, there. For example, for a while I was very interested in Buddhism and the ideas behind that which ultimately leads to nothing in the end. The purpose seems to be to achieve this state of nothing... And in that way, in that philosophy, there is goal-oriented nothingness. Um, striving for that. It's kind of a striving without striving. Because you're not... you can't want that. That's just a mess.

[laugh] It's just taking right action to achieve that which still gives you a good feeling even though you know that there's nothing there. So obviously it's the realization of meaninglessness.

This question of the desirability or undesirability of meaninglessness remains unresolved on the basis of the data from this study. It would be interesting to pursue this further with respect to groups of differing age and ethnicity, which was unfortunately not possible with the current sample size.

The broader area of psychopathology and well-being and how it relates to meaninglessness is sufficiently complex that an attempt has been made to address only a couple of the possible related issues that have received attention. Based on the current exploratory data the only statements that can be made are speculative and center on
possible connections between commonly-held perceptions of meaninglessness and commonly-held experiences of "depression" (i.e., not as a diagnostic label).

Although suicidality per se is relevant as a probable indicator of depression, it is the depression itself that is of concern in the present findings. There was a subset of study participants who appeared to have been afflicted with depression at the time of the meaninglessness experience they reported. They were felt to warrant separate treatment because, compared to other participants, there seemed to be a different chronological relationship between their "depressive" symptoms and the onset of what they experienced as meaninglessness. In this group the distinguishing feature was that there appeared to be a disintegration of the worldview independent of the kinds of external triggers that were identifiable for other groups of experiencers. To the observer, it appeared that the first thing to happen was some sort of mental dysfunction which decreased the level of tolerance of the "internal-external" comparison. In other words, it looked like some process of distortion first arose within the person and subsequently affected perception, rather than perception being directly affected by interaction with outward events. "First" is used loosely here since chronology is, at best, difficult to infer, but reflects the impression conveyed by these individuals and is preferable to the term "causality."

Within this model, it would seem to require less of a mismatch to produce a sense of meaninglessness. Tentatively, then, the healthy person is able to cope with a larger mismatch, while the depressed person is vulnerable to a smaller mismatch. This distinction, in fact, almost defined the use of the term "depression" to describe this group. The fact that these participants also identified (retrospectively) a group of symptoms that customarily surrounds clinical depression merely served as a confirmation.

Here is a 39-year old Asian-American female relating an earlier experience:
... a state of deep depression that I did not know the reason for. It was my senior year in high school. Family and friends and my doctor tried to help, but nothing helped. My school attendance and grades, and my social and family life deteriorated. In the end, suicide was the only option I could see as a way to end the pain.

... And what it feels like is that, it's not something that just happens all at once. It's something that happened over time, and it seems like every day my reasons for living decreased until it was zero, and I couldn't even imagine, my body didn't even have the energy to imagine. And I take that back now because I did imagine life after death. So I guess I was imagining. But it was like a different, I wanted to be in another reality. There was just this emptiness and void.

Trauma is almost by definition the ultimate disruption of a person's worldview, and hence should be central to the generation of meaninglessness. It is therefore unfortunate that the questionnaire data on self-reported continuing trauma experiences was intended and useful only as a preliminary screening measure. A single question was obviously not sufficient to explore this area deeply, nor was the sample sufficiently large to point to probable categorical differences. It would be very interesting to continue pursuing this aspect in the future.

**Reconsidering Goals and Meaninglessness.** A further implication of people's adaptation to a lack of meaning is that much goal-directed behavior in healthy people may therefore be attempts to forestall emptiness. Various authors (Emmons et al., 1998) have suggested that recovery of personal goals may be linked to regaining life-meanings after trauma has shattered them.

The results of this study suggested much in the way of a relationship between goal-directed behavior and meaninglessness. The following situational categories in particular have to do with this: “Accomplishment,” “Frustrated Self-actualization,”
"Pointless Activities," "Personal Failure," "Interpersonal Tension, Conflict in Views or Communication" (in the sense that interpersonal relations are guided largely by self-interested goals), "Interpersonal Tension, Betrayal of Trust by Other," "Interpersonal Tension, Rejection by Other" (especially), "Relationship Loss with Significant Other" (especially), and "Traumatic Experience (Personal)" (if it deprives the person of the ability to strive towards goals).

Although many observers (Emmons, 1999; Emmons et al., 1998; Joske, 1982; Klinger, 1998) have maintained that the pursuit of goals provides meanings to individuals' lives, the current data suggest that a slightly different stance may be more appropriate. It may be more accurate to say that people first seek meanings. People seek coherence in their worldviews; they seek to make the whole conglomerate of consciousness hold together, regardless of how it has been previously shaped by biology and experience. Part of the worldview involves one's concept of oneself, as a living, functioning, and significant part of that worldview. Goal-seeking behavior may thus be an effort to materialize or make manifest that self-concept; as Emmons (1999) puts it, goals are "internal representations of desired states, where states are broadly construed as outcomes, events, or processes" (p. 16).

Evidently all may not agree to the preeminent importance of coherence. Klinger (1998), for example, suggests that life's meaning is largely derived from the pursuit of goals itself. However, this may not be accurate, because his subject seems to be not goals but purpose, more closely related to self-concept, which in turn is part of the worldview. The meaning, if it is possible to reason backwards from the proposed model of meaninglessness, is the coherent structure of the Weltanschauung; goal-directed behavior attempts to hold that structure together. Though goals may be useful "units of
analysis" (Emmons, 1999), it is important to appreciate the phenomenological view that
first one construes one's world, then out of that construal comes goals.

[when a person feels meaninglessness...] People stop trying to be as moral.... Maybe you
just won't be as inspired to live your life everyday the best you've been and that kind of idea,
it diminishes... you think nothing has meaning... doing everything as best as you can.

Interviewer: So it sounds like... motivation to live by the accepted standards or rules sort of
dries up.... And why would that dry up?

Why would you bother living by those standards if those standards have no meaning to
them? There's no reason for it. There's no reason for anything, so why, I might as well sit
on the couch. And if it's gonna do just as good to sit on the couch as it is to go to work
everyday then go sit on the couch. It's relaxing, and it seems a lot better than going to work.

Interviewer: So it sounds like long term goals or higher goals that we might have had
become less important.

Yeah. Meaningless.... I think they're still there but you never really fell totally into the idea of
meaninglessness. At least most people don't. Some people do. They don't do real well in
society either. Yeah, it seems like that if your purpose in life is no more.... That would be the
key thing that would fall apart I think when you come to realize the meaninglessness.

(Male, Age 22, Caucasian)

I guess meaningful, meaninglessness is having no focus. It's having nothing there. Just
existing almost without doing anything.

Interviewer: Focus... you touched upon this previously. Purpose, and I like this word, focus.
It seems we need reason, purpose and goals, would that be fair to say? Some sort of goal?

I think so, but whatever goal that might be it doesn't have to be a tremendous goal. It could
be a goal to, you know, get to work, and do a good job, come home to you know clean up
the yard, anything. And I think it's really important to have those goals.

(Female, Age 41, Caucasian)
The Existential and Spiritual Psychology of Meaninglessness

Many participating individuals who felt that they truly experienced a period of meaninglessness in their lives, almost by definition had an existential experience. By this is meant an experience that had an altering effect on worldview and on behavior with respect to one's worldview. There are a number of aspects to this, most of which relate to points touched on earlier: meaninglessness as cosmic misfortune, the relationships to the experience of death and spirituality, and some observations on how the data fits the existential concept of "three worlds."

Tragic, "Cosmic" Meaninglessness. It was previously noted that ambiguity exists in the way the meaninglessness construct can be understood. "Tragic" meaninglessness is generally associated with a "cosmic" or universal role, and the narrative material suggested that for participants whose experience was tragic, this larger frame of reference was involved. The principal exceptions were the few references to Eastern or Buddhist thought in which dissolution of meaning is tantamount to liberation, or at least escape. This result came as no surprise; despite the majority of questionnaire responders being of Asian ancestry, they are generally immersed in a Western view which is not very accepting of the idea of dissolution of meaning. An example of an exception to this comes from this 39-year old Japanese-American female:

Interviewer: So it almost sounds as if, in the context of what we've been saying, meaning and the meaninglessness are opposites?

Yeah. But each one feeds the other. Kind of like ying and yang. And actually in the big picture, I don't think that meaninglessness is a bad thing. I think it's part of your life cycle just like the plant, Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter. In Spring there is life. Winter there is death. And I think that's how we live. I think in our souls we have renewal and death, renewal and
death. I don't think we can have one of them..... It's kind of like love, hate... it's kind of like to the degree that you love some person you can also hate them. To the degree that you hate someone you can also love them.... Just like meaninglessness and meaningful.

The word-association exercise provided a significant subset of associations with "Material Things," "Stupidity," "Mental Confusion, Boredom," or "Semantics, Grammar, Language" concepts. Though this would seem to indicate many "non-tragic" associations, that supposition is not supported by the nature of the narratives. Since it is probably easier to prevent single-word associations than freestyle anecdotes from going beyond this level, it may indicate an emotional reluctance to venture near that very same "tragic" frame of reference.

**Death and Meaninglessness.** As experience attests, the death of another is one of the most powerfully meaning-defying life events. This was certainly reflected by study participants who had experienced a bereavement. Not only were the events emotionally powerful; they seemed to most readily trigger the disintegration of the inner expectation, however implicit, in the face of the undeniable outward event. These two dimensions, the emotional sadness and the existential change in worldview that was forced on the individual, reflected most powerfully the pre-eminence of this event as the quintessential example of the meaninglessness experience, for young and old, male or female.

The death of my father in his early 40s and having to battle against a disease for the last ten years of his life.... I guess we're all taught there has to be a reason to something, a purpose of something, a reason for something and I guess you're trying to struggle with why would this happen to us. And there are all these other questions that you start to ask yourself later, and if there's no purpose and there's no reason, it just happened, that things just happen, it doesn't seem to be enough.
Interviewer: Somehow this sounds like it violates your sense of logic? Would that be fair to say?

Yeah. I would think so. Kind of a fairness. I mean it's not fair. Why did this happen? ...and it's kind of a silly thing because of course there are many reasons why these things happen. And as far as a medical reason, there is, yes there's definite reasons why these things happen. But to transcend that, I guess in a more philosophical kind of point of view, it's hard to answer those questions. You can't... you're kind of left with these thoughts with no one to give you any answers. So you're kind of left to figure it out by yourself, and there aren't too many places to turn.... No, there are no answers. You have to find yourself.

(Female, Age 41, Caucasian)

**Meaninglessness and Spirituality.** That spirituality is frequently tied to meaninglessness experiences may have a lot to do with specific forms of cognitive generalization mentioned earlier. Whatever its origins, just as spirituality is inevitably implicated in the ultimate concern of life-meaning, so it appears that this has an important association with meaninglessness. It is significant that, as indicated by the word association exercise, a proportion of subjects relate this topic to spiritual dimensions (under the group labeled "Cosmos, Life, Reality"). Though the proportion of participants is small, for many of these the relational connection with a spiritual dimension appears to have comparable importance with the other relational categories of "Other People," "Self-concept," and "External Reward or Threat."

A number of subjects related that the disruptive experience which gave them a sense of meaninglessness was instrumental in rejuvenating the spiritual aspect of their lives, sometimes in predictable ways, sometimes not.

[The aftereffects of this experience...] *gratitude* for being alive. I could have been successful at my suicide attempt and died. Every day since that attempt that I have been alive is a gift
because this extra time on earth has helped me to find hope and joy and love and peace, or, as I call these things today, God. My definition of life and death and God has expanded over the years. Expansion of the human spirit in its many forms seems to expand the meaning of life or in life.... I think a lot of my thoughts of meaning and meaninglessness these days comes from my spiritual beliefs.

(Female, Age 39, Japanese)

Jury duty for a DUI incident. The defendant refused the breath test or any other tests. Half the jury at one time or another had driven under the influence. I however never had and they were sympathetic to the driver so the case ended in a hung jury and the defendant was not convicted. It was meaningless to try to convince the other jurors, he was guilty.... I thought life wasn't fair to begin with, but after seeing and experiencing this situation, I was just really disheartened and felt this world is not perfect and I see a better future in heaven where things are not corrupt. It made me realize again that I can't trust things on earth. Trust in God only.

(Female, Age 27, Chinese)

It was stated earlier that self-reports in this study appeared to be generally congruent with Baumeister's (1991) concept of the universal “expectation of meaningfulness” and the “corollary myth of fulfillment.” If these are in fact mythical, then a genuine relational element of spirituality would seem to be inconsistent. One possible explanation may be that spirituality may be most relevant to those who refuse to admit that meaninglessness exists, or, as it is most commonly put, “everything happens for a reason.” Perhaps for these individuals higher meaning remains unviolated because they are able to “edit” their worldviews to accommodate happenings which are inconsistent. Similarly, if a person persists in faith, does that mean that he or she has not really experienced meaninglessness? Is faith the ultimate expression of editing the worldview;
i.e., can the worldview be edited down to this point and no farther? This question, unanswered at present, may some day be clarified in light of the meaninglessness construct.

**Meaninglessness and Dasein.** May's (1958b) statement that "World is the structure of meaningful relationships in which a person exists and in the design of which he participates.... But it is these as I relate to them" (p. 59, italics in original), was not consciously intended to be a starting point for investigation. However, it must have made some deep impression on the researcher, because it became inspirational in the understanding of the data of this study. Although unplanned, the identification in the data of relations whose breakdown or disintegration frame the experience of meaninglessness, must owe a dept to this concept articulated so well by existentialists such as May.

Almost as inspirational is Heidegger's conceptualization of the *Weltanschauung* as encompassing the three "modes of relating," *Umwelt, Mitwelt,* and *Eigenwelt* (Heidegger, 1982; May, 1958a). These "worlds" in some respects comprise very nearly the same relationships that appeared out of the narrative accounts. *Umwelt,* "the world around you," the environment, is the exception; it does not seem to play a prominent role in meaninglessness as it has appeared thus far. One must suspect that this remoteness may have been less true in historically more primitive times, but not for study participants.

Natural disasters were not cited, and external rewards and threats which can be cornerstones of meaning or its absence, are generally conveyed through society. *Mitwelt,* however, the "with-world," the world of fellow humans, is the realm of relationships to other people, self-concept (which is largely social), and external rewards or threats, which again mainly take a social form. *Eigenwelt,* the "own-world," is also the domain of relationships with one's own self-concept and with the cosmic forces one experiences in the spiritual life.
Thus these key existential-phenomenological concepts reviewed previously have appeared nicely reflected in the present conceptualization of meaninglessness.

**Conclusions and Future Work**

In a semi-qualitative study of this kind, the "conclusions" are intertwined to a large extent with the methodological process, and the reader is encouraged to refer to previous sections. By way of summarizing conclusions for goals (2) and (3), respectively the phenomenology of the experience of meaninglessness and the dimensions and structural components of meaninglessness, it should suffice to reiterate the synthetic generic model of meaninglessness that was put forth earlier.

From common experience, it did not come as a surprise that meaninglessness is experienced as a cognitive-affective Gestalt and that this embodies its phenomenological impact. Further, it is not surprising that, depending on the situation and the individual, there are behavioral consequences and resulting existential transformations. The significance of the degree of perceived agency-responsibility remains unclear, though a connection with existential angst is suspected. Most satisfying, perhaps, is the clarification of the actual psychological core of meaninglessness as, first, a dialectical juxtaposition of inner representation and outer experience along essential lines of relating to components of the "world," and, second, that breakdown in any of these directions is somehow so unbearable to the psyche that the entire "world" is experienced as collapsing.

How this collapse differs among individuals is the subject of goal (1), variations in the experience of meaninglessness. Though a detailed examination of this area was not possible from the data obtained in this study, several directions were suggested from differences in gender and in attributional and affective styles, and perhaps differences in
agency-responsibility. The latter may in fact underlie the real significance of situational variability. These questions were brought to light but not answered by the data obtained in this study, and point to the future directions suggested in this section.

Goal (4), the examination of the validity of meaninglessness as a useful psychological construct, was carried out by way of the dimensions and structures that were revealed. In brief, meaninglessness seems to be a breakdown in relational connections to the phenomenal world. This suggests that these structures indeed appear to be sources of meaning and that there emerges a close parallel to the models of meaning put forth by others.

As might be expected from an exploratory study of this type, more questions arise than are put to rest. A number of viable directions for future research emerged from the foregoing findings, but are dependent first on one overriding consideration. That consideration is the subjective nature of this study and the findings that have been presented here. All research is subjective to some extent, whether acknowledged or not, in that human judgment is involved in selecting the questions to be asked, deciding on the methodology, performing analyses, evaluating and presenting results, and so forth. Qualitative work is by definition subjective, and far from detracting from its merit, it is felt that this allows the process of investigation to attain new levels of creative inquiry and integrative insights. But if the results obtained therein are to assume a role that is supportive of further scientific inquiry, they must be freed to some extent from their limiting heritage as an admixture of valid observations and presuppositions of the experimenter.

Therefore the first question in the future should address the issue of the broad validity of the present model of meaninglessness. The question takes the following form: suppose this same dataset were given to other researchers along with the same original open-ended question, "what do you make of this?" Would they then produce the same
phenomenological structure: situations, attribution of agency, dialectical juxtaposition, relational orientations, and so forth? This thus becomes a matter of straightforward replication, and unfortunately few researchers could be expected to be willing to do that for reasons of time, effort, and expense. There is, however, the possibility that smaller, limited, unstructured replications could reasonably be performed.

Regardless of replication of the overall interpretive structure, the second large question relating to validity would be an interrater evaluation of the categories that have been derived so far. This is a structured, piecemeal process and would be much more feasible than a simple replication. Given the same dataset, competent evaluators would be asked to provide their own assignments of affect, cognitive dialectical juxtaposition, attributions, and so forth; the two sets of results would then be compared.

Thirdly, the situations of the meaninglessness experiences offered by participants tentatively seem to describe a continuous series or perhaps a categorical set of differences in the subjective sense of the role of the participant in the disillusionment. This has been referred to as differences in agency or responsibility, and it would seem that future efforts should continue to clarify these differences and explore their significance. Regardless of other dimensional hypotheses, that would dictate the need for larger samples from each situation subgroup, both to take a closer look at the agency-responsibility aspect itself with respect to affect, for example, and to contrast other aspects. As the next objective, those other aspects that could then be more precisely examined with respect to differences in agency would thus include: age, gender, ethnicity, affect, and cognitive aspects such as attributional styles. In other words, potential relationships should be explored among most of the dimensions and parameters that have been discussed previously.
Lastly, this topic will never be complete until a more detailed look is taken at two subgroups which appeared during the course of the study, that labeled “depression” and those who deny the meaningfulness construct. The condition of depression is not simply a yes-or-no state, which complicates the uncertainty whether this should be regarded as a more-or-less independent dimension. A study contrasting meaningfulness using a clinically diagnosed group of depressed individuals, compared to normals, would be of real value. Finally, the attributions and other cognitions of those who deny the whole construct of meaningfulness should be studied as to whether they do in fact represent a distinct group.
APPENDIX A
Opinion Survey Questionnaire

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN
LIFE PHILOSOPHY PROJECT

Principal Investigator
Noel Jordan, M.A.
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Honolulu, HI 96822

1. Description
I understand that this is Dissertation research in Psychology, the purpose of which is to
investigate the relationships of demographic, personality, and/or behavior variables that may be
associated with the understanding or experiencing of certain philosophical concepts. I understand
that this study will require volunteer participants to answer questionnaire(s) on topics that some may
consider sensitive, such as their understanding and/or interpretations of philosophical, religious, or
spiritual terminology.
I understand that I will be assigned bonus points to my psychology class total for my
completion of these questionnaire(s). I understand that some participants may also be invited to
voluntarily participate in an interview or group discussion in a later phase of the study, for which they
will receive $20.00. I understand that equivalent bonus points are available even if I choose not to
participate in this study, by doing another exercise that will be explained by the researcher or the
course instructor, and will not be a source of research data for this study. I also understand that I
am free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty, and that bonus points and/or
payment as applicable will be awarded even if I do not complete my participation.
I understand that my answers to these questionnaires will be grouped with those of other
participants, to help improve our scientific understanding of the psychological determinants of
philosophical and spiritual attitudes. I understand that this project will be terminated no later than
the year 2002.

2. Expected Procedures and Length of Involvement in Study
I understand that the questionnaires I will be asked to complete will require less than
approximately one hour to complete. I understand that my name and/or student number is required
for correct assignment of bonus points or cash reward, and that these identifiers will be removed
upon verification of completion of the questionnaire. I understand that the questionnaires will then
be anonymous, and that they are assigned code numbers known only by the investigator and
research assistants.
I understand that, if I wish, I may be contacted by the investigator or assistant at a later date
to take part in the interview/group phase of the study. I understand that this second phase of the
study involves an interview lasting not more than approximately one hour, or a group discussion
lasting not more than two hours. If I wish to participate in the second phase, I understand that I will
be asked to provide my telephone number and/or Email address, and that I give my consent to
make this information available so that contact can be made. By providing this information I
understand that the material on this questionnaire will no longer have complete anonymity, but will nevertheless still be confidential to the extent provided by state and federal law. I understand that a second consent form will be presented to me for approval in the
second phase of the project if I am asked to participate.

3. Statement of Risks and Benefits
I understand that answering questionnaire items about my opinions and understanding of
spiritual or religious terms may be uncomfortable for me and may cause me some distress. If so, I acknowledge that I can contact the Principal Investigator or researcher for referral to professional services, or I can contact the Counseling and Student Development Center directly at 956-7927.

I understand that there is always a potential risk of loss of privacy by completing questionnaires. However, I am aware that every effort will be made to maintain participant privacy including the assignment of a participant number and the storage of information anonymously in locked files and locked offices. I understand that code numbers that appear on the answer forms can only be matched by the researchers and that the master list of code numbers will be destroyed immediately after the second phase of the study is completed.

I understand that the data from the study will be submitted for statistical analysis without including any information about any person's identity. It will be completely anonymous (i.e., use no person's name). I am, however, willing to have results from this study published or shared for scientific or professional purposes if I am not personally identified.

I understand that the possible desirable benefits of taking part in this study are to help advance our scientific understanding of the many variables that influence philosophical and spiritual understanding and behavior. I understand that taking part in this research may not necessarily benefit my personal life. I understand that any important new information discovered during the project will be given to me upon my request. I can obtain this information by contacting the Principal Investigator whose name and address appear at the top of this consent form.

4. Consent and Certification

I certify that I have read and that I understand the foregoing contents of this consent form, and that I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions concerning project procedures and/or other matters, and that I have been advised that I am free to withdraw my consent and to discontinue participation in the project at any time without hurting my course work or class standing.

I also understand that if I have any questions about any matters relating to this project, I may contact the researchers listed in the beginning of this form, and I can discuss any questions that I might have with them. I understand that my consent does not take away any of my legal rights in case of negligence or carelessness by anyone who is working on this project.

I certify that I am 18 years or older and that I am a university student currently residing in Hawaii.

I herewith give my consent to participate in this project with the understanding that such consent does not waive any of my legal rights, nor does it release the principal investigator or the institution or any employee or agent thereof from liability for negligence.

Participant—Last Name, First Name __________________________ Signature __________________________ Date __________________________

Your Psychology course name or no. (for bonus pts.) __________________________ Instructor's name __________________________

Noel Jordan, M.A. __________________________ Signature __________________________ Date __________________________

NOTE: If you cannot obtain satisfactory answers to your questions or have comments or complaints about your participation in this study, contact: Committee on Human Studies, 2540 Maile Way, University of Hawai'i, Honolulu, Hawai'i 96822, 808-956-5007.
Please complete all parts in order.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Sex (check one)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Age: (in years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Ethnicity:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your first language?</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each horizontal row below is a continuum of ethnic identity, with Hawaii’s most common ethnic groups on one end, and American on the other end because you are currently living here.</td>
<td>Caucasian-European</td>
<td>Caucasian-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please find the one row with which you identify and check the box that best indicates how you personally feel about your most important ethnicity. For example, if you are Japanese-American you would mark only the “American----Japanese” row. If you identify more comfortably with Japanese culture and values than American ones, on that row you would check a box closer to the Japanese side.</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If your parents are of different ethnicities, say for example Korean and Japanese, try to choose only the single most suitable row (in this example either the American----Korean row or the American----Japanese row). If you cannot decide which ethnicity is more important to you, mark both rows as appropriate.</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hawaiian</td>
<td>American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other (specify)</td>
<td>American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Please write down in order at least the first **three** words that come to your mind (i.e., are associated) with the idea of **meaninglessness**.

(Please work as quickly as possible; the words that come mind don’t have to make sense to you; just put down whatever first pops into your head.)

<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please rate how the following statements apply to yourself **for the past 2 weeks or more**

Circle the appropriate number on the scale at the right:

1 = a little of the time
2 = some of the time
3 = good part of the time
4 = most or all of the time

<p>| | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I feel that I am useful and needed.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I felt down-hearted, blue, and sad.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I felt hopeful about the future.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I had trouble sleeping through the night.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I ate as much as I used to.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I felt that everything I did was an effort.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>My mind is as clear as it used to be.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>I felt depressed.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I still enjoyed the things I used to do.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Trauma** is experiencing or learning about an event involving death, injury or serious harm to yourself or another person, with your reaction being intense fear, helplessness, or horror. (Typical trauma experiences involve physical or sexual abuse, accidents, being the victim of a crime, and natural disasters; but there are many other possible situations.)

If you have ever experienced a serious traumatic experience in your life, please indicate below how much this event continues to influence or impact your current life (check one):

- [ ] not at all
- [ ] a little
- [ ] moderate amount
- [ ] a lot
- [ ] extremely

For each statement below, please circle the appropriate number on the scale in the middle column:
- **Numbers on the left** of the scale (1,2,3) mean you agree to the statement on the left;
- **Numbers on the right** of the scale (5,6,7) mean you agree with the opposing view at the right;
- 4 is always neutral.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Numbers on the left</th>
<th>Numbers on the right</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>My future is quite uncertain</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>...certain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Life is meaningful</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>...meaningless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Human nature is stable, and hence general laws can be formulated about it</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>...unstable... cannot be formulated...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The direction of my life is based entirely on my own choices</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>not based entirely...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>There is much certainty about the existence of God</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>...little certainty...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>It is quite certain what happens after death</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>...uncertain...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Love is both agony and joy</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>...is not both...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Humans are not always free to make their own choices</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>...always free...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Genuine personal relationships are beneficial</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>...futile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>It is disturbing that there are many paradoxes and contradictions in life</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>...not disturbing...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>That death may come at any moment to myself or loved ones is especially upsetting</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>not especially upsetting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>There is no purpose to life</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>a purpose to life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>I find it quite discomforting when failure continuously befalls me</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>I do not find it...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Truth is subjective</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>When I lose my temper or get extremely angry, I really regret it afterward</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>I do not regret it...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>The thought that death is inevitable is not discomforting</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>is discomforting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>I do not find it unpleasant that I have many personal limitations and inadequacies</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>I find it unpleasant...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>I am constantly facing myself</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>not constantly...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>I do not get upset if I lose something valuable</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>I get upset...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>I am not open to all unharmful experiences</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td>open...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Short Answer Questions

Try to think of a specific situation in which you most profoundly experienced *meaninglessness*.

Then complete the following sentences in your own words:

1. Briefly, the overall circumstances of the situation (what, when, where, other people) were...

2. My feelings in this situation were...

3. (For this question, please check ✓ all that apply; put more than one check ✓✓ if it was very strong)
   At the time of this situation:
   - I had a low opinion of myself;
   - I felt sad or depressed;
   - my sleep habits changed;
   - my eating habits changed;
   - I was very restless;
   - very sluggish;
   - it was difficult to concentrate;
   - I stopped enjoying things in life;
   - I thought a lot about death or mortality;
   - the future looked bad.

4. This felt specifically like meaninglessness, rather than some other emotion, because...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Short Answer Questions (continued)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>continuing with this same situation in which you most profoundly experienced <em>meaninglessness</em>. . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . complete the following sentences in your own words:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.(a) Before this situation, I think my expectations or beliefs about this aspect of life were...

(b) Then the actual events of this situation changed my views in this way...

6. The aftereffects of this experience on my external behavior, actions, life are/were...
Please give us your opinions of these exercises by marking the scales for the following questions.

Your frank replies will NOT affect your getting credit for this exercise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>How accurate are the answers you provided to the previous questions?</th>
<th>Not at all &lt;----- &gt; Very</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>How easy was it for you to answer the previous questions?</th>
<th>Not at all &lt;----- &gt; Very</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>How motivated were you to answer all the previous questions as well as you could?</th>
<th>Not at all &lt;----- &gt; Very</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Did you complete the different parts of this packet in the order they appear?</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

THANK YOU VERY MUCH—THE QUESTIONNAIRE IS NOW DONE

Below is an opportunity for further participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>How easy was it to think of the &quot;meaninglessness experience&quot; you described in your own words on the previous page?</th>
<th>Not at all &lt;----- &gt; Very</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>How great was the impact of this experience on your life?</th>
<th>Not at all &lt;----- &gt; Very</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>How willing would you be to talk about it or similar experiences in a private audiotape-recorded interview with the experimenter, in phase 2 of this study? If you are selected you would receive $20.00 as payment.</th>
<th>Not at all &lt;----- &gt; Very</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>How willing would you be to discuss the general topic of meaninglessness in a tape-recorded group setting of 6 to 8 other students in phase 2 of this study? If you are selected you would receive $20.00 as payment.</th>
<th>Not at all &lt;----- &gt; Very</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SKIP THIS PART IF NOT INTERESTED IN POSSIBLE FUTURE PARTICIPATION Contact Phone(s) or E-mail</th>
<th>1st choice—Phone/Email, best time?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>This is not a guarantee that you will be chosen</td>
<td>2nd choice—Phone/Email, best time?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please write in a name we should ask for if we contact you:

(otherwise, we will ask for "psychology student")

Please write any additional comments on the back

MAHALO FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!
APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW GUIDE

(Adapted from Arksey & Knight, 1999)

(1) Number: (S-no.date.time code)

(2) Sex: Male  Female  (3) Age:  (4) Ethnicity:

Set interviewee at rest

a. You may be feeling kind of weird, not knowing what to expect...
b. Mostly a chance for you to talk; I will try to guide only the direction...
c. Explain some things now; you can become more comfortable...

Explain purpose of interviews

a. How long it will take: 1 hour
b. Payback to informant; $20. (+the experience); follow-up meeting, $10.
c. Administer
i. informed consent
ii. ethical rules, confidentiality, anonymity, identifying features
iii. audiotape disposal
iv. "Your identity is going to be completely hidden... etc."
d. You can ask questions at the end, if you want

Move into topic

a. We are interested in people's personal subjective experiences of Meaninglessness:
b. This experience common to a lot of people, we who have experienced this...
i. Not evaluative or judgmental—brainstorm only
ii. Your experience—whatever—is valid, important, valuable
c. Even though important topic, very little research on meaninglessness
d. Trying to find out: How can we talk about this? Mostly, what is it like?
e. Check on Questionnaire:
   i. What did you think of it?
   ii. Confusing?
   iii. Your answers: Satisfied? Wanted to change anything after you had turned it in?

General Questions:

a. Your peer group/acquaintances: Do people mention meaninglessness?
b. Generally, how does a person experience meaninglessness in life? What characterizes a life that is felt to be meaninglessness?
c. Something is missing? What?
d. What do people do when they feel meaningless?
e. Easy to imagine experiences of feeling angry, or hopeless, or sadness in life; but how do you think most people would distinguish the experience of "meaninglessness"?
5. Direct / Personal Questions:
   a. On a scale of 0 to 10, how meaningful is your life right now?
      i. How full of meaning is it usually for you?
      ii. Personally, how do you conceptualize, understand "meaninglessness"?
      iii. If you were to try to capture this in a picture, what would it look like?
      iv. What does it make you think of?
      v. Do you think other people understand this term in a similar way?
   b. When did you first experience meaningful in life?
   c. What does a meaningless life feel like?
   d. How disturbing or incapacitating is feeling that life is meaningless?
   e. Can you identify what is missing from life that makes it seem meaningless?

6. Specific Incident:
   a. The incident in the questionnaire. Can you tell me about that one (or another specific experience) in which you really felt this "meaninglessness"?
      [SHORT ANSWERS: Circumstances; People; Feelings; [Depression sx];
       Expectations/beliefs (before) & changes (after); Aftereffects/Impact]
   b. Thoughts?
   c. Feelings?
   d. Actions?
   e. Life-changing impact (this situation changed my view of life in this way...)?
   f. Purpose/"message" of this experience [new] for you?
      i. Was it a philosophically confusing experience for you?
      ii. Were you hoping this talk could help you fit it in your overall worldview?
   g. How did this meaninglessness differ from... (disappointment, hurt from others, etc.)?

7. Close:
   a. Is anything you want to add about what "meaninglessness" is?
   b. Have we gotten to the core?
   c. What will happen next:
      i. Follow-up meeting for verification: date, time
      ii. Disposal of audiotapes as agreed
   d. Success: How valuable your contributions have been

INFORMATION FROM QUESTIONNAIRE

WORD ASSOCIATIONS:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.
### APPENDIX C

**WORD ASSOCIATION DATA**

for *Meaninglessness*

**Full Version**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MALE</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>% (68M)</th>
<th>FEMALE</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>% (204F)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cosmos, Life, Reality</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Cosmos, Life, Reality</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>space (2)</td>
<td>time</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;atheist, nonspiritual&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being</td>
<td>being without God</td>
<td>faithless</td>
<td>infinite</td>
<td>life (4)</td>
<td>space (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>life (4)</td>
<td>space (2)</td>
<td>time</td>
<td>unreal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death, Non-Being</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Death, Non-Being</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lifeless</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>dead, death (7)</td>
<td>end</td>
<td>lifeless, lack of life (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions, including</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>Emotions, including</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Hopeless&quot;</td>
<td>depressed (3)</td>
<td>despair</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fear</td>
<td>heart-broken</td>
<td>hopeless, hopelessness, no hope (5)</td>
<td>joyless</td>
<td>loneliness</td>
<td>love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>angst</td>
<td>cry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>depressed, depressing, depression (4)</td>
<td>despair</td>
<td>disappointment</td>
<td>don't care</td>
<td>ennuil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**APPENDIX C (Continued)**

**WORD ASSOCIATION DATA**

*for Meaninglessness*

**Full Version**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MALE</th>
<th></th>
<th>FEMALE</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n % (68M)</td>
<td></td>
<td>n % (204F)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>suicide</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>tired</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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**for Meaninglessness**

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- alone
- carefree
- careful
- don't care
- indifference
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#### for Meaninglessness
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*for Meaninglessness*

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*for Meaninglessness*
Full Version

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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>void, voided (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>nothing, nothingness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(45)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Numbers reflect the word entries, not the number of subjects; parenthetical numbers are totals for that word; words with the same root have been combined [e.g., worthless, worthlessness] but not antonyms [e.g., worth]. Percentages are based on number of male or female subjects.
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