Essay

Building Bridges, Forging New Frontiers: Meaning-Making in Action

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Abstract: The need to experience life as meaningful is fundamental to human nature. Recent years have witnessed a growing sophistication in assessing meaning in life (MIL) and new conceptualizations regarding its place within general models of well-being and coping. As part of this surge in research, increased attention has been given to the understanding, assessment, and practice of MIL in numerous arenas and contexts. However, despite these advancements, further knowledge is needed to explore the application of meaning interventions across more diverse contexts and non-clinical populations in the general community. The purpose of the present paper is to expand the existing knowledge on meaning-oriented interventions by introducing a community-based initiative that is directly responsive to this need. This includes describing its approach to meaning-making on multiple fronts: (1) Socratic Questions in the Public Sphere; (2) the Tribe Intergenerational Life Stories Project; (3) Literature, Arts, and Museums as Meaning-Making Sites; and (4) Education for Meaning. Each of these initiatives is described to propose more context-sensitive interventions that are applicable to everyday life in general society.

Keywords: meaning in life; intervention; culture; community

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a growing sophistication in assessing meaning in life (e.g., George and Park 2016; Martela and Steger 2016, 2022) and new conceptualizations for exploring its role within broader models of well-being (Huta and Ryan 2010; Keyes et al. 2002). This has led to increased interest in understanding, measuring, and promoting meaning in life in various domains and settings, including psychotherapy, education, and organizations. This surge of attention has opened up new avenues for research and practice aimed at enhancing individuals' sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Yet, despite the mounting body of research on the concept of meaning in life and its contribution to human functioning, the bulk of it has been focused on the individual from a psychological perspective and has not considered the crucial role culture plays in shaping individuals' assumptions, values, and needs, as well as influencing them through language, norms, symbols, rituals, schemas, beliefs, and other means (Markus and Kitayama 1991).

The experience of meaning and its expressions may vary across cultures, and sources and processes of meaning may be influenced by cultural factors (Steger et al. 2008). Along these lines, scholars have begun to express concerns that the lack of consideration of context and cultural content regarding the concepts of presence and search for meaning may leave these concepts too abstract (Wong 2014), making them subject to individual interpretations regarding their personal significance and alignment with individuals' lives (George and Park 2016). Furthermore, given that the majority of research on meaning in life to date has predominantly been carried out in North America and Europe, it is essential to broaden our understanding of it beyond these specific cultural contexts (referred to as WEIRD: Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic; Henrich et al. 2010; Robustelli and Whisman 2018) and include more diverse and international samples.

This paper highlights the significance of considering the social power of meaning, which includes but extends beyond cultural and subcultural differences in the way individuals interpret and experience meaning in life (see Vos et al. 2022) to facilitating context-sensitive applications for the general public. Interest in meaning and purpose in life has increased and is being expressed more deliberately and explicitly, both individually and collectively in various settings and contexts, as evident for example in the growing interest in meaning in life and work following the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, an increased emphasis on meaning in companies, organizations, schools, and popular media. Thus, it is important to demonstrate the social responsibility of the science of meaning in life to move beyond academic research and psychotherapy to more arenas—to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice in the real world. This paper explores various avenues to the cultivation of meaning in the everyday life of general society by examining the case example of the Compass Institute for the Study and Application of Meaning.

2. Why Is Bridging Academic Research and Practice in Communities and Society Important?

More than ever, we at the end of the last century were finding ourselves with big houses and broken homes, high incomes and low morale, secured rights and diminished civility. We were excelling at making a living but too often failing at making a life. We celebrated our prosperity but yearned for purpose. We cherished our freedoms but longed for connection. In an age of plenty, we were feeling spiritual hunger.

—(Myers 2001, p. 1)

There is an increasingly growing divergence between our fast-paced society with its rapid changes, economic prosperity, and technological developments and the struggle for connection, meaning, and purpose in life (e.g., Cacioppo et al. 2009; Kesebir and Kesebir 2012; Twenge et al. 2021). Our world today is more fragmented, polarized, and alienated than ever before. Otto Scharmer (2009) points to three divides facing modern societies: ecological (disconnection between self and nature), social (disconnection between self and others), and spiritual (disconnection of self from the soul of higher self). These divides correspond with some of the greatest challenges of our time, such as increased levels of loneliness, intolerance, and detachment, and they reflect the symptoms of current socioeconomic systems. As Sardello (2011) puts it,

The individual presented himself in the therapy room of the nineteenth century, and during the twentieth, the patient suffering breakdown is the world itself.... The new symptoms are fragmentation, specialization, expertise, depression, inflation, loss of energy, jargonese, and violence. Our buildings are anorectic, our business paranoid, our technology manic.

The progress made in science and technology has not only impacted society and culture but has also produced a gradual fragmentation within the social sciences, resulting in the emergence of various subdisciplines. However, it is important to note that throughout these academic subdisciplines, academic knowledge and practical knowledge overall are fundamentally different, despite them not often being recognized as such. Academic knowledge is typically abstract, teachable, and presented as a set of principles (epistemic knowledge), whereas practical knowledge, which is required to effectively carry out transformative actions, involves a more hands-on understanding or know-how (e.g., Bolisani and Bratianu 2018; Eraut 2000; Wrenn and Wrenn 2009). This lack of recognition of the relative contributions of academic and practical knowledge may lead to misconceptions about the value of knowledge and practice, which in turn result in greater emphasis on developing practical theory rather than practical knowledge (Rolfe 1998).

While social science research has made significant strides in understanding human behavior and social dynamics, the translation of this knowledge into practical applications for addressing the complexities of society's everyday life has been limited. Bridging the "theory-practice gap" requires an integration of top-down and bottom-up collaborative approaches between academic researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and society at large. This will not only better serve the needs of communities and society in innovative

and creative ways but also increase the relevance and impact of academic research. In other words, following decades of specialization, there should be complementary transdisciplinary approaches from both scientific and social perspectives that take into account multifaceted and complex lifeworld issues by examining them from diverse scientific and social perspectives.

These issues have special importance in regard to meaning in life. Given that meaning is a multifaceted, complex, and subjective concept, yet is central to human experience and the way individuals understand themselves and reality (e.g., Russo-Netzer 2021; Steger et al. 2013; Steger et al. 2014), it requires both a transdisciplinary approach and relevant everyday insights involving individuals' sense of belonging, significance, purpose, and values.

3. The Importance of Social Context to the Application of Meaning

Our cultural and historical backgrounds shape our shared consciousness, values, and perception of the world, all of which play a crucial role in how we experience our reality. It is within this context that our identity is formed and expressed. Such frameworks provide a foundation for the formation of a coherent narrative, a space in which our identity is embodied and expressed and weaves past experiences and future possibilities into a coherent whole. A shared network of meaning is created, disseminated, and reconstructed among a group of interconnected individuals who form a given community or culture (Chiu and Hong 2007). This inextricable interplay between meaning and sociocultural context functions as a framework or web of meaning that allows individuals to operate within a given environment (Fiske 2000).

Two primary perspectives have been suggested to reflect this interaction between meaning and culture (Chao and Kesebir 2013): "small-m-meaning", which refers to comprehensibility or a sense of coherence and understanding that one's life makes sense, and "capital-M-meaning", which relates to mattering, significance, or worth (George and Park 2016; Heintzelman and King 2014; Martela and Steger 2016). In the context of social frameworks, small-m-meaning refers to lower-level, more tangible everyday connections, such as through language and norms, enabling individuals to organize their fragmented daily experiences, detect patterns and connections, and integrate them into a coherent narrative of self and life (Chao and Kesebir 2013; Heine et al. 2006). Capital-M-meaning addresses more complex and abstract connections, such as values and beliefs about the self and the universe (Chao and Kesebir 2013). By providing a moral and values-based framework for exploration, sociocultural contexts can connect individuals to entities beyond their daily existence, relating to the ultimate meaning of life (Frankl 1969) and the "big questions of life," such as the fragility and limitations of life and individuals' value, which are universal concerns of humans (e.g., Greenberg et al. 1997). These are essential ingredients in shaping individuals' sense of belonging and identity, as well as in developing meaningful interpersonal connections that are deeply embedded in the symbolic creations of a specific culture.

Another layer of the interplay between meaning and culture involves a general sociohistorical context, which encompasses global processes and values. This overall cultural backdrop is commonly referred to as the zeitgeist (the spirit of the time), which serves as a sociocultural framework for exploring the universal questions of meaning in life. The current zeitgeist of postmodernism is often characterized by our rapidly changing world, with increased uncertainties, making it harder to achieve a sense of comprehension or small-m-meaning (e.g., Moules 2000; Russo-Netzer and Mayseless 2021). Additionally, cultural and traditional deconstruction and fragmentation processes have contributed to a sense of loss of community and tradition as well as to increasing isolation and disconnection (e.g., Cacioppo et al. 2009; Kesebir and Kesebir 2012). Data shows that loneliness rates have been rising worldwide, with more than approximately 42 million American adults over the age of 45 estimated to be suffering from chronic loneliness, and this number is expected to increase with population aging (APA 2017). This has a direct connection to the capital-M-meaning function of society in facilitating a sense of significance, worth, and

mattering. These challenges are intensified given various global crises, including but not limited to racial and ethnic discrimination, waves of political and social changes, natural and technological disasters, the climate crisis, and the ongoing outcomes of the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

Extensive research has explored the benefits of meaning and purpose for individuals' resilience, growth, and development, including academic achievement, occupational adjustment, happiness, and life satisfaction (e.g., DeWitz et al. 2009; Steger and Dik 2009; Steger et al. 2006; Ryff and Keyes 1995; Steger et al. 2009; Drescher et al. 2012; Steger et al. 2006; Steger et al. 2008). For example, people high in MIL tend to report more positive future orientations (Steger et al. 2008), hope, optimism (e.g., Mascaro and Rosen 2006; Steger and Frazier 2005; Steger et al. 2006), and work enjoyment (e.g., Bonebright et al. 2000). Individuals with a strong sense of meaning also exhibit better coping abilities in the face of life's challenges, adjusting more effectively to stressful events and experiencing lower levels of psychological stress, with MIL acting as a buffer or source of resilience (Henoch and Danielson 2009; Park and Folkman 1997) as well as reduced levels of depression (e.g., Mascaro et al. 2004) and vulnerability to psychopathology (Debats 1999). High levels of meaning may also serve as protection against feelings of loneliness (Folker et al. 2021). Given the growing body of research on MIL, there has been an increased focus on understanding, assessing, and implementing meaningful interventions in various arenas (Batthyany and Russo-Netzer 2014; Hill 2018; Park and George 2018; Russo-Netzer et al. 2016; Vos 2018; Wong 2014). For instance, meaning-centered therapies have shown promise in improving clients' sense of MIL and subsequently enhancing their mental health and well-being (Disabato et al. 2017; Krause 2007; Negru-Subtirica et al. 2016; Vos and Vitali 2018).

However, despite these advancements, further knowledge is needed to explore the application of meaning interventions across more diverse contexts and populations (Shin and Steger 2014). Extensive reviews and meta-analyses (e.g., Manco and Hamby 2021; Russo-Netzer and Vos, forthcoming; Vos 2016) indicate that the majority of such interventions have primarily focused on increasing meaning in life in clinical populations, such as palliative care patients, mental health care recipients, and individuals with chronic or life-threatening diseases. Furthermore, existing interventions primarily address recuperative and protective aspects of meaning (e.g., Guerrero-Torrelles et al. 2017; Kleiman and Beaver 2013; Schnell and Krampe 2022), neglecting its broader normative processes. While there has been a recent increase in interest in meaning-oriented interventions among non-clinical populations, particularly within the field of positive psychology, it is important to note that many of these interventions still primarily target specific populations and settings. For example, interventions, such as reflecting on self-concordant goals (Locke and Schippers 2018), job crafting (e.g., Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001), and life crafting (Schippers and Ziegler 2019) to name a few, are still primarily focused on specific populations and settings, such as organizations, elderly citizens, or university students. Additionally, some of these interventions do not solely focus on meaning itself but rather view meaning as one component of other positive psychological components or skills within the PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement) framework (Seligman et al. 2009), or overall well-being. Examples of such interventions include gratitude practices, forgiveness exercises, and self-reflection techniques (Emmons et al. 2003; McCullough et al. 2000; King 2001; Lyubomirsky et al. 2006). Therefore, the purpose of this manuscript is to expand the existing knowledge on meaning-oriented interventions by proposing more context-sensitive interventions that are applicable to everyday life in general society.

The individual search for meaning is influenced by the socio-historical context and global processes, which shape the specific meaning individuals adopt. Thus, meaning is always embodied in a socio-cultural-historical context, and as social beings, our development as humans is always in a dialogue with and within community and social contexts, in their various forms. Given that an essential ingredient of meaning is a connection "between people, places, objects, and ideas to one another in expected and predictable ways" (Heine et al. 2006, p. 89), communities provide people with a sense of belonging, a coherent and

organized view of life, and a set of values, standards, and guidelines for living life in a meaningful way, as well as a clear and stable identity and support. Communities are not a random gathering of individuals, but a complex system that is often characterized as a web of affective relationships among its members, involving a sense of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and mutual history and narrative (e.g., Etzioni 2015). Belonging to a given community is not enough; being a member of a community requires active involvement and commitment.

4. The Compass Community-Based Initiative

Against this background, the Compass Institute for the Study and Application of Meaning was established in 2020 as a nonprofit organization that aims to bridge the science of meaning in life, in its broadest sense, and its application in the general public and society at large. Essentially, its central aims are developing programs, training, studies, and projects for the greater good to cultivate meaning in Israeli society in various settings. It focuses on building connections between scientific knowledge and social change in real life to make knowledge related to meaning more accessible and tangible. Although it is an independent non-profit association, the institute also engages in research activities and collaborates with academic institutions and government entities, such as the Ministry of Education and Welfare, depending on the specific project.

Adopting an ecosystem framework highlights the importance of exploring living organisms as part of complex relationships between organisms and their environments rather than in isolation. Human societies are just as complex as ecosystems, with various players and environmental conditions (Aldrich 1999; Rothschild 1990). In this view, rather than simply treating symptoms of individuals' problems, there should be a focus on facilitating an ecosystem that supports conditions for driving change. The first step in this entails mapping given resources, environmental conditions, social networks, needs, challenges, constraints, potential infrastructures, dynamics, subgroups, norms, and values. The next step is developing facilitating structures to support the overall conceived vision.

Empirical research indicates that maintaining a status quo default often requires less mental effort than does change (Eidelman and Crandall 2009) and may echo other phenomena such as loss aversion of existing reality and regret avoidance (Anderson 2003; Kahneman et al. 1991). Accordingly, people consider the status quo as a reference point to potential change and favor the current state of affairs, since the potential costs of change appear to carry more weight than the potential benefits (Moshinsky and Bar-Hillel 2010). This suggests that implementing meaning in the greater society should consider not only the clarity of values, purpose, and direction but also the rituals and regularities that sustain and support them. Snyder's hope theory (Snyder 2000; Snyder et al., 2003) supports the idea of complementing a goal with pathways for attaining it by offering a distinction between *willpower* (i.e., agency and goal-directed energy) and *waypower* (pathways and planning to attain goals). More specifically, this framework involves three elements that should be taken into consideration when creating and maintaining communities of meaning: (a) *Goals*, which serve as anchors and provide direction; (b) *Pathways*, the routes taken to achieve desired goals and individuals' perceived capacity to create these routes; and (c) *Agency*, which relates to one's motivation to undertake routes toward desired goals. To facilitate social change in a given society, this process requires both awareness and action, which can be developed through regular practices. The following sections describe the initiatives of the Compass Institute that illustrate broad directions for the practice of meaning in the community on multiple fronts: (1) Socratic Questions in the Public Sphere; (2) the Tribe Intergenerational Life Stories Project; (3) Literature, Arts, and Museums as Meaning-Making Sites; and (4) Education for Meaning.

4.1. Socratic Questions in the Public Sphere

Socratic questioning, commonly known as meaning-related questions, is a well-established technique in meaning-centered psychotherapy, particularly in logotherapy

(e.g., Salomon and Díaz del Castillo 2015), where the therapist acts as a "midwife" and uses questioning to uncover "logo clues" and insights. By using the client's own words, the therapist promotes self-discovery and awareness of the patient's noetic unconsciousness, values, inner hidden strengths, and potentials, as well as their previous achievements (Russo-Netzer and Maoz-Israel 2021). This method allows the therapist to focus on the client's present strengths and assets, as well as future possibilities for growth and expansion (Lukas 1998; Overholser 2018). Essentially, the therapist helps the client explore their inner world and identify ways to tap into their full potential by exploring the patients' goals and competencies or reframing events in a more positive light (Flückiger et al. 2014). The purpose of Socratic questions is to help individuals identify and gain a better understanding of their own values and meanings. These questions are designed to explore different aspects of life's meaning by prompting individuals to reflect on their goals, values, relationships, and desired direction (Martínez and Flórez 2015). The use of Socratic questioning is aimed at promoting a fresh perspective on life and a more constructive interpretation of situations (Padesky 1993), as well as to broaden attention on key aspects of life experiences, enabling clients to develop a more flexible and adaptive mindset, ultimately leading to greater personal growth and well-being (Overholser and Beale 2023). By facilitating self-exploration, self-reflection, and self-comprehension, Socratic questions may contribute to nurturing components of meaning in life, such as making sense, discovering purpose, and experiencing significance. However, despite the benefits of Socratic questioning for the exploration and discovery of meaning, this approach has predominantly been utilized within therapeutic settings.

At the Compass Institute, we began to use this method of introducing Socratic questioning to the general public outside of psychotherapy and in real-world contexts to help the many people feeling isolated, anxious, and lonely due to COVID-19 lockdowns (e.g., Bu et al. 2020; Kasar and Karaman 2021). Increasing levels of loneliness and social disconnection led to the need to find ways of reaching out to the greater community to enable people to reflect on the meaning of the situation for them and to allow self-discovery as well as spontaneous opportunities to connect with others in the public sphere.

One way was a professional team of logotherapy graduates who volunteered for the institute to create weekly ads with reflective questions, which were widely disseminated across the country (e.g., in apartment buildings, on bulletin boards in parks and workplaces, outside supermarkets, etc.). The Socratic open-ended questions were accompanied by suggested responses that people could use, and people also could provide their own responses. All ads had the hashtag *#TimeToReconnect* and included questions such as the following: *What makes you excited to get out of bed in the morning? What or who inspires you? What did you choose to do for someone else today? Which meaningful experience did you experience this week? What do you choose to be grateful for today? What new habit do you want to introduce into your life? What meaningful sentence\quote will accompany you this week? How can you surprise yourself this week? Where did you experience a moment of grace this week? The gift I choose to take from COVID-19 is?* Most of the ads, originally in Hebrew, were also translated into Arabic and English to reach more people in the community from various subgroups. Overall, almost 20 weekly ads were distributed. The testimonials that were shared with us and published on social networks indicate that this initiative contributed to individuals' sense of meaning and connection across various contexts and settings, from discussions around the dinner table among families to conversations with people waiting in a queue outside a supermarket during lockdowns, neighbors in an apartment building, and strangers passing on the street or in a park walking their dog. These experiences, and others, suggest that exploratory modest initiatives such as distributing ads with meaning-eliciting open-ended Socratic questions in the public sphere may have a far-reaching impact on the greater community when executed regularly. Socratic questions, aimed at self-reflection and self-exploration, have applicability in various orientations and settings. The essence of the questions lies in their ability to elicit the discovery of meaning, regardless of whether they are used in a dialogue format or introduced independently of a facilitator. While this

initiative should be viewed as exploratory and warrant further examination, ads featuring Socratic questions in the public sphere can serve as catalysts for dialogue, connection, and the exploration of diverse viewpoints. They are not static in nature. When these ads are displayed in various public spaces, Socratic questions designed to stimulate critical thinking and introspection grab individuals' attention, prompting them to pause, reflect, and engage in deeper levels of thought. The thought-provoking nature of these questions encourages individuals to contemplate their own perspectives, values, and beliefs, fostering meaningful internal and external dialogues. Moreover, ads featuring Socratic questions invite active participation from individuals. By challenging viewers to consider alternative viewpoints or reflect on their own experiences, these ads create a sense of engagement. The insights gained from these initiatives suggest new directions for future interventions and theoretical advancements in the field and may serve to inform a more systematic planning of a study design and data collection.

4.2. Literature, Arts, and Museums as Meaning-Making Sites

Another method for reaching out to the community was widely distributing online informative magazines dedicated to different topics related to meaning (e.g., humor and meaning; freedom, responsibility, and meaning; loss and meaning). Each magazine included up-to-date research, interviews with "real-life" individuals on the subject topic, and spotlights on poems, projects, practices, and stories that exemplified the three pathways of meaning: creative, attitudinal, and experiential. The magazines appeared to be a useful venue for providing hands-on information about meaning-oriented perspectives on given topics, which integrated theory and empirical knowledge with practical everyday stories and insights. Future research could explore such exploratory directions in a more systematic manner.

Museums have traditionally been understood to be a mechanism of cultural transmission and socialization, but in recent years, a growing recognition has emerged of their importance not merely for obtaining information or knowledge but rather as sites capable of encouraging meaning creation (Silverman 1995). The meaning-making paradigm involved in this instance, rather than differentiating between sacred and profane spaces, which represent symbolic versus instrumental activities, emphasizes the potential of museums to significantly contribute to individuals' personal meaning-making processes concerning their identities and their place in the world. Museums and art galleries can serve as physical spaces imbued with a matrix of potential meanings via the interpretation of and interaction with exhibits and artworks displayed (Pierroux 2010). Museum visitors' active engagement (Scott et al. 2013), facilitated through their senses, experiences, and emotions, enables new layers of meaning to be uncovered and discovered (Harris 2023). More specifically, museums provide individuals with the opportunity to learn and construct their own narratives and stories via interactive engagement with art exhibits, fostering a lived embodied experience where the entire body moves through space (e.g., Kozinets et al. 2017). The museum visitor actively engages with the social and physical context of the museum to explore personal meaning, thereby maintaining or building their identity (Falk 2006, p. 126). Engaging in encounters and dialogues with non-verbal images and exhibitions within the museum can initiate a discovery-oriented process and contemplation of ideas such as the impermanence and fragility of life. These contemplations may also prompt reflection on existential issues like suffering, death, and authenticity. Furthermore., art possesses the power to evoke a wide range of emotions and emotional responses, ranging from amazement and awe to anger or discomfort, as well as transcendent experiences that foster a sense of connection to something greater than oneself. All of these can contribute to self-reflection and a deeper sense of meaning. In this regard, museums may serve as spaces designed for the display and performance of meaning (Kozinets et al. 2017), encouraging individuals to connect with their inner selves, engage in critical reflection, expand their perspectives, and embody attitudinal and experiential values.

Echoing recent calls emphasizing the importance of the arts for nurturing well-being, meaning, and purpose and for building healthy societies (Ryff 2019) in arenas such as education, leisure, and work (Shim 2022), as well as in other fields such as medicine and public health (e.g., Crawford 2015; Stuckey and Nobel 2010), initiatives to encourage dialogue between worlds involved performing artists such as musicians, using creative methods such as photography (Russo-Netzer 2021), and organizing gatherings in a contemporary arts museum. The latter involved active interactions with art exhibits as triggers for discussion followed by engagement with corresponding texts (e.g., poetry, religious texts, philosophy, literature, and insights from empirical social sciences studies) to encourage conversations on meaning-related issues such as authenticity, values, freedom, and responsibility. These explorative initiatives suggest that the arts, particularly museums, may serve as settings and environments for meaning-making in society, both through personal and social processes. However, given the exploratory nature of these initiatives, further theoretical and empirical research is necessary to solidify the role of arts, particularly museums, as settings and environments for meaning-making in society.

4.3. The Tribe Intergenerational Life Stories Project

Research consistently supports the idea that stories shape our lives and the way we make sense of them (e.g., Beach 2010). They play a crucial role in shaping our identity and the social environment we exist in and constitute a fundamental aspect of human growth, cultural belonging, and the formation of connections with others (Bruner 1990; Fivush 2008; McAdams 2001). Extensive research has documented how socially shared memories can impact cognitive processes and outcomes (see Elias and Brown 2022). In a conversation, storytelling goes beyond simply describing an event; it provides the listener with contextual information about when the event happened, what it entailed, and the possible psychological effects on those involved (Fivush 2008). Additionally, when a speaker shares a personal memory with someone else, it can lead to the strengthening and modification of the original memory based on various factors related to both the speaker and the listener (e.g., Hirst and Echterhoff 2012). By connecting their experiences to a wider context, individuals can derive meaning from these narratives. An increasing body of research has demonstrated the critical role of intergenerational transmission of family stories not only in shaping one's identity but also in promoting well-being and mental health (Chen et al. 2021; Elias and Brown 2022; Svob and Brown 2012). While life review interventions have been applied for years, previous research and theory indicate that the majority of such interventions involve psychotherapists or family members (e.g., Haber 2006; Pinquart and Forstmeier 2012). The institute's Tribe project focuses on an intergenerational approach, where adolescents from the broader community, outside of the professional or family circles, engage with older adults in their natural settings.

The project aimed at cultivating intergenerational connections between youth and the elderly in communities. It was developed and initiated in several cities across the country, beginning during the COVID-19 pandemic breakout. The project involved assigning dyads of a volunteer adolescent and an elderly community member and had a two-way complementary purpose: to serve as an empowering experience for the youth allowing them to learn from the life stories of older adults on the one hand, and to create a safe space for older adults to share their wisdom and legacy, thereby contributing to the community and alleviating their loneliness, which was exacerbated during the pandemic, on the other hand, with both participants collaborating around a shared mission. The project included five meetings, each lasting about an hour or longer, where the elderly person shared their life story with the adolescent volunteer, and together they chose how to document it and create a shared product based on the story in a creative way, such as through photos, a collage, a play, a video, and more. As part of the project, a manual including background material (i.e., theoretical knowledge about the needs and challenges of the elderly, as well as inspirational quotes of wisdom related to meaning and connection) and a guided protocol for the life story interview was developed and distributed along with brief training for

the youth who committed to taking part in the project. The protocol included guidelines about the structure of the meetings, the importance of listening empathically, the effect of body language, and the importance of documenting, as well as specific instructions for each session.

More specifically, the first meeting focused on establishing connection and rapport, including ice-breaking questions, and provided information about the setting and structure of the project and subsequent meetings, in order to create a safe environment as a foundation for the rest of the meetings. In this session, questions referred to "anchors" in the elderly person's life story that would be developed in later sessions, such as: *If we made a movie or wrote a book about your life, what would the first chapter be? What was your nickname and favorite food in childhood?* The second meeting focused on meaningful choices and crossroads in life. It included questions such as: *Could you please tell me about two special memories or milestones that you remember from your life thus far? What is the most important lesson you've learned about life thus far?* The third meeting focused on meaningful experiences and included questions such as: *Could you please tell me about an experience that made you change your mind about something? Could you please tell me about things that excite you in your life?* The fourth meeting focused on meaningful values in the elderly person's life and included questions such as: *Who were the figures who influenced you the most and in what ways and which values characterized them? What is the most meaningful value that guides you in your life?* The fifth meeting focused on personal imprint and legacy and included questions such as: *Which values do you wish to endow to future generations? What is the message that is most important to you to deliver to the next generation? Could you please tell me about dreams that you haven't fulfilled yet and would like to fulfill?* (and, if appropriate, *What is important for you to do that you haven't done?*). At the end of the fifth session, the volunteer adolescents were guided to acknowledge with gratitude what they had learned from the experience, to conclude the main takeaways in terms of reflection and insights, to share the documented life story they recorded during the sessions, and to plan how to create a joint product that would reflect the process together in a creative way. The manual also included a bank of additional suggested questions and guidelines for how to contact the Compass Institute for questions, consultations, and sharing the creative products and experiences from the project. It is important to note that although the process is presented here as linear, in practice it was more cyclical, with each session building upon its predecessor, involving a dynamic and repeated back-and-forth between the various focused subjects and the whole of the life story. Furthermore, the prompts that were used for the interviews were aimed to tap into common denominators shared by all humans, regardless of their orientation or background, revolving around meaningful experiences, memories, life lessons, and more. This approach allowed for a broad and non-directive exploration, allowing for various subjective responses to emerge. However, the unique cultural characteristics of the Israeli context were taken into account in the arrangement and facilitation of the project. These characteristics include existential threats, a sense of collective vulnerability, and uncertainty, as well as the presence of dialectic identity and worldviews within a multicultural immigrant society (Ezrachi 2004; Russo-Netzer and Mayseless 2021). Specifically for this project, older adults in Israel face the dual challenge of aging (a universal experience) and coping with traumatic adversity (specific to the Israeli context), stemming from distal traumatic exposures such as the Holocaust and Israeli wars, as well as proximal experiences like terrorism. These experiences may increase the sense of loneliness and the need for a sense of belonging (Shrira et al. 2022). In light of these considerations, the guided protocol and manual included, in addition to general directions and guidelines, a strong emphasis on the importance of cultural nuances. This emphasis was driven by the principles of cultural humility and sensitivity, recognizing and respecting challenging experiences, traumatic memories, unique cultural rituals, traditions, and more that may emerge during the interview. Trust and mutual respect were fostered throughout the process.

The relationships that were formed during the meetings appear to have contributed in many ways to all the parties involved. According to the participants, the elderly people

had a place to share their life experiences and to open their homes to young people who brightened their day and shared time and memories with them. The young people gained an understanding of the world of the elderly and meaningful insights about life and their own direction in the future. They also had a chance to connect with a population they did not usually interact with. Finally, according to facilitators who accompanied the youth in the process, the youth involved gained a sense of responsibility, respect for the elderly, and a sense of purpose that contributed to their personal empowerment. For example, one volunteer adolescent shared the following:

> *The elderly resident I was assigned to shared her life story with me and it was really moving to learn from her about life, to laugh with her and to learn new things that I have never knew before... I even learned how to knit! This project turned out to be significant for all of us. I am really glad I joined it.*

Another volunteer shared the following:

> *At first, I was a little nervous and didn't know how I would develop a conversation with someone so much older than me, but the elderly woman I visited was so nice and open that slowly I felt much more comfortable and the stories she told were really interesting. It was meaningful and fun. I didn't think I would enjoy it that much.*

This project enabled elderly citizens to reconnect with their memories and life stories as part of a structured informal process of sharing their life's experience and wisdom with a young person, outside their families. The extension of close circles of belonging to the greater community is in line with the importance of older adults to remain useful (e.g., Lieblich 2014) and active participants in society by creating opportunities for social connectedness, contribution, and belongingness (Russo-Netzer and Littman-Ovadia 2019). The project is still in development, aiming to involve both organizing an appreciation gathering where the elderly and youth could present their experiences and creative outcomes, as well as initiating an evaluation study to explore in more depth the experiences and insights of both the adolescents and elderly throughout the project.

4.4. Education for Meaning: The Meaning Detectives Program

Education is a critical component of any society, as it influences and shapes a vast spectrum of life domains, such as social justice (North 2006), gender (Gray and Leith 2004), and political beliefs (Vos 2018), among others. The essence of the concept of education originated in the process of *Edukos*, a Greek term that means "to draw forth from within," which highlights the significance of fostering and nurturing the internal potential of children and adolescents. However, this process does not occur in isolation, as it is influenced by various competing factors, including social, political, economic, religious, technological, and cultural influences (Forrester and Garratt 2016). Elsewhere, (Russo-Netzer 2022) I have argued that a significant shift in the thought process and direction of practice and application in education is necessary to establish communities that integrate the fabric of meaning into the everyday lives of children, adolescents, and educational staff. Despite significant evidence indicating the importance of meaning across life domains, interventions and strategies aimed at fostering meaning among students have yet to be thoroughly developed and tested (Morse et al. 2019; Steger et al. 2021). Currently, meaning is mostly implemented as one of the positive psychological skills in the PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement) framework in schools (Seligman et al. 2009). Considering its crucial role as a driving force for healthy development, as well as a source of well-being and mental health, education for meaning deserves specific attention in the educational context.

Several initiatives were created to address this challenge, both in research to better understand youth understanding of meaning in life and its potential outcomes for their well-being (e.g., Russo-Netzer and Tarrasch, forthcoming; Russo-Netzer and Shoshani 2020) and develop more nuanced measures for the developmental needs of young children (Shoshani and Russo-Netzer 2017), and in practice. The Meaning Detectives program

aimed to provide a hands-on holistic view and application of meaning in life, suitable for children and adolescents. To allow accessibility to the rather abstract topic, the participants are encouraged to act as "meaning detectives," striving to explore and discover meaning potentials and "clues" in their lives and surroundings. The overarching model is rooted in two main conceptual frameworks: Frankl's (1985) meaning triangle, which includes the creative, experiential, and attitudinal pathways, and the tripartite model of meaning in life, which identifies coherence, significance, and purpose as key components (George and Park 2016; Martela and Steger 2016). The model also draws on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system theory, which emphasizes the importance of understanding human development within the contexts in which individuals live and act. The model is organized into three levels of reference, with the individual-intrapersonal level at the core, followed by the communal-interpersonal level that includes family, neighborhood, ethnic origin, and traditions, and finally the universal level of humanity as a whole. The model takes into account both individual psychological factors and contextual factors in order to understand human wholeness.

The program is composed of eight 90 min sessions and includes a reflective journal for students to record their experiences, insights, and reflections throughout the program. In the first few sessions, the focus is on "embarking on a journey" by identifying internal and external resources, and potential challenges, and setting personal goals. In the subsequent sessions, the students explore the experience and manifestations of meaning in their lives by looking at past, present, and future experiences to "connect the dots" in their life story. They identify choices, meaningful figures, insights derived from positive and negative events, and values as sources of meaning. They also learn to discern meaning in the present moment and form unique, purposeful, and action-oriented goals for the future. Throughout the program, the material and practices are tailored to the participants' age, developmental level, and terminology. The program incorporates nonverbal methods to explore human experience, which may provide a better understanding of individuals' ways of being in the world beyond culturally accepted verbal definitions. This approach may reflect a more experiential felt sense of embodied meaning and purpose, which complements the overall sense of having meaning in life and cognitive understanding of one's sources of meaning.

Overall, the program's message was "your voice matters," both in terms of self-discovery to enable self-knowledge and self-exploration to gain authentic self-awareness ("know thyself") and in terms of personal responsibility and commitment to contribute to and express this unique voice in the greater community. At the end of the program's sessions, the students together created an inspiration wall that was to be hung in their school, which summarized their experiences from the intervention program, including photos, quotes, and concrete reminders of the various activities. This was to allow their engaged participation in a shared project, emotional and cognitive processing of the experiences throughout the program, and the creation of a physical anchor that would remind them of the program after it was completed.

Following several successful pilot tests in schools, the program is currently being empirically assessed both at the student and the teacher level (for more information about the program, see Russo-Netzer 2022).

5. Discussion and Conclusions with an Eye to the Future

The purpose of the present paper is to expand the existing knowledge on meaning-oriented interventions beyond clinical or targeted populations, by introducing a Community-Based Initiative that is directly responsive to this need.

As humans, we enter the world as social beings and become part of a community, whether it be tangible or intangible (such as an online community). Throughout our existence, we often find ourselves belonging to multiple communities. While advances in urbanization and technology continue to reshape the landscape of these communities, they remain crucial to our overall well-being (de Vries 2021). Due to its significant impact on individuals' well-being, resilience, and mental health (e.g., Linley and Joseph 2011; Russo-

Netzer 2018; Steger 2012), as well as its role as a protective factor against psychopathology, meaning holds great importance in both the general population and the clinical population (e.g., Lorca et al. 2021; Marco and Alonso 2019; Marco et al. 2019; Marco et al. 2021, 2022). Furthermore, studies confirm that intervention programs focused on increasing meaning in life are effective in the clinical population, such as palliative care patients, mental health care, and chronic or life-threatening disease (e.g., Manco and Hamby 2021; Russo-Netzer and Vos, forthcoming; Vos 2016). Yet, while interest in meaning in life has increased in recent years among non-clinical populations as well, such as within the positive psychology field, including interventions such as reflecting on self-concordant goals (Locke and Schippers 2018), job crafting (e.g., Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001), and life crafting (Schippers and Ziegler 2019), to name a few, these interventions are still primarily focused on specific populations and settings, such as organizations, elderly citizens, or university students. Thus, developing meaning-oriented context-sensitive interventions applicable to the general society's everyday life is a worthwhile challenge for scholars and practitioners alike. This paper integrates insights from case examples of the Compass Institute initiative to suggest a perspective and foundation that may allow practitioners, policy makers, and researchers to continue the discussion on how we can bridge the gap between accumulating theoretical and empirical knowledge on meaning in life and meeting real-life needs in the community and society, especially following the COVID-19 global pandemic. In order to create such a bridge, we need to consider the importance of making reciprocal connections and contributions through intentional and sustained efforts to engage constructively in existing rituals and customs, as well as to explore new and creative approaches. By engaging in established practices, we can connect with others and tap into the shared experiences and values that define the community. At the same time, embracing new and innovative ways of introducing insights gained from theory and empirical knowledge may assist in expanding horizons for connection and growth.

The examples outlined in this paper may be seen as exemplifying the potential power of brief situational interventions in cultivating purposeful change (Walton and Wilson 2018). While they require further exploration and validation, such potential "wise interventions" may set in motion a virtuous cycle of positive reinforcement . . . when they meet the requirements of the three Ts of situation-crafting: The right psychological message (tailoring) is given to the right person or persons (targeting) at the right time (timeliness). Under these conditions, a wise intervention will be more likely to make an authentic connection with people's lives (Cohen 2022, p. 47).

This entails a dynamic process of conscious and sensitive awareness based on trial-and-error efforts to discern and align the various ongoing factors and contexts that shape and reshape the meaningful and suitable message, target population, and timing. Fostering connections between individuals, sharing knowledge and insights, and making meaningful contributions to various aspects of communal life are essential core values of a resilient community (Prilleltensky 2012). To promote collective action and agency, it is crucial to establish social rituals that facilitate cooperation and collaboration. Furthermore, investing in community capital requires a deep understanding of the social dynamics, assets, and deficiencies that exist within a given community.

In essence, communities serve as the foundation for understanding the dynamics that shape our lives and enable us to comprehend the context, pace, boundaries, and opportunities that life presents us. Communities constitute the basis for social capital, which pertains to the inherent potential resources present in a social structure or network (Coleman 1990). This is achieved through participation in social roles, functions, narratives, and rituals, which are essential for developing one's identity and building connections that can last a lifetime. The opportunities provided by the community not only enable individuals to gain access to resources but also contribute to the development of a sense of purpose, belonging, and interconnectedness (de Vries 2021). Working from the inside out, by involving and empowering members to participate in collective action, may foster the creation of shared narratives that help maintain a positive shared perspective and a

cohesive sense of community over time ([Born 2014](#)). This requires routines and structures that provide a context for self-exploration, reflection, and active contribution. Future efforts should take into account cross-cultural and multicultural differences in how these ideas are perceived and applied. By doing so, a potential platform can be developed to delve deeper into the question of how meaning in life can be nurtured and practiced in various everyday arenas and settings in society at large.

By serving as the foundation for our social roles and functions, communities provide us with a sense of identity and belonging. By prioritizing meaning, communities can become a central frame of reference for us to comprehend not just ourselves but also the people and world around us. Prioritizing meaning requires planning and decision making that weave meaningful activities and situations into daily life routines ([Russo-Netzer 2018](#)). It can be a starting point for designing an intervention via an open and flexible dialogue aiming at better clarification of community members' values and the ways and routes that can be chosen to translate these values into action via specific and concrete activities that are in congruence with such values. For example, inquiries along these lines may include the following: What is important to us as a community? How can we translate that into action? Which meaningful activities or interactions should we prioritize this week? Which activities should be modified or refined? Based on this step, initiating meaning-oriented interventions in a community may involve creating rituals and a framework in which meaning can be encountered and co-constructed. Creating a shared experience through designing environments, structures, and platforms enables us to embody values and shared ethos in classes, schools, organizations, museums, and the public sphere. This involves integrating interdisciplinary, research-based knowledge and adapting terminology and language to everyday life.

In today's world of increasing fragmentation, instability, sophistication, and personalization, feelings of social disconnection and alienation, often amplified by the dominance of individualism in Western societies, lead to a tension between the desire for personal freedom and the need for a sense of community and security. Moreover, powerful political, economic, and ecological forces can influence our thoughts and perspectives, which can further erode the social fabric that binds us together. Social systems as a whole appear to be on unstable ground, as realities such as the pandemic, economic crises, climate change, and increasing income disparities have called into question long-held assumptions about the importance of individual growth and progress. Attending to the interplay of individuals surrounding culture also entails the promotion of social justice and equity, which also can be facilitated by bridging the divide between academic research and practical application. This approach can help ensure that policies and programs are designed and implemented in a manner that fosters social justice and equity, resulting in more inclusive and equitable outcomes for all members of society, especially those who have been historically marginalized or disadvantaged. Furthermore, in light of the physical and psychological aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak, it is becoming increasingly apparent that networks built around communal support and care can prove to be highly beneficial in countering the expected rise in mental health issues. Meaning-oriented grassroots initiatives and proactive interventions can help to address the lingering effects of the pandemic by providing a space for individuals to connect, share experiences, and support each other through the challenges they face. Situating community-based work vis à vis the individual basis of most prior interventions seeking to promote meaning, purpose, and well-being is an important next step, and in this context, the community-based initiatives described in this article may serve as concrete examples of transferring scientific knowledge to society. As Mahatma Gandhi put it,

> It's the action, not the fruit of the action, that's important. It may not be in your power, may not be in your time, that there'll be any fruit... You may never know what results come from your action. But if you do nothing, there will be no result.

As researchers and practitioners, we have a social responsibility to extend our focus beyond individual well-being to society and to extend meaning beyond academic research

and psychotherapy to more arenas, especially given the existing and new challenges people are facing in their daily lives and in the world surrounding them. In this regard, no action should be taken for granted, and every small step can make a significant difference. No matter how small or modest it may seem, such initiatives can contribute to creating positive change and making a meaningful impact.

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