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REVIEW ARTICLE

People of the 21st century: Where we came from – Who we are – Where we are going

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The current culture emphasizes effectiveness and happiness. In this article, we discuss whether it is possible to function optimally in the professional sphere without existential reflection. As we argue, the need for a meaning of life and giving sense to our activity is fundamental. Universal human needs, optimal functioning models, and developmental patterns throughout life support our perspective. The challenges and problems of midlife transition have a common denominator – personalized awareness of life's finiteness and fear of death. During midlife, people need philosophical reflection on values basic for the meaning of life. Referring to Søren Kierkegaard, culture promotes fixation on the aesthetic stage, while personality development leads to the ethical and religious stage. It means profound transformation, striving for internal integration, and stabilizing the person's functioning on higher values. Kierkegaard's philosophical anthropology and existential psychology promote the pattern of conscious, intentional life, and personal growth.

KEY WORDS
meaning of life; values; Kierkegaard; midlife transition; optimal functioning

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BACKGROUND

The reference to the outstanding work of Paul Gauguin from 1897 is not accidental. First of all, the painting was created under the influence of an existential crisis after the artist received information about his beloved daughter's death. Secondly, the turn of the century and the dynamic changes in ecology, science, and culture raise questions about the further development of civilization and the physical, mental, social, and spiritual condition of people in the 21st century (cf. Harari, 2018). Will there still be a place and time for existential dilemmas and crises if, according to Harari, we are to deal with genetic diseases, aging, and death? – however absurd it sounds in 2020 during the COVID-19 epidemic. The removal of the threat of death and disease will, as Harari writes, make the dilemmas of meaning and value of life cease to bother humanity. Life will be improvable and renewable, at least for those who can afford it, and this means that most of the suffering will disappear. Unhappy love or conflicts at work will be possible, but the shadow of death will no longer hang over them, and the future (immeasurable) will carry many promises of a good fate and improvement.

TOWARDS A HAPPY FUTURE: TRANSHUMANISM

The conviction that people have the right to happiness acquires new power in the 21st century. It is new because it is armed with the technical possibilities with which some thinkers and, behind them, scientists promise to radically dispel the fears and limitations that have long affected humankind. The representatives of Transhumanism, a philosophical movement that was dynamically developing in the twentieth century and the intellectual current more widely, who are associated in the Future of Humanity Institute and *Humanitar+*, argue that the only correct course of action is to multiply global happiness (Harrari, 2018, p. 43). This goal is to be achieved by "improving" man (Harris, 2010). Max More (2010), one of the leading representatives of transhumanism, in his letter to *Mother Nature*, guilty of human suffering, enumerates further shortcomings of human nature. Susceptibility to disease and damage, susceptibility to aging, and death are limitations resulting from low awareness of one's carnality and cognitive and emotional processes, to name but a few. More, and after him Bostrom (2003), Harris (2010), Buchanan et al. (2002), Kurzwein (2013), and Harari (2018), convince us that it is impossible to continue living like this! Radical changes are needed to enable people to reach a higher level of development, and as a consequence, life without pain, suffering, aging, and, above all, without death. All this is possible, thanks to mainly neurobiology, genetics, biotechnology, and nanotechnology. According to Kurzweil and de Grey, human biotechnological evolution will become a fact in thirty years. The question is whether, after all these upgrades, people will still be humans, and thus whether they will continue to feel and think "human" for the time being must remain unanswered. Taking into account the plan, for example, of Bostrom (2003), in which the gradual "improvement" is to be carried out from the replacement of defective, sick organic elements with mechanical ones (implants, prostheses), to the replacement of the body with avatars (artificial bodies), into which, as in "vessels", the personality and consciousness written on the hard disk will be introduced – one can have serious doubts (Hołub, 2018).

AIM OF THE PAPER

A direct reason to prepare this article was an invitation from the organizers of the conference with the provocative title "Meaning of life – sell, buy, exchange", organized at the University of Gdańsk, as the 7th part of the series: "Psychology – consumption – quality of life". The main question posed by Anna Zawadzka was about personal and professional self-actualization as a life priority in the 21st century and the possibility to replace the meaning of life with a sense of accomplishment. In our article, we start from a current cultural movement called transhumanism that poses similar theses and one concept known in work psychology that introduces professional effectiveness devoid of the meaning of life. Then we argue that a search for meaning belongs to basic human needs well rooted in life span changes. Next, we refer to Søren Kierkegaard and his philosophical concept of the person facing existential challenges and anxiety. We introduce some inspirations of his thoughts and parallel psychological notions concerning people in a rapidly changing world. Our conclusion is that, at work as in life, reflection on the meaning of our activity and actions, in the long run, is necessary to be fully human.

MEANING OF LIFE AND HUMAN ACTIVITY

Leaving aside the question of how accurate the transhumanism vision is, the question of whether the specter of death, disease, and old age is the only reason people ask themselves the meaning of life remains. Well, we think not. This question arises from the deepest needs of people aware of their existence (Frankl, 1959), is inscribed in the psychological devel-

opment during the life span, and does not necessarily appear in the face of final issues. Among the conditions of happiness, alongside pleasure, commitment, relations with others, and success, Martin Seligman (2011) gives a sense understood as the sense of action, work, and activity. When activity, work, and action matter, and, what is important, serve, they generate happiness and fulfillment. When actions, including work, make no sense and when they do not serve anything of value, a person feels senseless and uncomfortable about it. The sources of sense and pleasure vary at different stages of life, the degree of satisfaction from engaging in various intentional activities also changes, and successes, just like contacts with people, bring different levels of satisfaction. Hence, sense and searching for meaning are inscribed in a person's life cycle, regardless of the length of life and perspective of death. Regardless of them, a person feels and will feel a desire to be close to his soul mate, a longing for the fulfillment of possible dreams, or the pain of existence caused by a lack of decision, error, misunderstanding, or omission. Moreover, the meaning is not a commodity; it cannot be bought or obtained from trade; life's meaning can be discovered, or meaning can be given to life (Frankl, 1959; Gałdowa, 2005; Jacobsen, 2007; Obuchowski, 1993).

Meanwhile, issues of meaning and value of life are not as popular in applied psychology as one might think. Among the concepts describing and explaining job satisfaction and promoting the model of optimal professional functioning, the theory of core valuations (Judge et al., 1997) has gained importance. According to this approach, mental predispositions for professional success and sufficient work include four variables: generalized self-efficacy, self-esteem, locus of control, and emotional stability. These consist of generalized self-esteem and abilities and form a higher-order variable called the core of self-esteem. The Core Self-Evaluations Scale (CSES; Judge et al., 2003) is used to examine the self-esteem core and the four components mentioned above. The results on this scale correlate with life satisfaction, work satisfaction, and productivity at work. Note that there is no sense of life or commitment to valuable activities among the components of core self-evaluations. It is as if instrumental personality properties, like predispositions for effective action, regardless of its purpose and objective or subjective value, were enough.

From the perspective of the assessment of work efficiency, this may be sufficient; from the point of view of a person's optimal development and functioning, perhaps not. Why? Let us check what happens in adult life, what human needs are, what aspirations bring satisfaction, what goals adults are willing to set and achieve, and more generally, how they perceive their own and other people's lives.

According to the concept of life tasks (Havighurst, 1953) and gains and losses in human life (Baltes, 1997), new tasks appear at every stage of life, and at the same time, opportunities and threats arise and we gain and lose something. The experience we have gained helps us make decisions, and the practical realization of our desires transforms into more effective actions in the future. We often learn from our own mistakes, but it is not necessarily the case that the experience we have gained has little connection with the goals we pursue. We usually know how to raise children or build relationships best when this knowledge has little application possibilities. Although Harari's futuristic visions allow us to see reality as reversible, meaning we can go back to early adulthood and start a new family, the mistakes (and omissions) made in a previous relationship cannot be corrected. Furthermore, this is sufficient reason for an existential reflection that can negatively correlate with emotional well-being.

During adult life, specific developmental trends, as well as needs, can be observed. Reaching back to an older concept by Robert White (1975), one can mention the reflection on identity, overcoming past experiences and building contacts with people on new principles, broadening and deepening interests, re-evaluations towards social, moral, and interpersonal values, and broadening the ego from a growing interest in quality of other people's life and their future to the care of humankind and future generations. Moreover, among the so-called objective human needs is the need for a meaning of life (Frankl, 1959; May, 1967; Obuchowski, 2000), or transcendence (Fromm, 1955; Kozielecki, 2007), which means a personal engagement is such strivings and goals which exceed personal interest and are socially beneficial.

Meaning of life "may be defined as the extent to which one's life is experienced as making sense, as being directed and motivated by valued goals, and as mattering in the world" (Login & Park, 2017, p. 614), and by numerous psychologists is regarded as a central human motive (e.g. Frankl, 1959; Heine et al., 2006; Heintzelman & King, 2014). Moreover, one can distinguish two aspects of the meaning of life: presence and search for meaning (Steger et al., 2006), both related to Frankl's (1959) theory. Advanced research relates to a tripartite view of the meaning of life that consists of comprehension, purpose, and mattering (Martela & Steger, 2016; Login & Park, 2017).

In the short run meaning of life can be supported by strictly personal needs, but in the long run meaning of life is based on actions taken for pro-social motives. Although the needs of affiliation, competence, and autonomy seem to indicate self-actualization, their full realization concerns other people, so they also imply the meaning of life as a condition for optimal functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

OPTIMAL FUNCTIONING DURING THE LIFE SPAN

The satisfaction of these needs and life's aspirations is made possible by selecting, optimizing, and compensating. These processes are responsible for maximizing gains and minimizing losses; they are the foundation of successful human development in the course of life (Baltes, 1997; Heckhausen, 1999). Selection concerns life goals for a given stage, and achieving them includes both selection and abandonment of alternative or unattainable goals. When making a selection, a person focuses on the most critical goals, seeks new ones, revaluates existing beliefs, aspirations, and goals, modifies personal standards.

Optimization is about how best to use limited resources and means to achieve life's most important goals. It refers to selecting means suitable for achieving a given goal, taking into account the circumstances, searching conditions conducive to achieving the goals, and proper investment of the possessed means. As part of the optimization process, people often make essential life changes – and, what is more, they enable a better fit between their potential and the environment that enables them to use it.

Compensation is a process resulting from the awareness and acceptance of existing deficits; it aims to replace ineffective with practical actions, replace the (already) unattainable with achievable goals, and look for alternative actions to recoup the necessary losses (unattainable goals). Compensation can foster creativity and even wisdom. It involves allocating resources (effort, time), activating new skills or resources, modeling, using others' help, etc. In general, it is about maintaining a certain level of functioning in the face of the loss or reduction of resources needed to achieve a given goal (Baltes, 1997).

Note that at the heart of all three processes – selection, optimization, and compensation – lies a reflection on life priorities. This type of reflection occurs significantly often or particularly clearly at developmentally important stages, such as adolescence and emerging adulthood when the young person develops a personal identity (Arnett, 2002); or the midlife passage, when the program, which is, by the way, strongly culturally conditioned, for the so-called first half expires, and the person is confronted with the problem that the author's program is to arrange and implement for the second half (Jung, 1933; Levinson, 1986; Obuchowski, 2000; Oleś, 2013). The change of perspective on the perception of life and its values results from the fact that social and cultural expectations related to lifestyle choices, and even a pressure to make professional decisions, to educate and acquire competences, and to arrange personal matters, are much stronger for young people than for middle-aged adults (although these things in culture change quite rapidly). Moreover, adults who have already (at least partially) achieved essential goals and have a specific position in society are recovering resources to think about personal priorities. At the same time, simultaneously, the pressure of time – middle age (sic!) – motivates to undertake neglected or postponed things. Sometimes, the need to reflect on priorities results from crossing the lines of gains and losses; running ahead, i.e., taking new actions, helps maintain the conviction about possible and current profits despite losses.

MIDLIFE TRANSITION AND GAUGUIN SYNDROME

Although caused by many factors, the psychological challenges and problems typical for midlife transition have a common reason – a personalized awareness of life's finiteness and the fear of death. Therefore, in the middle of adulthood, there is a greater need for reflection over life values and priorities that can underpin the sense of life and, more generally, philosophy of life. Moreover, the crisis or middle transition, regardless of the controversy surrounding these phenomena (Lachman, 2001), provides fertile ground for existential reflection (Oleś, 2013; Sęk, 1990; Straś-Romanowska, 1999).

Meanwhile, the prevailing trends in culture and work pace seem to dissuade people from such reflections effectively. Avoiding this type of reflection and reappraisal can be a simple – which does not mean that it is a short – path of fear that is a signal of abandonment of developmental opportunities (Jung, 1933), or of depression, which is a distant consequence of not taking up the challenges of the midlife (Levinson, 1986; Obuchowski, 2000; Oleś, 2013). According to our research, the mid-life transition's key issues, regardless of gender, are life balance, sense of change, and revaluation (Kluska et al., 2016).

Creating and engaging in an authorial program for the time still to come means taking a conscious approach to life and generally results in fulfillment and well-being; conversely, a lack of existential reflection can result in emotional disorders. According to Yalom (1980), middle-aged people's emotional problems, whether anxiety or depression, always have a conscious or unconscious fear of death at their root.

Often, reflection on the value of activity filling adult life leads to changes, including a great life change (Oleś, 2019). Change is great when it involves a significant and lasting change in the line of life, where goals and desires are based on different values than before; great change gives a sense of freedom and identity with the self and results in a new form of activity that justifies the meaning of existence. Also, the decision about great change is made on one's responsibility and generally without the support of the

loved ones; its personal and social costs are generally significant, e.g., loss of prestige and social security. It can be caused by neglecting the development of abilities, lack of achievement of an important personal goal, the need for change resulting from reevaluation, a new idea for activity and involvement in the world, the desire to renew the self, and/or a sense of stagnation, fatigue, stress, lack of motivation to continue the current lifestyle, or the desire to withdraw from the competition. An indirect and sometimes direct cause is the pressure of time, spectacularly expressed in the phrase "now or never". One cannot forget the purely existential reason: the fear of failure and existential emptiness (cf. Oleś, 2013).

This is not the only existential problem of an adult. Some others can be summarized in the following questions: *Does life have any meaning and value? Furthermore, how to find it? What to base it on? What reference point to take? What values/actions/goals can give meaning to life? Can and how can one rebuild the meaning of life when one loses it? Is it worth it to become like others or to risk individuality and authenticity?* Finally: *Can the question about the meaning of life be ignored at no cost?*

HUMAN LIFE – EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE

To answer this question, let us reach for the philosophy or the thought of one of the philosophers who knew a lot about an individual asking about the meaning of life – his or her existence. We are talking about Søren Kierkegaard, called "Socrates of Copenhagen", who formulated his existential concept of man in the first half of the 19th century. The person described by the Danish philosopher is more than the sum of intellect and body. Above all, it is a synthesis of the corporeal, spiritual, infinite and finite, temporal and eternal, free, and necessary (Toeplitz, 1975). It is precisely the fact that man is also a spirit, a soul, whose existence one is not always aware of, makes one unique because one is sensitive to the truth – a guiding thought, for which one is ready to sacrifice life and die. As the analysis of the philosopher's works shows, the search for this thought is the goal of every person who, gaining awareness of their mortality, experience fear for themselves and their existence (Kierkegaard, 1849/2013). The only salvation can be to find answers to the questions: "how to live and why live", being aware of one's death.

In a society of consumption, where people cease to be synthesized, separating themselves from themselves (depersonalization), treating themselves and others objectively (dehumanization), questions about the meaning and value of life can only be specified indirectly (Toeplitz, 2006). In Kierkegaard's opinion, not being a synthesis, an individual cannot take up the most critical problems of real life such as the temporality of his or her existence, the immortality of himself or herself as a spirit (the relation between psyche and body) and the choice of purpose, the sense of his or her existence (Mazurkiewicz, 2005). Despair about oneself, that one is not synthesis and fear, that one is temporal, that is, in the philosopher's opinion, finished, one should shake an individual to take responsibility for oneself, for one's existence (Toeplitz, 2006). What does the Dane mean by "taking responsibility for oneself"? It is about the courage to enter the path of choice: the choice of oneself as a concrete individual, the choice of concrete existence, towards the realization of chosen values (Kierkegaard, 1849/1941). On this path, he mentions three stages (aesthetic, ethical, religious) that are qualitatively different because of the individual's sensitivity to the truth about oneself and his or her ability to make the final choices that make them change.

The religious stage is the culmination of efforts of a person who, by opening up not only to what is temporal but also to what is eternal, defines themself, their existence in relation to higher, religious values. Few can reach this stage since few can go beyond ethical and social norms by realizing higher values – religious (Kierkegaard, 1849/2013). Since Kierkegaard was firmly rooted in the Christian religion, his pattern of a truly and sensibly existing individual is the same as that of a "knight of faith" – stout-hearted to pursue their goal. Their strength, however, does not come from the strength of the muscles but the strength of the spirit/faith. Deep in it, he or she is ready to make even the highest sacrifice, like the biblical Abraham, who, believing that duty is most important, was ready to sacrifice his own son (Kierkegaard, 1914).

The religious stage precedes the aesthetic and ethical stage. In the former, like a drifting boat, a human being does not so much live as mask the surface of life, focusing on the maximum satisfaction of sensual and artistic needs. The negation of all authorities and values, the lack of commitment, the spiritual emptiness, living only by external temptations – moments of pleasure and delight that follow one another make the aesthetic person incapable of understanding his or her situation. Only the moment of realizing the nonsense of such an existence can become an excuse to make an absolute choice: either *not to be* and live as before, or *to be* and give meaning and value to life. Hence the famous *either-or*.

The moment of choice is crucial; it is a qualitative "leap" to the ethical stage. The human being, guided by ethical, socially acceptable values, chooses himself or herself as a concrete person, capable of engaging in a permanent emotional relationship, acquiring a profession, building stability. His or her life already has a meaning and a goal set by general social goals. He or she can enjoy such a life and be calm but only

for a while. As subjective tendencies begin to supplant the objective, an ever stronger spirit ("heart inexpressible emotion"; Kierkegaard, 1843/1992, p. 477) will foster the formation of a personal ideal that will gain strength in the religious stage.

BACK TO OPTIMAL FUNCTIONING

The presented – out of necessity – very brief description of a person's path towards being a truly value-encompassing individual is not only a philosophical construction. Insightful analyses, but above all, empirical research conducted by Kazimierz Dąbrowski (1986) – a Polish educator, doctor, and philosopher – can be a psychological commentary for Kierkegaard's analyses. The author of the theory of positive disintegration, describing the process of shaping personality and the dynamisms accompanying the development of the internal mental environment, also writes about spiritual crises accompanying the search for meaning in life. Describing them as "struggles of groups of different tendencies within the internal mental environment – the structure of different mental dynamisms occurring at different levels of personal development, remaining in periodic harmony, and above all in single-level and multi-level conflicts", Dąbrowski (1986, p. 47) refers directly to Kierkegaard's thoughts. He states at the same time that the ideal of personality, which is the synthesis of what is carnal, intellectual, and spiritual, exists: "Such an ideal and sublime set of goals can be called the empirical ideal. It is not a fantasy nor merely a philosophical construction, but it is accessible to experience, concrete, it works in our daily life" (Dąbrowski, 1986, p. 42). Returning to the question: *Can the question about the meaning of life be ignored at no cost*? The answer is: *No*!

The reference to Kazimierz Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration is a good opportunity to return to psychology; within it, there are several approaches and concepts consistent with Søren Kierkegaard's anthropology (e.g., Frankl, 1959; Jacobsen, 2007; May, 1967). Here we will refer to three selected ones. According to Alan Waterman's (1993) concept of eudaimonic well-being, a sense of meaningful and valuable life is based on the pursuit of perfection, which includes adequate self-knowledge, the development of one's potential, a sense of purpose and meaning of life, an effort to strive for perfection, a commitment to action and the enjoyment of self-expression.

There are also other approaches and theories which directly or indirectly follow Kierkegaard's inspirations. The vast majority of researchers influenced by the Danish thinker aimed to seek answers to questions about the influence of existential anxiety on human functioning. Researchers focus on how to fight unjustified fears (Kondrat, 2015; May, 1967; Łukaszewski, 2010; Łukaszewski & Boguszewska, 2008; Sękowski & Płudowska, 2011) or how to live with them (Frankl, 1959; Leontiev, 2006; Popielski, 2009; Yalom, 1980).

A unified model of human motivation introduces nine universal needs in three domains: enhanced expectations (being), experiences (doing), outcomes (having) (Forbes, 2011). Directly it does not include the need for meaning, but indirectly, it does. Let us consider only two quotations: (1) "…the identity domain of motivation involves striving to act as one's self and express one's individuality. In this domain lie motivations for expressing personal tastes, values, and styles that define who one is as a particular individual" (Forbes, 2011, p. 89); and "This striving, toward realizing the fullness of one's distinctive potential as a person, includes aspirations for excellence, expertise, perfection, control, organization, and understanding" (Forbes, 2011, p. 90) – which perfectly fits the existential notion of authenticity (Jacobsen, 2007; Leontiev, 2006). Furthermore, authenticity seems the psychological equivalent of courage to be oneself – emphasized by the Danish philosopher.

Carol Ryff's (1995) theory of psychological well-being, in turn, includes six elements: self-acceptance, purpose in life, environmental mastery, positive relationships, personal growth, and autonomy. Unlike Waterman, Ryff treats them separately by definition; the essence of the matter is to what extent an individual fulfills each of them and what profile of life activity and well-being he or she realizes. However, this is not the most important thing. The most important thing is that both mentioned concepts are highly convergent; secondly, both contain direct (Waterman, 1993) or indirect (Ryff, 1995) reference to life's meaning. According to both theories, these properties form a particular whole, except that according to the first one, the sense of life is one of the components, and according to the second one, these properties imply the meaning of life. Self-acceptance, purpose in life, environmental mastery, positive relationships, personal growth, and autonomy treated separately, that is, each of these properties individually and together indicate a life saturated with existential reflection, values and meaning.

Let us reach for yet another concept belonging to positive psychology – Kenon Sheldon's (2004) concept of an Optimal Human Being. Optimal refers to the maximum achievable level in the conditions in which a person functions: to what extent he/she is involved in effective, purposeful activity, represents a certain level of maturity and life satisfaction, has adequate self-esteem, is optimistic about the future, and so on. Human existence is dynamic; therefore, it is about development, growth, sufficient realization of one's aspirations and desires, intentional reference to the world, reflection, understanding of the essence of human existence, and the anticipation necessary for the proper choosing and planning of purposeful

activity. The five general principles of optimal existence are commitment to non-personal goals, satisfaction of needs, self-work, responsibility for one's own goals and choices, and contact with one's organism. In other words, say, in applied form, Sheldon (2004) put it this way:

"1) Try to serve something beyond yourself, i.e., social and cultural goals.

2) Seek balanced need-satisfaction.

3) Be prepared to work against (or to try to modify) problematic aspects of yourself or your world.

4) Take responsibility for your goals and choices.

5) Listen to your organismic valuing process and be prepared to change your goals if it seems necessary" (p. 200).

Concerning the pattern described in this way, two remarks come to mind. Firstly Sheldon's optimal existence is not far from the intentional person's properties, according to Kazimierz Obuchowski (1993), and the transgressive concept of a person by Józef Kozielecki (2007). Secondly, the link between the eudaimonic concept of happiness (and well-being) and listening to the voice of one's organism (balanced need-satisfaction, readiness to change under the influence of organismic valuing process) is, on the one hand, a reference to the phenomenological theory of the self (Rogers, 1961, 1980), and, on the other hand, to contemporary concepts of effective management, for example, a dialogical leader who is in contact with both others and the self, including his own body (Van Loon, 2017). Moreover, even in the psychodynamic approach, a similar concept is known – a sense of the self that "can be defined as that personal, subjective awareness of one's self, which includes a sense of agency for one's actions, a sense of continuity over time, and a sense of personal unity and wholeness, with a special affective energy or vitality" (Basten & Touyz, 2020, p. 159).

CONCLUSIONS

In the end, it is necessary to return to the question of whether a reference to the meaning – but not only to self-actualization or the effectiveness of actions – is necessary. Arguments referring to philosophical anthropology make it possible to put forward the thesis that people, as reflective and intentional beings, need conviction and a sense of the meaning of their actions and their lives in general. The arguments coming from the psychology of the course of life or positive psychology indicate that the necessary conditions for full development, well-being, health, and happiness are the sense of meaningfulness of actions, the realization of values, and autonomously chosen goals and meaning of life (see e.g. Heine et al., 2006; Heintzelman & King, 2014; Park, 2012; Steger, 2012). Hence, all three components of the meaning of life, namely comprehension, purpose, and mattering, are crucial for the optimal functioning of the person.

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