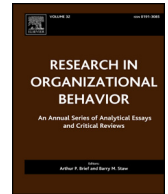




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## Work and the good life: How work contributes to meaning in life



Sarah J. Ward, Laura A. King\*

University of Missouri, Columbia, United States

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### ABSTRACT

Many people expect their work to provide meaning to their lives, yet the specific organizational factors that can promote meaning in life are not clearly delineated. Drawing on the basic science of meaning in life, in this paper we propose that work entails a host of experiences that foster meaning in life. We begin by defining meaning in life, noting its placement within the broader well-being literature and dispelling common myths about its rarity in people's lives. After highlighting the myriad benefits of meaning for individuals and organizations, we describe several established sources of meaning in life and their relevance to work. We then examine how work orientations and social demographic factors influence the propensity to seek meaning through work. We conclude with a discussion of future research directions that can better illuminate the predictors and functions of meaningfulness at work.

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\* Corresponding author.  
E-mail address: [kingla@missouri.edu](mailto:kingla@missouri.edu) (L.A. King).

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“All goods are disguised by the vulgarity of their concomitants, in this work-a-day world; but woe to him who can only recognize them when he thinks them in their pure and abstract form!” (James, 1890, p. 125)

For many people the “work-day-world” noted by William James includes work. The trappings of work life involve a host of quotidian experiences that are rarely considered central aspects of the good life. Indeed, fantasies of the ideal existence are likely to reflect something more like a long vacation (Scollon & King, 2004). The work-a-day world may include early morning alarm clocks, daily commutes, sharing coffee and complaints with coworkers, meeting demands, and dealing with e-mails and voicemails. Leaving these commitments for a weekend or holiday is often met with joy. Nevertheless, work occupies a central role in most people’s lives. The experiences people encounter at work have the potential to greatly improve or thwart their well-being. Many people expect their work to provide not only financial rewards but feelings of happiness and satisfaction with life. Indeed, many people hope that work will provide life with a sense of purpose or meaning. Yet, whereas factors related to life and job satisfaction have been probed extensively (e.g., Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010; Judge & Watanabe, 1993; Tenney, Poole, & Diener, 2016; Wright & Bonett, 2007), the specific organizational factors that can promote meaning in life are largely uncharted.

In this article, drawing on the basic science of meaning in life, we argue that work entails a number of experiences that likely foster a sense that life is meaningful. Research has begun to show that rather than being rare or challenging to accomplish, meaning in life is supported by affective, social, and environmental factors that are surprisingly ubiquitous (e.g., King, Heintzelman, & Ward, 2016). Meaning in life is not only a product of profound, life-altering experiences but is part of the work-a-day world. Grounding meaning in life in the everyday experiences of people, we consider the specific ways that work can encourage meaningfulness and the benefits of meaning for organizations.

In this review, we focus on how work contributes to the broader meaning people ascribe to their lives, rather than on specific interpretations of the *meaning of work*, defined

as “employees’ understanding of *what* they do at work as well as the *significance* of what they do” (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003, p. 99). Certainly, the meaningfulness of people’s lives is related to the meaningfulness they attribute to their work (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012), so we draw connections to the meaningfulness of work and to work orientations when relevant throughout this review (for reviews of the meaning of work literature, see Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010; Wrzesniewski, 2003). Although meaning in life is sometimes considered a rarified experience (see King, 2012), something above the common and ordinary, we hope to show that this experience, though “disguised in the vulgarity of its concomitants,” likely springs from many largely unnoticed aspects of work life.

We begin by defining meaning in life, describing its measurement, and placing it in the larger context of the science of well-being. We also briefly sketch the properties and broader correlates of this construct. Then, we review the literature on the meaning of work. Next, we describe the role of six factors in enhancing meaning in life, ranging from the potentially trivial (e.g., positive mood) to the more profound (e.g., religion). Then, we seek to link meaning in life to work attitudes. Finally, we offer ideas for future research and some closing remarks. To begin, we take on a lingering challenge in the well-being literature, defining meaning in life.

## Meaning in life

### *Delineating meaning and its components*

The meaning of life is an age old human preoccupation that is unlikely to have a settled resolution. However, within the science of well-being, meaning *in* life is treated as subjective state or judgment regarding how people feel about their lives, rather than the broader existential purpose people attribute to the world or to human life more generally (i.e., the meaning *of* life). Here, we present a definition of meaning in life, review its measurement, and seek to place it in the larger well-being literature.

Meaning in life is often presented as an enigma: At once a cornerstone of well-being and simultaneously ineffable (Halusic & King, 2013). This definitional ambiguity has

arguably impeded scholarly progress in building an understanding of this important construct. Numerous definitions have been promulgated (Heintzelman & King, 2013). For instance, King and colleagues offered the following definition (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006, p. 180): “Lives may be experienced as meaningful when they are felt to have a significance beyond the trivial or momentary, to have purpose, or to have a coherence that transcends chaos.”

A somewhat more detailed definition was proposed by Steger (2012, p. 65): “Meaning is the web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our experience and formulate plans directing our energies to the achievement of our desired future. Meaning provides us with the sense that our lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are more than the sum of our seconds, days, and years.”

Even these disparate and rather abstract definitions have commonalities. Indeed, considering the many ways that meaning has been defined, scholars have reached a consensus that the experience of meaning includes (at least) three components: purpose, significance, and coherence (Heintzelman & King, 2013; King et al., 2006; Martela & Steger, 2016). Purpose in life involves having goals, a sense of direction, or a mission in life (Reker, 1992). Significance reflects feeling that one matters to the social world and is valued in social roles. Significance also includes an emphasis on *generativity*, which involves making important contributions that will extend beyond one’s personal existence (Cox, Wilt, Olson, & McAdams, 2010). Reker (1992) defined coherence as a feeling of order, consisting of an integrated and perceptive understanding of the self and the world, as well as feeling that life makes sense. A sense of coherence involves perceiving one’s world as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful (Antonovsky, 1979, 1987).

These components of meaning in life—purpose, significance, and coherence—clearly share considerable conceptual overlap. Consider that working in a context that “makes sense,” in which one’s efforts pay off in accomplishments, is likely a prerequisite for fully engaging in one’s goals in that context. Recognition for accomplishments, in turn, feeds a sense of significance. Successfully pursuing goals likely influences the extent to which one matters to the context. Similarly, those who feel a high level of significance may be more likely to engage fully with goals. It may be that the feeling of meaningfulness emerges from related but separable experiences (Heintzelman & King, 2014a). Indeed, empirically, purpose, significance, and coherence are strongly correlated with each other. Psychometric investigations support a hierarchical structure, such that purpose, significance, and coherence represent lower order factors, feeding into an overarching, global sense of meaning in life (e.g., Krause & Hayward, 2014). Often, purpose and meaning in life have been used synonymously in past research (e.g., Reker & Peacock, 1981). Although conceptualizations of purpose have sometimes emphasized goal-directedness more strongly than conceptualizations of meaning (Martela & Steger, 2016), generally in research and theory both refer to the same construct and phenomenological experience

(meaning in life). In the present review, we focus broadly on meaningfulness, the central overarching construct that encompasses feelings of purpose, significance, and coherence. We refer to specific components of meaningfulness when this level of precision is appropriate or when describing literature that assessed a specific component.

### *Measuring meaning in life*

Conceptual ambiguity notwithstanding, numerous scales measuring meaning in life have been developed. These self-report measures include the Purpose in Life Test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), The Life Regard Index (Battista & Almond, 1973), the Sense of Coherence Scale (Antonovsky, 1987), the Meaningful Life Measure (Morgan & Farsides, 2009), and the Personal Meaning Profile (Wong, 1998). The most widely used and well-validated (Brandstätter, Baumann, Borasio, & Fegg, 2012) contemporary measure used to assess global feelings of personal meaning is the presence of meaning subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006). This measure assesses meaning with five face valid items pertaining to one’s evaluation of life’s meaningfulness, such as “I have discovered a satisfying life purpose” and “I understand my life’s meaning.” In sum, then, when researchers talk about meaning in life, they are referring to a subjective assessment provided in answer to the (potentially deceptively) simple question, “How meaningful is my life?” Although such ratings may seem rather trivial in the context of one of life’s central existential questions, these ratings have been shown to predict important outcomes, as reviewed later.

### *Meaning in life in the context of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being*

Understanding the place of meaning in life within the broader well-being literature requires a short history of its theoretical treatment. The well-being literature is often characterized in terms of two types of well-being, hedonic and eudaimonic (e.g., Huta & Waterman, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Hedonic well-being generally involves experiencing positive affect and avoiding negative affect, as well as subjective evaluations of life (*life satisfaction*) (e.g., Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999). Eudaimonic approaches emphasize that well-being extends beyond personal feelings of happiness and involves personal growth and virtuous pursuits (Ryff, 1989; Singer, 1998a, 1998b; Singer, 1998a, 1998b). Importantly, meaning in life is typically included as an aspect of eudaimonia (e.g., Huta & Waterman, 2014).

Eudaimonic well-being might be thought of as well-being in “its pure and abstract form”—unsullied by worldly concerns (Ward & King, 2016a). Because eudaimonic approaches emphasize well-being that extends beyond the self, they are often conceptualized as morally superior to hedonic well-being. For instance, Huta and Waterman (2014, p. 1427) considered eudaimonic well-being to capture a suite of motivations representing “the best within us,” in contrast to the inherently personal and potentially selfish nature of hedonic well-being.

In contrast to the theoretical notion that eudaimonic well-being is less subjective than hedonic states, both are overwhelmingly measured using self-reports and reflect internal feelings about people's lives. Although, theoretically, hedonic and eudaimonic well-being ought to be separable by their antecedents (Waterman, 1993), no evidence exists supporting the notion that these types of well-being differ qualitatively from each other (Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008). Rather, engaging in eudaimonic pursuits has been found to lead to quantitatively higher levels of self-reported (hedonic) well-being (Waterman, 1993). In addition, many activities lead to both positive emotions and enhanced meaning in life. For instance, prosocial actions predict increases in both positive emotions and meaning in life (Nelson, Layous, Cole, & Lyubomirsky, 2016; Van Tongeren, Green, Davis, Hook, & Hulsey, 2016), demonstrating that actions that provide benefits beyond the self are not only related to eudaimonic forms of well-being but to hedonic well-being as well.

Although eudaimonic and hedonic well-being are often treated as theoretically distinct, empirical research suggests they are highly correlated and not qualitatively distinct (for reviews, see Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & King, 2009; Kashdan et al., 2008). As an example, a study of over 7,000 people in 109 different countries provided strong support in favor of eudaimonic and hedonic well-being variables representing one overarching well-being construct (Disabato, Goodman, Kashdan, Short, & Jarden, 2016). The latent constructs representing hedonic and eudaimonic well-being in structural equation models were very strongly correlated,  $r = .96$ , and exhibited minimal evidence of discriminant validity (Disabato et al., 2016). This strong correlation may reflect shared method variance between the constructs, as both are measured via self-report. Clearly, meaning in life is best considered a part of a broader suite of variables representing positive psychological functioning, rather than qualitatively different from more hedonic forms of well-being.

Just as eudaimonic and hedonic well-being are highly related, the lower order variables considered representative of each would be expected to be associated. Indeed, meaning in life, life satisfaction, and positive affect are all moderately correlated with each other (e.g., Disabato et al., 2016; King et al., 2006; Steger et al., 2006; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), each representing a specific aspect of psychological well-being (e.g., Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Research reviewed below suggests that the boundary between eudaimonic and hedonic well-being ought to be considered quite permeable (or in fact artificial), and, as we will see, variables emblematic of each form of well-being may causally impact each other.

### Ubiquity and benefits of meaning in life

Research on meaning in life, both in psychology and organizational behavior, has proliferated at a slower rate than research on life satisfaction and happiness, perhaps due to conceptual issues regarding the precise nature of meaning as noted above. In some ways, the placement of meaning in life on a eudaimonic pedestal has led to a sense

that this aspect of well-being is somehow more esoteric, rare, and less useful to our understanding of the work-a-day world in which most people live. Thus, we turn to two important concerns. First, is the experience of meaning in life, in fact, rare? And, second, is there value in the experience of meaning in life? We answer these questions in turn.

#### *Meaning in life is commonplace*

Psychologists have often portrayed meaning in life as chronically lacking in people's lives (e.g., Yalom, 1980). Certainly, just perusing the headlines or one's twitter feed, it is not difficult to get the sense that there is little sense to be found in life. Moreover, the popularity of self-help resources promising a more meaningful or purposeful life suggest that people are, indeed, searching for meaning. If meaning in life is thought to occupy a place in eudaimonic well-being we might expect it to be less common than happiness or positive mood, variables that are emblematic of hedonic well-being. Yet, it is an empirical question whether the sense that life is meaningful is, in fact, lacking in most people's lives. Heintzelman and King (2014b) reviewed several sources of evidence to address the question, How meaningful is life, on average? They found that the answer to this question was a potentially surprising, "pretty meaningful."

Evidence for the notion that meaning in life is commonplace can be found in representative samples of Americans in which the level of meaning (or purpose) in life has been reported to be significantly above the midpoint of ratings scales (see Heintzelman & King, 2014b for a review). A particularly intriguing example is provided by the Gallup Global Poll, which involved a representative sample of participants from 132 nations ( $N = 137,678$ ; Oishi & Diener, 2014) who responded to the question, "Do you feel your life has an important purpose or meaning?". The percentage of respondents answering yes (averaged across nations) was 91% (Oishi & Diener, 2014).

Additional evidence that life is pretty meaningful comes from the body of research on meaning in life that has accrued over the last several decades. Compiling this literature across two measures of meaning (including the Purpose in Life Test and MLQ presence subscale described above), Heintzelman and King (2014b) found that, on a scale from 1 to 7, means were typically and significantly above the midpoint of the scales (modal ratings of 5 for Purpose in Life Test and 4.5 for MLQ presence subscale). These ratings are notable because they were drawn from diverse samples. Even among samples of individuals diagnosed with a serious psychological disorder or physical illness, meaning in life was rated significantly above the midpoint of the 7-point scale. Thus, in variety of contexts, life appears to be experienced as pretty meaningful.

Of course, there is variability of meaning in life, just as there is for any aspect of well-being. But the results of these analyses suggest that meaning in life should not be considered an unsolvable mystery or an aspect of well-being reserved only for the introspective or elite. Rather,

meaning in life appears to be a relatively common experience. This fact is important because, as we consider next, meaning in life is a vital aspect of well-being.

#### *Meaning in life is important: personal and organizational benefits*

Research using self-reported meaning in life has found that perceiving one's life as meaningful benefits both psychological and physical health. Meaning in life is positively associated with several markers of psychological well-being, including higher life satisfaction and positive affect (e.g., Steger et al., 2006; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Meaning is negatively correlated with indicators of poor psychological well-being, specifically negative affect, depression, anxiety, general psychological distress, and posttraumatic stress disorder (e.g., Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Owens, Steger, Whitesell, & Herrera, 2009; Steger, Mann, Michels, & Cooper, 2009; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). In the realm of physical health, meaning is associated, prospectively, with lower mortality rates, lower risks of cardiovascular health problems, lower risk of Alzheimer's disease, and slower age-related cognitive impairment (e.g., Boyle, Buchman, Barnes, & Bennett, 2010; Boyle et al., 2012; Hill & Turiano, 2014; Kim, Sun, Park, Kubzansky, & Peterson, 2013; Kim, Sun, Park, & Peterson, 2013). Clearly, meaning in life is associated with a variety of positive markers of psychological and physical health.

As noted earlier, meaning in life has not been studied extensively within the organizational literature, yet there is indirect evidence for its benefits to organizations. Most of the research on meaning in the workplace has focused on how meaningful people find their work, rather than on meaning in life, broadly. This research has demonstrated that perceiving one's work as meaningful is associated with a host of positive outcomes, both for individuals and for organizations. People who find their work meaningful exhibit higher work engagement, more organizational commitment, and higher job satisfaction (e.g., May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004; Geldenhuys, Laba, & Venter, 2014; Steger et al., 2012). Perceiving one's work as meaningful is also linked to individual well-being, including higher meaning in life and life satisfaction, as well as lower depression and hostility (e.g., Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Steger et al., 2012). If income is a proxy for success in the workplace, it is notable that a recent longitudinal study showed that a strong sense of purpose predicted greater lifetime earnings (Hill, Turiano, Mroczek, & Burrow, 2016).

In contrast to the dearth of research on meaning, organizational research has probed the effects of positive moods and life satisfaction extensively. Because meaning in life shares a moderate association with both positive affect and life satisfaction (e.g., Disabato et al., 2016; Steger et al., 2006), it may relate to outcomes in a similar manner to these well-being variables. Positive affect and life satisfaction predict a host of beneficial outcomes, including job performance, job satisfaction, self-regulation, creativity, and positive social relationships, as well as lower absenteeism (for reviews see Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Tenney et al., 2016). As these examples illustrate, being in a good mood and feeling satisfied with

one's life can have wide ranging effects on performance and motivation, suggesting the organizational importance of understanding how to improve well-being as well as the need to investigate whether meaning in life is predictive of positive outcomes in the workplace. Moreover, research might probe whether a sense of meaning mediates the relationships between positive emotions or life satisfaction and work outcomes.

The indispensable value of meaning is recognized not only within the theoretical and empirical literature, but also by everyday people who strive for a life of meaning. People recognize that, along with happiness, meaning in life is a critical component of what they consider a good, desirable life (e.g., King & Napa, 1998). Many people look to their careers for a source of meaning, given the high amounts of time most people spend at work. Workplaces that are believed to encourage personal meaning and happiness will consequently be viewed as more desirable and may foster higher workplace commitment and motivation. Next, we review research on the importance of work for well-being before outlining the factors that can promote meaning in life and contextualizing these in organizations.

#### **Meaning in the workplace**

Whereas meaning and flourishing within the workplace once received scant empirical attention, organizational scholars have become increasingly interested in identifying how organizations and work can contribute to well-being (e.g., Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). This heightened interest in the domain of positive organizational scholarship is unsurprising considering the well-being benefits of work and the fact that many people are expecting their work to provide a sense of meaning. Prior to delving into the specific factors that may influence meaning in life in the workplace, we address an important initial consideration: Do people who work have better well-being than the unemployed? We then turn to examine the conceptualization and benefits of meaningful work, a topic that has understandably received more attention within the organizational literature than the study of meaning in life, more broadly construed. Because meaning in life has been studied less often than other aspects of well-being, namely life satisfaction and happiness, throughout this review we highlight findings from these other aspects of well-being when relevant, given their association with meaning and their obvious relevance to well-being (e.g., Disabato et al., 2016; King et al., 2006; Steger et al., 2006; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992).

#### *Employment and well-being*

It is well-established that people who are employed have higher psychological well-being than people who are unemployed (e.g., Brief, Konovsky, Goodwin, & Link, 1995; Clark & Oswald, 1994; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2004; Frey & Stutzer, 2002; McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005). Although research examining how employment relates specifically to meaning in life is sparse (Ward & King, *in press*), unemployment is known to predict a host

of negative well-being outcomes. Compared to the unemployed, people who are employed have lower odds of depression and anxiety, as well as higher life satisfaction and happiness (e.g., see [McKee-Ryan et al., 2005](#) for a meta-analysis; [Lucas et al., 2004](#); [Theodossiou, 1998](#)). These negative consequences of unemployment hold even when controlling for decreases in income faced during unemployment ([Clark & Oswald, 2002](#); [Lucas et al., 2004](#)), though economic deprivation plays a sizable role in well-being decrements experienced during unemployment ([Brief et al., 1995](#)).

Unemployment may differ from other negative life events in terms of its implications for well-being. Although people tend to adapt to some negative life events, returning to their previous baseline level of well-being (i.e., hedonic treadmill; [Brickman & Campbell, 1971](#)), unemployment exhibits an enduring negative influence on well-being ([Clark, Diener, Georgellis, & Lucas, 2008](#)), and is even more deleterious than other personally distressing events, including divorce and separation (e.g., [Oswald, 1994, 2002](#); [Oswald, 1994, 2002](#)). Further, unemployment may alter a person's baseline level of life satisfaction: A longitudinal study showed that after becoming employed again following unemployment, people did not return to their previous levels of life satisfaction and instead exhibited lower life satisfaction than before their unemployment ([Lucas et al., 2004](#)). Unlike other setbacks in life, loss of employment may thwart well-being in a manner from which it is difficult to recover and may potentially “reset” a person's well-being baseline, demonstrating how essential employment is to positive psychological functioning.

Although unemployment clearly impedes well-being ([Clark & Oswald, 1994](#); [Lucas et al., 2004](#)), retirement from the workforce exhibits more inconsistent effects on well-being, and the relationship between retirement and well-being is likely to be moderated by other factors ([Kim & Moen, 2001](#)). People who are involuntarily retired or those whose identities are strongly based on their work (*work centrality*) exhibited poorer well-being than those who were satisfied with their choice to retire (e.g., [Bonsang & Klein, 2012](#); [Gall, Evans, & Howard, 1997](#); [Wang & Shi, 2014](#); [Warr, Butcher, Robertson, & Callinan, 2004](#)). Just as economic resources and social relationships are associated with meaning in life more generally, as we will later describe (e.g., [Hicks & King, 2009](#); [Kobau, Snizek, Zack, Lucas, & Burns, 2010](#); [Lambert et al., 2013](#); [Ward & King, 2016b](#)), they also appear to promote better retirement outcomes. Retirees' financial resources and the quality of their social relationships and marriage predict more successful adjustment to retirement (e.g., [Kim & Moen, 2001](#)).

Additional evidence for the importance of work in people's lives comes from research investigating whether people would still work if they could financially afford to not work. These studies have repeatedly shown that a majority of people say that would still choose to work even if they did not need the income (e.g., [Arvey, Harpaz, & Liao, 2004](#); [Highhouse, Zickar, & Yankelevich, 2010](#); [Morse & Weiss, 1955](#)). One study provided evidence of these inclinations: Among a sample of 185 lottery winners, a

majority (63%) continued working full time at the same organization they were employed at prior to winning, and only 15% stopped working altogether ([Arvey et al., 2004](#)). These studies demonstrate that most people value their work for benefits beyond simply financial rewards.

### *Meaningful work*

The previous examples illustrate the broad benefits of work for well-being. Of course, not all work is experienced as enjoyable or meaningful, and many people find their work tedious, lacking the motivation to perform well. What distinguishes meaningful work from that experienced as unimportant? Recently, research on the importance of meaningful work and the attributes people associate with work they find meaningful has proliferated (e.g., [Cartwright & Holmes, 2006](#); [Fairlie, 2011](#); [Geldenhuis et al., 2014](#); [Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012](#); [Pratt & Ashforth, 2003](#); [Steger et al., 2012](#)). Scholars have also begun to consider the wide ranging organizational features and processes that can promote meaningful work, including leadership, recruitment, job crafting, and organizational culture ([Pratt & Ashforth, 2003](#)). Within the past decade, three multidimensional scales have been developed to measure meaningful work ([Fairlie, 2010](#); [Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012](#); [Steger et al., 2012](#)). The definitions of meaningful work adopted by these scholars are reminiscent of components of general meaning in life. [Steger et al. \(2012\)](#) definition of meaningful work involves three components: believing that one has found a meaningful career that contributes to one's life purpose, perceiving one's work as contributing to personal growth and one's understanding of the world, and believing that one's work serves a greater purpose. These features of meaningful work closely resemble the components of meaning in life—purpose, coherence, and significance.

Other operationalizations of meaningful work capture similar components. [Lips-Wiersma and Wright's \(2012\)](#) conceptualization of meaningful work involves expressing one's full potential, serving and being unified with others, feeling inspired, and developing one's inner self. Similarly, [Fairlie \(2010, 2011\)](#) conceived of meaningful work as involving the opportunity to self-actualize through work, have a positive social impact, fulfill one's purpose, and feel a sense of accomplishment.

Finding work meaningful exerts a sizeable influence on people's motivation at the workplace. Several studies in diverse occupational settings have demonstrated a link between work engagement and perceptions of meaningful work (e.g., [Fairlie, 2011](#); [Geldenhuis et al., 2014](#); [Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012](#); [May et al., 2004](#); [Steger, Littman-Ovadia, Miller, Menger, & Rothmann, 2013](#)). In addition to better work engagement, meaningful work was also associated with higher commitment to one's career and organization as well as higher job satisfaction (e.g., [Fairlie, 2011](#); [Steger et al., 2012](#)). Meaningful work may also facilitate improved social functioning at the workplace, including better relationships with coworkers and supervisors ([May et al., 2004](#)), as well as a higher incidence of organizational citizenship behaviors ([Steger et al., 2012](#)).

Meaningful work is also linked to fewer negative outcomes in life and in the workplace, including lower depressive symptoms, hostility, burnout, exhaustion, absenteeism, and intentions to leave one's organization (Fairlie, 2011; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Steger et al., 2012). Finding one's work meaningful may also allow people to better undertake challenging tasks. In a sample of deployed soldiers, finding one's work meaningful was related to deriving more long-term benefits from deployment, including an increased ability to deal with stress and a better appreciation for one's life and job (Britt, Adler, Bartone, 2001).

The myriad examples above illustrate the suite of personal and organizational benefits of meaningful work. Most important for the present review, finding one's work meaningful is also correlated with meaning in life (e.g., Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Steger et al., 2012). People who find their work meaningful also tend to find their life meaningful.

### Sources of meaning, in life and at work

The preceding examples exemplify that work is an important contributor to well-being and the pursuit of a meaningful life. When people find their work and their lives meaningful, they not only experience higher well-being, but they also exhibit improved motivation and performance in the workplace. People's experiences at work can impinge on meaning and well-being in numerous ways. Employment enables the pursuit of important goals, fosters generativity, facilitates positive achievement-related feelings, and provides structure and coherence to one's life. Employment also involves tangible economic rewards and incentives that can bolster meaning in life. These features of work that can enhance meaning accord with the everyday sources of meaning identified in past research.

In the next section, we review research on factors that are known to facilitate meaning in life, and we describe how these are relevant to people's experiences in the workplace. In all, we describe the contributions of six factors that have been identified as promoting meaning in life: happiness, social connections and generativity, goals and motivation, coherence and structure, financial resources, and religion. As we describe these various factors, it is important to keep in mind that they likely overlap with each other in important ways. Throughout the discussion, we also suggest how meaning in life may benefit workplace motivation, performance, and satisfaction, illustrating that meaning not only benefits individual well-being but provides benefits to organizations.

### Happiness

Feeling happy and perceiving one's life as meaningful are important aspects of naïve notions of a desirable life (e.g., King & Napa, 1998). Despite early contention and theoretical arguments that meaning and happiness represent vastly different types of well-being (as reviewed above), these components of well-being are deeply interconnected. Building on the notion that people may

use their current mood to guide assessments of their life (e.g., Schwarz & Strack, 1999) and that positive affect may provide a sign that one's life is going well, King et al. (2006) predicted that positive affect would lead to higher meaning in life. Positive affect was strongly related to meaning in correlational data (Study 1; King et al., 2006). Interestingly, a daily diary study showed that the strongest predictor of daily meaning was not the amount of goal-directed behavior that day (nor any of the other daily factors considered) but rather the amount of positive affect experienced that day (Study 2; King et al., 2006).

Of course, correlational data are ambiguous with regard to causal direction and it is entirely plausible that high levels of meaning in life lead to higher levels of happiness. However, and importantly, the potency of positive mood in bolstering meaning has been repeatedly demonstrated in experiments. Experimental inductions of positive affect using priming with positive words, positive stories, or recalled happy experiences have all been shown to increase meaning in life (Studies 4 and 5, King et al., 2006; Study 2, Ward & King, 2016b). Feeling happy makes life feel more meaningful.

One potential interpretation of the strong link between positive mood and meaning in life is that people are using their current good mood as a quick heuristic for how meaningful their life is, rather than think more deeply about whether their life is meaningful. However, research suggests that this is unlikely to be the case. Trent and King (2010) conducted an experiment in which participants were assigned randomly to complete measures of meaning in life either very fast, thoughtfully (after taking time to think about items "carefully"), or with no special instructions. Positive affect (measured prior to the manipulation) was more strongly tied to meaning in the thoughtful experimental condition than the fast/control conditions, demonstrating that this association is not due to people relying on mood as a quick heuristic of how meaningful their lives are. Instead, positive mood appears to be an important aspect of whether people consider their lives meaningful.

Many of the studies reviewed above relied on young adult samples. Perhaps young people are somehow more prone to base a sense of meaning in life on simple happiness. Is it possible that the strong relationship between positive mood and meaning in life applies only to undergraduate samples? Quite the contrary, in a series of experiments, Hicks and co-workers (2012) demonstrated that positive affect is more strongly tied to meaning in life among older adults and among people who perceive themselves as having minimal time left to live and achieve their goals. One implication for organizational scholars is that people nearing retirement may thus find work that is personally enjoyable to promote a stronger sense of meaning than younger people. It may be that with age, the "meaning of life" becomes a simpler proposition and simple pleasures become increasingly definitive of what is meaningful.

The association between experienced happiness and meaning in life within the workplace has not yet been investigated, but given the strong association between happiness and meaning (King et al., 2006), we may expect

that experiences of happiness and meaning likely co-occur at work and produce similar outcomes. Indeed, people who take great enjoyment in their work, such as an artist or carpenter, are likely to experience it as highly meaningful. Measures of happiness, including positive affect and life satisfaction, are associated with numerous markers of workplace success, including higher work engagement, better performance, and stronger organizational commitment (e.g., Field & Buitendach, 2011; Fisher, 2010; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Staw & Cohen-Charash, 2005). The associations between happiness and performance are typically small to moderate (for a review see Tenney et al., 2016), suggesting that perhaps there are moderators of this relationship, one of which may be the experience of meaning in life. Life satisfaction and positive affect have also been linked to job satisfaction and perceiving work as meaningful (Steger et al., 2012; Tenney et al., 2016), demonstrating that people who are generally happy also tend to be happy with their work and believe it provides an outlet for meaning-making. Much of this research on happiness and workplace outcomes is correlational, and it is easy to imagine that satisfaction with one's life and with one's career share a reciprocal relationship, each reinforcing each other. Meaning in life may similarly share a bidirectional relationship with positive work outcomes, as it is likely to be enhanced by success at work as well as encourage further motivation towards goal pursuit (e.g., Emmons, 2003; Machell et al., 2015).

Although the association between positive affect and meaning in life is generally straightforward, positive moods share a more complex relationship with the attitudes people have towards specific tasks. Research has demonstrated that induced and dispositional positive affect can influence people's attitudes about the meaningfulness of tasks and work engagement. In a sample of workers in diverse occupations, people with more positive affective dispositions—higher proneness to experience positive attitudes towards various objects and topics—exhibited higher work engagement than those with low positive affective dispositions when work was considered to have low meaning (Steger et al., 2013). However, when people perceived their work as having high meaning, positive affective dispositions were unrelated to work engagement. People who have a generally positive disposition appear to have stronger motivation towards their work, regardless of whether they interpret the work as meaningful.

Whereas positive affective dispositions facilitate work engagement even when the work is considered lacking in meaning, induced positive affect appears to make people less prone to find meaning in relatively meaningless tasks. King et al. (2006; Study 6) examined whether positive moods affect the meaning people perceive in meaningful versus meaningless tasks. After reporting their current mood, participants in this experiment were randomly assigned to either a meaningful or meaningless task (pondering important passages vs. counting the number of "e's" in them), and then completed ratings of how meaningful they considered the task. Among people assigned to complete the meaningless task, positive mood was negatively related to the perceived meaningfulness of

the task. In contrast, among people who completed the more meaningful task, positive mood was positively associated with perceived meaningfulness. Thus, positive moods may enable people to discriminate between meaningful and meaningless tasks. These results suggest that different types of positive affect (induced versus dispositional) can have divergent effects on people's interpretations and motivation towards meaningful versus more meaningless tasks. Just making people happy in a way that is not directly related to a task may not transform a patently meaningless, boring task, into a meaningful one. Rather, momentary positive affect may enhance a person's sensitivity to the inherent meaningfulness of any activity (King et al., 2006).

Positive affect comes from many different sources but one of the most robust predictors of positive mood is social interaction. Next we review the evidence for the role of social connections in the meaningful life.

#### *Significance: mattering to the social world*

Social connections are a very strong predictor of well-being generally and they play an important role in the experience of one's life as meaningful. Being socially excluded has a profound effect on a person's sense of his or her existence as meaningful (Williams, 2007a, 2007b). Moreover, research has demonstrated that even very subtle rejection, as having someone forget one's name, can damage the sense that life is meaningful (King & Geise, 2011). Work is a context in which individuals have an opportunity to matter and to obtain feedback on their own indispensability. Work can allow us to provide for our loved ones, to extend the self through professional identity, and to build a legacy for the future. Here we review two broad indications of personal significance: social relationships and generativity.

#### *Social relationships*

A wealth of research demonstrates that social relationships are an important source of and contributor to meaning in life. Feeling that one is accepted and cared for by their social group, referred to as *relatedness need satisfaction*, is related to higher meaning in life (Hicks & King, 2009; Hicks, Schlegel, & King, 2010). Similarly, a sense of belongingness—feeling that one accords with the people they know and in the social roles they occupy—has been found to predict meaning in life in studies using correlational, experimental, and longitudinal designs (Lambert et al., 2013). Conversely, feelings of loneliness (such as those elicited by social exclusion) lead to lower meaning in life (Stillman et al., 2009). People's sense of meaning is highly attuned to their acceptance within the social sphere and thus meaning is likely to suffer when people feel they are not adequately accepted, appreciated, or acknowledged by others.

Family relationships provide an especially potent source of meaning. In a study of young adults, 68% chose their families as the most important contributor to their personal meaning in life (Study 1; Lambert et al., 2010). In another study, people selected their family as the most important source of meaning in relation to other potential



sources of meaning, including religion, personal growth, and helping others, to name a few (Study 2; Lambert et al., 2010). Positive relationships with one's family also contribute to higher meaningfulness (Lambert et al., 2010). These results demonstrate how social relationships, particularly familial bonds, are a robust source of meaning in life, even when considered alongside other critical features of life considered to contribute to meaning.

Just as social belongingness in general can promote meaning (Lambert et al., 2013), positive social relationships at work can improve well-being and meaning. Ragins and Button (2007, p. 5) maintained that positive relationships are "the means by which work is done and meaning is found in organizations." The myriad social interactions an employee has at work exert strong influences on employees' perceived significance and meaning of their lives and of their work (e.g., Dutton, 2003; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Positive interpersonal interactions can promote a sense of personal value and worth to the organization (Dutton, 2003). Feeling social connected and accepted by one's coworkers is also linked to greater job satisfaction and performance (e.g., Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Ilardi, Leone, Kasser, & Ryan, 1993). Organizational climates that foster supportive interactions can help workers to form essential social bonds that provide encouragement, motivation, and meaning.

Emerging evidence has begun to suggest that meaning in life may also benefit social interactions. Among a sample of white adults, purpose in life was found to increase comfort with ethnically diverse interactions and living in a diverse environment (e.g., Burrow & Hill, 2013; Burrow, Stanley, Sumner, & Hill, 2014). People with a strong purpose in life may be better able to thrive in diverse environments because they are more strongly focused on broader collective goals that benefit society (Burrow et al., 2014). Interestingly, meaning in life also promotes social appeal: In two studies, people with high meaning in life were rated by observers as being more likeable and desirable potential friends than people with low meaning (Stillman, Lambert, Fincham, Baumeister, 2011). This association held when controlling for relevant personality factors (e.g., extraversion, agreeableness, self-esteem) and happiness of the target. People may be drawn to those who appear purposeful and confident in their actions. The social appeal of meaning has not yet been studied within organizational settings, yet an interesting application of these findings would be to examine whether they extend to leadership: Are leaders with higher meaning in life perceived by observers as more likeable and competent compared to those with lower meaning? Leaders with a high sense of meaning may convey more confidence and ambition in their speech or behavior, leading to admiration from others in the workplace.

The power of social relationships to create meaning in the workplace implies as well that negative social experiences at work are thus likely to impair meaning. Negative social interactions can damage performance and psychological well-being (Dutton, 2003). Employees' perceptions of their worth within their organization are often gleaned from their social interactions. Statements

and actions that convey social disaffirmation at work are likely to lower an employee's feelings of significance and worth in the organization, as well as the specific meanings people attach to their role at work (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). It is thus important for organizations—and individuals within these organizations—to foster organizational contexts that encourage positive social interactions that reinforce employees' value to the organization. Affirming social interactions can promote higher meaningfulness at work and, in turn, reinforce standards for courteous interpersonal interactions (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Discrimination faced at work is likely to have an especially pernicious effect on meaning and psychological well-being (e.g., Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014). People who perceive their workplace or specific individuals within their workplace as discriminatory are likely to experience a lower sense of belongingness, which hinders meaning (Lambert et al., 2013).

In addition to negative social interactions thwarting meaning, occupations that offer minimal social interaction may also be detrimental to meaning, as loneliness and social exclusion decrease meaning (e.g., Hicks & King, 2009; Stillman et al., 2009). People who have minimal social interactions at work, either as a result of frequently telecommunicating, completing isolating tasks, or working at a very small company, can experience lower well-being and worse relationships with coworkers (e.g., Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Grant, Wallace, & Spurgeon, 2013). Indeed, some occupations are inherently solitary, such as being a truck driver, writer, or actuary, and people in these occupations are likely to derive their social belongingness from relationships outside of work.

#### *Generativity*

Work not only provides a context for important social relationships, but along with parenting (Morfei, Hooker, Carpenter, Mix & Blakeley, 2004), it is a key way that individuals contribute to the world in a larger sense (Clark & Arnold, 2008). Generativity involves a person's interest in and dedication to benefitting future generations (Erikson, 1963; McAdams, 2006). Generativity concerns serve as a motivational force, guiding which goals people prioritize and pursue. Concerns with generativity can lead people to strive to make a broader impact to the world through their contributions at work, in civic engagement, and to their families and friends. People with high generativity perceive their futures with optimism, believing that their legacies will outlast their life and benefit future generations (McAdams, 2006). Engaging in activities that are believed to promote generativity instills a sense of significance and purpose to one's life, making people feel that their contributions extend beyond the self and that their existence is serving broader and potentially profound goals (de St. Aubin, 2013).

The workplace provides many opportunities for experiencing generativity through one's direct work contributions and the social relationships formed in this context. Imbuing work projects and even small tasks with a larger focus on their benefits to society can help people to feel that their work is valuable to others and will have a

positive impact. Workplace social relationships involving training and mentoring are also integral to experiencing one's work and life as significant. Feeling that one has made important contributions at work can leave a lasting sense of generativity that extends into retirement. For instance, past experience with mentoring others in the workplace predicted higher generativity and meaning among a sample of retired adults (Miranda-Chan & Nakamura, 2015).

People are likely to be concerned about their overall contribution to the world throughout multiple stages in life, but considerations of generativity heighten as people reach middle and late adulthood (e.g., McAdams, 2006). As people age, they become increasingly concerned with the legacy and generativity of their life and work, placing more emphasis on goals that offer meaningful outcomes rather than more individualistic pursuits (e.g., Lang & Carstensen, 2002; McAdams, 2006; Ng & Feldman, 2010). Just as people's concerns about generativity are likely to increase as they get older, meaning is also likely to heighten with age. Older people tend to report higher meaning in life than younger people, who are more likely to report searching for meaning (Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009). The higher meaning among older adults may be due to older adults' stronger sense of generativity, having had a chance to contribute to the next generation. Older adults also prioritize jobs that offer the opportunity to train younger employees as a means of promoting generativity (Mor-Barak, 1995). These findings suggest that it may be valuable to emphasize and offer more mentoring opportunities for older employees who are looking to teach their skills to their coworkers, as this can provide more opportunities for these employees to realize the significance of their work.

Prioritizing generativity may inform the types of careers people seek out in hopes of achieving a meaningful existence and leaving a legacy. People with stronger concerns for generativity may be drawn to careers related to more altruistic pursuits (e.g., social work, medicine) versus careers more centered on extrinsic rewards. Careers that allow people to devote themselves towards broader goals can promote feelings of personal significance, making one feel that their work is critical to the advancement of society. People who strongly value generativity may also desire careers that offer the opportunity for mentoring others in hopes of directly contributing to the well-being and advancement of other people. Teachers and those engaged in voluntary work with youth showed higher levels of generativity than people employed in other contexts (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997). A survey of mid-career men found that work generativity was separate from generativity in the parenting domain (Clark & Arnold, 2008). Moreover, those who experienced generativity at work reported greater job satisfaction and career success (Clark & Arnold, 2008).

Generativity involves a concern for contributing to the well-being of others. As such, it is an important aspect of a person's goals or life mission. In this sense, generativity sits at the very intersection of social relationships and our next topic, purpose.

### *Purpose, goals, and motivation*

Goals represent concrete examples of the desired objectives and events people believe will lend purpose to their lives and therefore provide an important source of meaning (e.g., Emmons, 2003). Goals also provide motivation and order to people's lives, guiding them towards actions that are imbued with personal significance and value (e.g., Emmons, 2003). Pursuing goals that one finds personally valuable improves well-being (e.g., Sheldon & Elliot, 1999), including meaning in life (e.g., Emmons, 2003; King et al., 2006). Success or failure at living up to one's goals can also influence fluctuations in meaning. A two-week study of people's daily experiences demonstrated that events related to achievement increased daily meaning, even when controlling for mood (Machell, Kashdan, Short, & Nezlek, 2015). In contrast, experiencing negative achievement-related events predicted decreases in daily meaning. People's daily well-being and meaning is tied to their ability to achieve valued goals and feel accomplished; if these goals are thwarted, people will experience momentary feelings of lower meaning and happiness. Such feelings may play an important role in self-regulation (e.g., in redoubled efforts or goal disengagement).

The workplace is an important domain for goal pursuit and personal growth, as people have ample opportunities to gain knowledge, master new tasks, and tackle novel challenges, all of which can promote feelings of personal achievement. Constantly tackling novel tasks in the workplace enables people to grow and develop themselves and feel purposeful as they achieve important milestones at work. One specific way through which goal attainment may foster purpose is by increasing beliefs that one can successfully accomplish tasks (*self-efficacy*), which is related to higher purpose in life (DeWitz, Woolsey, & Walsh, 2009). Self-efficacy also drives people to persist in attempts to achieve their goals (Bandura, 1982; Judge, Bono, Erez, & Locke, 2005), suggesting that the successful pursuit of goals may impel people towards additional success and a corresponding sense of purpose.

Goal pursuit can connect individuals to a big picture within their organization and society. Personal goals may be especially powerful predictors of well-being when they provide a means to important, broader ends (King, Richards, & Stemmerich, 1998). By achieving goals at work, people can envision how their contributions benefit others and their organization, fostering feelings of purpose. However, not all personal goals contribute equally to the pursuit of meaning: Pursuing goals that align with a person's core values and interests is more likely to promote life satisfaction and positive affect (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999) as well as enhance motivation towards future goal pursuit (Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001). If a person's goals do not reflect their deeper values, then pursuit of these goals is unlikely to promote well-being and may instead lead people to exhaust energy and lose motivation (Sheldon, 2002). This is because people will not feel very personally drawn to value-inconsistent goals, instead feeling that they are being forced to pursue them for an external purpose. Pursuing activities that one

has little personal interest in detracts one's energy from more meaningful goal pursuits (e.g., Sheldon, 2002). This issue is central to Self Determination Theory, as we review below.

Research within organizations has provided support for the benefits of pursuing goals that are congruent with one's values and motivated by internal, rather than from external, factors. In a longitudinal study of diverse employees within the United States, people who pursued goals that were aligned with their interests and were internally (versus externally) motivated had higher subsequent goal attainment and job satisfaction (Judge et al., 2005). Pursuing goals that are personally meaningful and valuable can enhance motivation, leading to better goal attainment and satisfaction with one's job.

Just as congruence between personal goals and one's organizational environment is important for fostering motivation and well-being, it is also likely that meaning is enhanced when a person is well suited for their job and organizational culture. Person-job fit is related to satisfaction with one's job, organization, supervisor, and coworkers (e.g., Caldwell & O'Reilly, 1990; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Believing that one's personal values are congruent with one's job and organization is vital to feeling positively about one's place within each. People's perceptions of how well their values align with an organization's culture inform how well they believe they will fit in with the organization as well as their intentions to accept or leave a job (Cable & Judge, 1996). It is also important for workers to feel that their organizations encourage their goals. Perceiving one's workplace as supportive of personal goals is related to higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Maier & Brunstein, 2001), illustrating the importance of fostering workplaces that provide support for workers' unique aims within the organization. People are best able to achieve feelings of meaningfulness when they accomplish goals that they find personally valuable within a career and organization that provides support and harmony with these personal goals.

Of course, people do not typically pursue only career-relevant goals. Every goal exists in a context of multiple goals and desires (e.g., Kruglanski, Chernikova, Rosenzweig, & Kopetz, 2014). When these goals conflict, well-being is likely to suffer (Emmons & King, 1988; Gray, Ozer, & Rosenthal, 2017). When placed in the context of the multiple goals a person wishes to attain, workplace goals may conflict with other pursuits, particularly those related to family life, a key predictor of meaning in life. The time people spend at work is related to more interference with family life and increased psychological distress (Major, Klein, & Ehrhart, 2002). Employees with children may be especially prone to experience lower meaning and psychological well-being when their work interferes with their family life, given the strong importance of family as a source of meaning (Lambert et al., 2010). In order to best promote meaning and well-being more broadly, it is important for organizations to emphasize schedules that allow people sufficient time off to spend with their families and pursue goals outside of the workplace. Indeed, company benefits that provide for better health and family

support as well as increased work schedule flexibility may provide more benefits to employees' meaning than higher salaries, as money offers declining benefits to well-being once people's basic needs are met (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Diener et al., 2010). People who work long hours while being reluctant (versus pleased) to do so experience lower purpose in life and life satisfaction (Bonebright, Clay, & Ankenmann, 2000). It is important for people to seek careers and organizations that align with their expectations for how much they want to work, as people's attitudes about how much they would like to work will shape the extent to which their purpose and happiness is impeded by enduring long work hours. Of course, people may have difficulty anticipating the demands of their chosen career, and mismatch between one's expectations and the true nature of their career may hinder well-being.

The fact that goals exist within a context of multiple motivational impulses suggests the need to prioritize some concerns over others. The optimal prioritization of motivational pursuits is a topic that is central to our next topic in this section, Self Determination Theory.

### *Self Determination Theory*

The role of motivation in a meaningful life is well-delineated by Self-Determination Theory, which proposes that people have three primary universal and innate needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2012). *Competence* involves feelings of mastery and knowledge from developing one's interests and skills. *Relatedness* refers to feeling connected to others in one's social world. *Autonomy* reflects the desire to have control over one's life and act in a manner consistent with one's personal values. Self-Determination Theory posits that people's motivation towards relatedness, autonomy, and competence is intrinsically motivated, reflecting desires for internal growth and exploration rather than extrinsically motivated by external rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

A wealth of research has documented the well-being benefits of fulfilling these basic psychological needs. Having high levels of autonomy, competence, and relatedness is associated with higher satisfaction with life, positive affect, and meaning in life (e.g., Church et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2013; Sheldon, Ryan, Deci, & Kasser, 2004; Trent & King, 2010). Not only are trait differences in autonomy, competence, and relatedness predictive of general well-being, but the extent to which these needs are met throughout a day influences fluctuations in well-being. Experience sampling studies have demonstrated that on days when people felt more autonomy, competence, and relatedness during their activities, they experienced higher positive affect and lower negative affect (e.g., Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996).

Organizational environments that enable people to experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness can help people to experience more meaning and happiness at work. The broad benefits of satisfying these needs has been documented in diverse work settings, including workers in a factory, a psychiatric rehabilitation program, a bank

operations center, and an investment firm (Baard et al., 2004; Kasser, Davey, & Ryan, 1992; Ilardi et al., 1993) as well as in a collectivist-culture, Bulgaria (Deci et al., 2001). In these diverse settings, competence, autonomy, and relatedness were related to improved psychological well-being, more positive attitudes towards work, and better job performance (e.g., Baard et al., 2004; Deci et al., 2001; Kasser et al., 1992; Ilardi et al., 1993). Though research on general populations suggests need satisfaction promotes higher meaning in life (e.g., Church et al., 2013), none of the aforementioned studies conducted within organizational settings assessed meaning in life. Meaning in life is highly correlated with other features of well-being employed in these studies (e.g., positive affect and life satisfaction; Steger et al., 2006; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992) so it is likely that it is also benefitted through need satisfaction, yet this remains to be tested in future research.

Our previous considerations of the roles of social relationships and goal achievement in promoting meaning in life have exemplified the importance of relatedness and competence for meaning. As noted earlier, social relatedness and a sense of belongingness are tied to meaning in life (e.g., Hicks & King, 2009; Hicks, Schlegel et al., 2010; Lambert et al., 2013) and meaning in the workplace is facilitated through positive social relationships (e.g., Dutton, 2003). Feelings of competence are also vital to well-being in the workplace. Competence is experienced through the achievement of important and personally valued goals, which, as noted earlier, can promote meaning in life and happiness (e.g., Machell et al., 2015; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). Workplaces that enable people to conquer novel challenging tasks and form positive social connections can facilitate employees' fulfillment of these needs.

Having autonomy—perceived control and decision-making capacity—in one's life and work is vital to motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon, Turban, Brown, Barrick, & Judge 2003). The most direct way organizations can support people's needs for autonomy is through effective leadership. Transformational leaders inspire workers to adopt autonomous goals that are viewed by employees as especially important and self-congruent (Bono & Judge, 2003). Sheldon et al. (2003) proposed that transformational leaders promote autonomous goals by appealing to workers' values, causing higher internalization of goals. Transformational leaders may also encourage higher motivation of goals by supplying a "vision" that includes the specific goal as well as reasons and justification for pursuing the goal, which often appeal to workers' values and identities (e.g., Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; Sheldon et al., 2003). Transformational leadership is linked to higher perceptions of meaningful work and positive affect (Arnold, Turner, Barling, Kelloway, & McKee, 2007). Charismatic, transformational leaders that provide workers with inspirational visions can thus inspire stronger motivation and well-being.

Leaders and supervisors can provide support for employees' autonomy in organizations in several ways beyond grand visions, including valuing the expertise of their employees, offering employees more control over their work, and advocating for employees to take initiative over their own work (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci et al.,

2001). People who are in autonomy supporting environments are more apt to exhibit internalized motivation and to experience more positive emotions from performing tasks at work (e.g., Gagné, Senecal, & Koestner, 1997; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Sheldon et al., 2003). Because autonomy supporting environments make people more invested in their tasks at work, they can promote better performance and job satisfaction (e.g., Blais & Brière 1992; Bono & Judge, 2003; Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989; Gagné & Deci, 2005), both of which are likely to bolster meaning in life.

Autonomy is closely related to feelings of personal control, the belief that one can manage events and respond to negative setbacks in life (often referred to as internal locus of control; e.g., Rotter, 1966). Personal control is related to stronger purpose in life (Jackson & Coursey, 1988; Ryff, 1989). Working fosters a higher sense of personal control (Price, Choi, & Vinokur, 2002), which is likely to benefit meaning and may also improve goal pursuit and performance in the workplace. People who believe they have control over their actions exhibit higher effort and persistence towards their goals (Turban, Tan, Brown, & Sheldon, 2007), as well as higher performance and job satisfaction (Greenberger, Strasser, Cummings, & Dunham, 1989). Work environments that promote higher feelings of controllability and autonomy can aid in facilitating the well-being and performance benefits of personal control.

#### *Job crafting*

When considering the roles of supervisors and organizational environments, it may seem that employees have little personal control over whether they can achieve autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the workplace. However, workers do have the potential to exercise control over their experiences at work in ways that provide meaning. "Job crafting" involves the process through which employees can define and structure their tasks and environment at work in ways they find meaningful (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). By taking more control over the design and nature of their job, people can derive more meaning from their work. Job crafting allows employees to harness meaning at work through three primary avenues: (1) exercising greater control over tasks, (2) determining the way tasks are perceived, and, finally, (3) deciding which social contexts and relationships to encounter at work (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013).

Regardless of the objective importance of one's work, people have the ability to interpret their work in a manner that emphasizes its broader value and purpose. Berg et al. (2013) highlighted that one way to encourage meaning at work is by expanding how one views the importance of their work, focusing on the holistic value of the job rather than on discrete tasks. This can allow a worker to realize the larger purpose of their work, fostering more appreciation for the value of one's role and, correspondingly, higher meaning. For instance, a person who works as a cook in a fast food restaurant may envision the broader significance of their work role, considering how they provide nourishment to several busy people, as opposed to thinking of the specific food-preparatory steps they perform at work. Another form of job crafting involves

exerting more control over social relationships at work. For example, an employee may find a way to mentor coworkers while performing a task at work, thus promoting feelings of generativity and fostering relatedness. These examples of job crafting illustrate how employees can exercise greater autonomy in their roles at work in ways that align with their personal values and preferences in order to promote higher meaning at work and in their lives more broadly.

### *Coherence and structure*

People strive to make sense of the situations and experiences they encounter, particularly those that defy expectations (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Baumeister and Vohs (2002) suggested that, in the simplest sense, a meaningful life is one that makes sense to the person living it. Meaning in life is likely to be enhanced by living in a world that is perceived as making sense (King, 2012, 2014). Research has started to demonstrate that environmental regularities and patterns can bolster meaning in life. In a series of experiments conducted by Heintzelman et al. (2013), participants were exposed to photographs of trees, either presented in a random or seasonal order, as well as series of words that were either incoherent or coherent. Across experiments, people exposed to the coherent stimuli had higher meaning in life than people exposed to the incoherent stimuli. These effects did not depend on mood, showing that the higher meaning elicited by environmental regularities is not simply due to these being experienced as more pleasant. Additional support for the importance of environmental coherence comes from a study examining how the ease with which information is processed influences meaning. People rated their lives as more meaningful when rating items with an easier (versus harder) to read font (Trent, Lavelock, & King, 2013). Experiences that feel “right” are thus apt to be perceived as more meaningful (Hicks, Cicero, Burton, Trent, & King, 2010).

Further corroboration of the importance of environmental regularity in supporting meaning is provided by The Meaning Maintenance Model, which posits that expectancies about what may happen in one’s environment provide a source of meaning (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006). According to this model, meaning is threatened when people encounter unexpected situations, information, or perceptual anomalies. When people’s expectancies are violated, people will consider these experiences negative and seek to reestablish meaning to relieve their discomfort (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012) through various means. For instance, participants who were exposed to absurdist (versus abstract) art subsequently reported a higher need for structure (Proulx, Heine, & Vohs, 2010). Given the widely touted benefits of creativity and unstructured environments, it may at first seem counter-intuitive that stability and coherence are beneficial. Yet, together, the findings from these various lines of research suggest that having a stable environment characterized by coherence bolsters a sense of meaning.

Workplace settings can facilitate feelings of coherence by providing people with structured settings and

schedules characterized by habits and routines. Because meaning in life is bolstered by environmental regularity and thwarted by chaos (e.g., Heintzelman et al., 2013), the routines and structure that work provides are likely to improve meaning, specifically through their influence on feelings of coherence. For instance, in a longitudinal study of employment and well-being, people who experienced unemployment had a lower sense of coherence than people who remained continuously employed (Feldt, Leskinen, & Kinnunen, 2005). A sense of coherence can also mitigate the effects of negative experiences in the workplace. In studies of employed adults, a sense of coherence was associated with better psychological health and fewer symptoms of negative psychological functioning (Feldt, 1997; Kinman, 2008). Workplaces that promote coherence may help employees to be less affected by negative experiences, fostering improved well-being and meaning in life. Consider as well that structure may mitigate the negative effects of unemployment on well-being. Studies show that maintaining a regular daily structure reduces the decline in well-being that follows unemployment (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Van Hove & Looftens, 2013).

In addition to promoting coherence, the structured environments offered by many workplaces may also benefit goal progress. In a series of experiments, people who were induced to think about structure (versus randomness) displayed higher motivation to pursue personal goals (Kay, Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Landau, 2014). An additional series of experiments illustrated that exposure to a structured environment lead to higher elaboration and confidence about subsequent decisions (Rahinel, Amaral, Clarkson, & Kay, 2016). These studies demonstrate that environments characterized by structure may make people more goal oriented and thorough, and in turn, foster higher purpose (and meaning).

Research has demonstrated that a sense of coherence may predict additional workplace outcomes, especially in the social realm. Because a sense of coherence allows people to perceive environmental stimuli as structured and predictable, it may also enable people to perceive their workplace more favorably. A longitudinal study demonstrated that a sense of coherence was related to positive attitudes about organizational climate, measured with statements pertaining to believing one’s workplace is socially supportive, open, and cooperative (Feldt, Kivimäki, Rantala, & Tolvanen, 2004). Research has also shown that a sense of coherence can mitigate symptoms of posttraumatic stress among targets of workplace bullying, though the protective benefits of coherence decrease as the severity of bullying increases (Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2008).

Of course, coherence and structure do not represent a panacea for the meaningful life or for meaningful work. Externally imposed structure may threaten a sense of autonomy. Perfect predictability may lead to boredom, an experience likely to reduce (not enhance) a sense of meaning. People are intrinsically drawn towards roles that offer them opportunities to conquer new challenges, which provides personal growth and meaning (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2012). If people find their work

tasks overly predictable and tedious, they may begin to consider their work and life insignificant. Finally, as with any other factor associated with meaning in life, there are likely individual differences in the capacity to thrive in a relatively disorganized environment. The benefits of structure and coherence for meaning may depend on other individual differences, such as a need for structure or boredom proneness, which is an interesting area for future research. Some people may find unstructured environments more conducive to productivity and well-being. We might also consider, as the notion of job crafting implies, that individuals who are able to create their own structure might be especially likely to experience meaning within that structure.

The factors considered thus far have been rooted in basic science that has often employed experimental designs to examine the impact of variables on the experience of meaning in life. We end this section considering two correlates of meaning that are not amenable to such designs: financial resources and religion. Research has demonstrated that these “person” variables predict meaning in life.

#### *Financial resources*

Research has demonstrated that income and other indices of economic success, such as education, are positively associated with meaning in life (e.g., Kobau et al., 2010; Pinquart, 2002; Ryff & Singer, 1998a, 1998b; Ward & King, 2016b). It is easy to imagine how economic resources may heighten various components of meaning. Economic resources may allow people to have more control over their lives, enabling a more structured and coherent existence. Financial resources can enable a person to pursue their personal goals in the workplace and in the social sphere, fostering higher purpose. Finally, economic resources can allow a person to contribute to bettering their family or to philanthropic pursuits, boosting feelings of significance and generativity (e.g., Smeets, Bauer, & Gneezy, 2015).

Because of the benefits income has on meaning in life as well as life satisfaction (Diener, & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Diener, Ng, Harter, & Arora, 2010; Ward & King, *in press*), it is likely that people in higher paying occupations will have higher well-being. However, income’s association with meaning in life and life satisfaction is curvilinear, offering decreasing benefits at high levels of income (e.g., Diener, & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Diener et al., 2010; Ward & King, *in press*). If employees receive high enough incomes to live comfortably and meet their basic needs, they are likely to enjoy the well-being benefits that financial resources can offer. However, it is unlikely that workers’ meaning in life and life satisfaction will be strongly benefitted by pay increases once they are already living comfortably. Pay increases may also be accompanied by job changes, such as greater responsibility, longer work hours, or stress, helping to explain why increased pay beyond a certain point does not enhance well-being. In instances where employees already earn high incomes, it may be more valuable for organizations to offer benefits that facilitate worker health or offer increased vacation time or scheduling flexibility, as

these are known to relate to improved well-being and work-family balance (e.g., Costa et al., 2004; Fritz & Sonnentag, 2006; Hill, Hawkins, Ferris, & Weitzman, 2001).

Income’s association with well-being may at times be altered by other factors, such as mood or personality. Ward and King (2016b) demonstrated that induced positive affect can attenuate the association between meaning and income. Although income was positively related to meaning in a control condition, after a positive mood induction, meaning and income were unrelated. In the positive mood condition, meaning in life was high across levels of income, suggesting that being in a good mood can buffer the negative effects of low income on meaning in life.

Research has not yet probed the moderational influence of personality traits in the association between income and meaning. Yet, research has demonstrated that factors, such as emotional stability and higher perceptions of control over life, can mitigate the effects of low income on life satisfaction (e.g., Lachman & Weaver, 1998; Soto & Luhmann, 2013). Similarly, it may be that the association between meaning and income is moderated by other factors, such as job satisfaction or optimism. People who are highly satisfied with their careers and optimistic about their future may have a strong sense of meaning despite lower incomes.

Certainly, it is easy to imagine why financial resources may benefit well-being and meaning in life, yet it is also possible that people with higher well-being may be more successful in their pursuit of financial success. Perceiving one’s life as meaningful has been shown to predict higher gains in income across time. In a longitudinal study noted earlier, higher purpose in life predicted greater income and net worth over time when controlling for initial levels of each as well as life satisfaction and personality traits (Hill et al., 2016). The authors did not determine precisely how perceptions of purpose benefitted income, but one can easily imagine this may be due to stronger motivation or increased success at work. People with high dispositional positive affect exhibit better job performance, and as a consequence, higher pay and more promotions (e.g., Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Staw & Cohen-Charash, 2005). Meaning may function in a similar fashion in promoting performance. Understanding how meaning in life may benefit one’s future earnings and motivation towards work is an intriguing area for research.

#### *Religion*

A final well-established and robust predictor of meaning in life is religion. A variety of studies have shown that people who are religious report higher meaning in life than the nonreligious (e.g., Hicks & King, 2008; Oishi & Diener, 2014; Park, 2005). Religion can exert an influence on meaning in a multitude of ways. Religion can provide a sense of purpose and guidance for one’s life, helping people to feel secure about themselves and pursue their goals (e.g., Emmons, 2005). By integrating one’s personal goals into a broader purpose, religion can also promote generativity and personal significance. Religion also provides a framework for how to live one’s life, fostering

coherence and a way to cope with the vicissitudes of life. Finally, religion may facilitate social interactions, a vital contributor to meaning in life (e.g., Hicks & King, 2009; Lambert et al., 2013).

Although many people are religious, they often feel that they cannot express religious values at work (Mitroff, Mitroff, & Denton, 1999). Indeed, the roles of religion and spirituality in the workplace are controversial (e.g., Chan-Serafin, Brief, & George, 2013; Hicks, 2002), yet there is a growing interest in the roles of both in the workplace (Duffy, 2006). Religion may benefit work outcomes in varying ways. Religion is linked to higher self-efficacy in career decisions as well as higher job satisfaction (e.g., Duffy & Blustein, 2005; Duffy, 2006; Robert, Young, & Kelly, 2006). Religion can also influence people's orientation towards their work, with many religious people viewing their occupations as a "calling," as we consider in greater detail below. Finally, religion may promote prosocial values that benefit workplace interactions, though it may also make people feel morally superior to others, which may lead to negative organizational consequences (Chan-Serafin et al., 2013). Thus, the beneficial and deleterious effects of religion in the workplace are ripe for further exploration.

Clearly, the many factors we have considered in this section are intertwined in important ways and nowhere is this more evident than in the case of religion. Religiosity is associated with heightened positive affect and often promotes social support (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011). It also provides people with a ready-made set of goals toward which to strive. It allows the individual to attach his or her experience to a larger narrative of grand meaning. It is interesting to consider how other valued social groups and organizations might facilitate these experiences.

The six sources of meaning and examples of each are shown in Table 1. Although meaning in life is likely to result from profound experiences, the examples in Table 1 highlight the ways that quotidian experiences may feed into a sense of life as meaningful. People's lives and workplaces are filled with numerous opportunities to experience meaning through happiness, social relationships, goal pursuit, and personal growth.

### Attitudes about meaning and work

Although the sources of meaning reviewed above may be widely available in most workplaces, not all people necessarily look to their work to provide these sources of meaning, or any broader meaning at all. People's attitudes towards their work influence the extent to which they

believe work will provide meaning. Next, we turn to people's attitudes towards the meaning they seek through their work, examining how people's views of their jobs shape whether they expect to derive meaning from work. Then, we examine the factors that make people more inclined to seek meaning in their work.

### Work orientations

Research on work orientations emphasizes that people tend to view their work in three primary ways—as a calling, a career, or a job—and that these orientations towards work shape people's interpretation of the meaning of their work, their motivation towards their work, and the broader meaning and satisfaction people derive from their work (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). People who view their work as a *calling* are primarily drawn to the occupation because it can provide personal fulfillment. Callings are often viewed as contributing to a broader social goal beyond the self and are frequently imbued with religious significance (e.g., Davidson & Caddell, 1994). *Career* orientations emphasize attaining rewards, achievement, and advancement within one's occupation, rather than the personal fulfillment that characterizes a calling. Finally, *job* orientations are characterized by a focus on the direct financial benefits of work rather than the long-term advancement or personal fulfillment that are emblematic of career and calling orientations, respectively (Rosso et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997).

Of all these work orientations, callings are considered to provide the highest personal meaning because they involve pursuing one's unique purpose or mission in life and are often deeply embedded in people's values (e.g., Elangovan, Pinder, & McLean, 2010; Rosso et al., 2010). Research corroborates the beneficial effects of callings on both psychological well-being and positive work outcomes. Viewing one's occupational choice as a calling is associated with higher life satisfaction and meaning in life (e.g., Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997) as well as perceiving one's work as meaningful (e.g., Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Steger et al., 2012). Calling orientations are also associated with higher job satisfaction, career commitment, and organizational commitment (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Duffy, Dik, & Steger, 2011; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Wrzesniewski, 2003). The beneficial effects of perceiving one's occupational choice as a calling have been demonstrated in a variety of occupations. Teachers who perceived their occupation as a calling had a stronger appreciation for their careers,

**Table 1**  
Meaning sources in the workplace.

Source	Examples of everyday meaning
Happiness	Feeling enjoyment about one's tasks
Significance	Training and mentoring coworkers
Purpose & goals	Achieving personally valued goals
Coherence and structure	Lack of chaos and presence of reasonable predictability
Financial resources	Getting bonuses or other benefits
Religion	Religious values guide compassionate work behavior

higher career commitment, and more openness to work-related sacrifices than teachers who did not view their occupational choice as a calling (Serow, 1994). In a sample of zookeepers, a sense of calling related to higher perceptions of the significance and meaning of their work and higher occupational identification (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009).

Although in general calling orientations lead to better performance in the workplace and greater well-being, there is the potential for viewing one's work as a calling to be detrimental to well-being. People who view their work as a calling are more likely to make sacrifices to improve their work performance, including settling for lower pay, longer hours, and lower comfort (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Serow, 1994). When these sacrifices come at the expense of sources of meaning in life, such as time with family, happiness, and coherence, they may thwart meaning in life. Certainly, some people may be highly successful at work but feel a lack of meaning and unhappiness in their lives, overall. Moreover, people who feel that they have "unanswered callings"—the inability to pursue what they were meant to do—can experience regret and stress (Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010). Thus, perceiving one's occupational as a calling can improve work commitment and performance, but may in some cases promote psychological distress and lower meaning if people are unable to pursue their callings or make too many sacrifices in pursuit of it.

#### *Who is most apt to seek meaning from work?*

The research on callings demonstrates the variability in how people approach their work and the meaning they expect to derive from their workplace contributions. Although all people strive for a meaningful life, not all people expect to find this meaning through their work. There are cultural and historical differences in the extent to which work is expected to provide individuals with meaning. Contemporary Western culture emphasizes that people should seek personal fulfillment and happiness through their work, and it is often socially normative for people to prioritize career goals over social or leisurely pursuits. Much of these attitudes about the importance of devotion to work stem from what Weber described as the "Protestant Work Ethic" (1958), Protestant teachings during the Reformation that hard work and wealth were a sign of personal goodness and the likelihood of salvation in an afterlife. The Protestant Work Ethic encouraged people to pursue their callings from God by working hard and striving for success and prestige at work, ideals which helped contribute to modern day capitalism (Weber, 1958; Furnham, 1990). In contemporary society, many people still believe that devotion to hard work is necessary for a good life. However, in many cultures, people are expected to find meaning through their families, friendships, and hobbies rather than through work, potentially viewing their work with a "job" orientation that emphasizes financial compensation but not a broader purpose of the work. Given these important cultural differences, it is necessary to consider the broader cultural context and norms when evaluating whether people will expect work

to contribute to meaning and well-being within a given context.

As exemplified by the Protestant Work Ethic, religion can be an important influence on whether people seek meaning through work. Religiosity is related to stronger desires to pursue callings and to beliefs that work should contribute to a broader purpose (e.g., Davidson & Caddell, 1994; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010; Hernandez, Foley, & Beitin, 2011). Religious people are often drawn towards specific careers that they believe God wants them to pursue (e.g., Hernandez et al., 2011) and this may promote confidence in one's career decisions (e.g., Duffy & Blustein, 2005) as well as serve as a motivator at work. Although the association between religiosity and higher meaning in life (e.g., Oishi & Diener, 2014; Park, 2005) may be explained by numerous factors, it is possible that work decisions and outcomes may help explain this association. It would be valuable for future research to investigate to what extent career choices, career commitment, and job satisfaction may account for this association. If religious people are more drawn to careers they view as callings, they may experience higher meaning by enacting these callings and feeling stronger commitment to their organizations and career.

Research on predictors of calling work orientations has demonstrated that some groups are more inclined to view their occupations as a calling, including women (Davidson & Caddell, 1994) and people with higher educational attainment (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010). These findings suggest that women and people with higher educational attainment may be more prone to seek careers that offer opportunities for personal fulfillment that can promote meaning. It is interesting to consider demographic factors that influence calling orientations within the context of the career choices people make. Professions involving helping others and working with children (e.g., nursing, childcare, elementary/secondary educational services, social services) are predominantly occupied by women (United States Department of Labor, 2010). Although numerous social and economic factors likely underlie gender disparities in these occupations, it is also possible that they may result from gender differences in the expected meaning these careers can offer, as women may be more inclined than men to believe that work involving helping others contributes to meaning and consequently pursue careers consistent with these goals. Just as work orientations can influence the types of careers people pursue (e.g., Dik, Duffy, & Eldridge, 2009), expectations of which careers will provide the highest meaningfulness may also influence career choices.

People's baseline levels of meaning may also predict which type of career they seek out in their hopes of attaining a meaningful occupation. For instance, adolescents with higher meaning in life exhibited stronger motivations to pursue occupations that offered benefits beyond the self (Yeager & Bundick, 2009). Perhaps people with high meaning seek out careers that enable them to make contributions to the broader world.

The previous discussion highlighted how people's personality, educational background, and gender can shape the types of careers they believe will provide them



with meaning. Indeed, people adopt a variety of orientations towards work—calling, careers, and job—which influence whether they expect their work to be a great source of personal fulfillment and meaning. People's backgrounds and their beliefs about work can thus influence whether they perceive their work as relevant to their meaning in life.

### Directions for future research

Compared to other aspects of well-being, the experience of meaning in life has received less attention from organizational scholars. In addition to simply encouraging scientists to include well-validated measures of meaning in life in organizational research, we next review potential research directions inspired by considering meaning in life in an organizational context. Specifically, we consider five research directions that would offer important information about how the workplace facilitates (or threatens) a sense of meaning in life. These directions include examining the relationship between meaning in life and career choices, identifying the proximal mediators of the experience of meaning at work, considering the positive benefits of meaning in the workplace, examining the components of meaning in life within an organizational context, and, finally, methodological recommendations.

#### *Meaning and career choices*

Research on work orientations and callings has made great headway, yet there is still much to know about whether people's perceptions of a career's ability to provide personal meaning can guide decisions to pursue such a career. It would be valuable to examine how career choices are guided by the meaning the occupation is expected to provide, and how individual differences inform the types of careers people expect to be meaningful. For example, people with strong empathy may seek out careers that allow them to help others (e.g., nursing, nonprofit organizations) because they believe these occupations will provide meaning. Similarly, extraverts may pursue careers that offer more social interaction, believing that they will find more meaning in these careers. Moreover, it would be valuable to examine whether people's beliefs about which careers will provide them with meaning relate to the actual meaning derived from the work. Understanding how meaning in life is affected by people's congruence with their occupation and organizational culture is an important avenue for future research.

In addition, beliefs about an occupation's ability to provide personal meaning may encourage motivation even when occupational stressors are encountered. For instance, a doctor may experience stress and long hours during their work week, but nonetheless maintain high levels of motivation and performance due to considering the work an essential contributor to meaning in life. In contrast, people who believe their work is not integral to their personal meaning may be less inclined to persist when experiencing setbacks. People's beliefs about whether their work provides personal meaning may also

shape their decisions to change occupations in pursuit of a meaningful career.

#### *What, specifically, promotes meaning at work?*

As we reviewed earlier, there are a host of potential sources of meaning in the workplace. Our review of these factors suggests that they are likely to be related to the meaning in life people derive from work, yet this is a nascent area of research with many open questions. Acknowledging that the experience of meaning is likely to be commonplace and linked to everyday experiences calls for greater theorizing about meaning in life and its likely relation to specific aspects of work. Some features of work may be especially important in promoting meaning whereas others may be less influential, so it would be valuable for future research and theory to probe which factors are most strongly predictive of meaning. Moreover, it would be useful for research to probe the specific links between meaning, sources of meaning in organizations, and organizational outcomes such as performance and motivation. Do positive social relationships and autonomy promote meaning in life and happiness, which then subsequently encourage stronger motivation and workplace performance? Or may meaning and happiness facilitate better autonomy and social relationships in the workplace, which then foster stronger motivation? Because these variables are all related to some extent, it may be difficult to establish causality, but nevertheless, establishing the causal directions between sources of well-being, well-being outcomes, and organizational outcomes remains an important research avenue. Theoretical models that promulgate predictions with regard to the directionality of these relationships would be beneficial in illuminating the potential pathways between these factors.

The research on meaning in work could also be benefitted by a larger focus on the specific factors that contribute to making work feel meaningful. Research on meaningful work has largely focused on defining what meaningful work entails and identifying positive organizational outcomes of meaningful work (e.g., Fairlie, 2010; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Steger et al., 2012). Much remains to be known about the organizational factors and experiences that contribute to perceptions that one's work is meaningful. It is possible that workplace factors that are conducive to meaning in life also support meaningful work. It would be valuable to examine how features of broader organizational culture, such as corporate values and vision statements, influence how meaningful work is perceived to be. Relatedly, leadership styles can also shape workers' perceptions of the value and meaning of their work. Past research has shown transformational leadership is associated with finding work more personally fulfilling and meaningful (Arnold et al., 2007). Transformational leaders may create meaning by tying work tasks to broader missions and goals that people find valuable. Because transformational leadership encompasses many features, including being empowering and supportive to employees, as well as being charismatic, ethical, inspirational, and creative (e.g., Avolio & Yammarino, 2013; Carless, Wearing, & Mann, 2000), it would be important for

future research to identify which specific features are most beneficial for meaning.

#### *Positive effects of meaning in the workplace*

Most of the extant research on meaning in life has sought to identify predictors rather than consequences of meaning. Investigating the motivational and performance benefits of meaningfulness is a much needed area of research. Meaning in life is associated with many individual differences that are known to benefit performance and motivation, including self-efficacy and optimism (e.g., DeWitz et al., 2009; Ju, Shin, Kim, Hyun, & Park, 2013; Ho, Cheung, & Cheung, 2010), so it may help provide people with stronger adherence to their goals. Past research noting links between goal pursuit and meaning in life has been either theoretical or correlational in nature (e.g., Emmons, 2003; King et al., 2006), so though it is known that meaning does relate to successful goal pursuit, it is unclear whether meaning can promote persistence and attainment of goals. Past research has suggested happiness and satisfaction with life can boost performance in the workplace (e.g., Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Tenney et al., 2016), so it is possible that meaning in life may similarly provide benefits to performance and goal pursuit.

Meaning can also potentially mitigate the effects of negative states on performance. Meaning in life can serve as a protective factor against the negative effects of stress and depression (e.g., Krause, 2007; Wang, Lightsey, Pietruszka, Uruk, & Wells, 2007), which are both known to hinder job performance (Motowidlo, Packard, & Manning, 1986). People who find their lives highly meaningful may be better able to cope with negative setbacks in life and in the workplace, an intriguing area for future research.

In addition to facilitating motivation and performance, meaning may also benefit social interactions in the workplace. Past research has shown that people with high meaning in life and happiness are viewed as more socially appealing by others (e.g., Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Stillman et al., 2011). In the workplace, people may be drawn to coworkers who exhibit a high sense of purpose in their pursuits. People with strong concerns about generativity may also be viewed favorably by others, perhaps because they may focus on improving the well-being of their coworkers through mentoring and training.

#### *Components of meaning experienced in the workplace*

As noted earlier, purpose, coherence, and significance are all reflected in global feelings of meaning in life (Krause & Hayward, 2014). Throughout our review, we noted how some aspects of work may be especially relevant to specific components of meaning. For instance, successful goal pursuit is likely to instill a sense of purpose, yet it may be less relevant to coherence. In contrast, workplaces characterized by chaos may provoke a lower sense of coherence but not affect workers' purpose or significance. However, because the components of meaning in life are highly correlated (e.g., Krause & Hayward, 2014), they may covary and not exhibit any noteworthy distinctions.

Understanding whether the components of meaning have similar antecedents and consequences in the workplace (or in everyday life) can help glean important insights into the experience of meaning. Because of its clear relevance to the hypothesized components of meaning, work may be the ideal context for such investigations.

#### *New methodological approaches*

Most of the organizational well-being research reviewed here involved cross-sectional study designs, making it impossible to probe the dynamic interplay between well-being variables, workplace motivation, and performance. Much of the research on meaning has been conducted online or in the laboratory with samples of students or diverse adults rather than samples in organizational context. Consequently, one useful methodological approach for future research on meaning is field experiments, where organizational processes can be studied as they unfold. Field experiments can illuminate how meaning is affected by the implementation of new organizational policies, either by comparing meaning before and after employees' experience a new change, or, alternatively, by comparing meaning between workers who were randomly assigned to conditions that receive different experimental treatments. Field experiments would provide more understanding about how organizational contexts affect meaning and illuminate the causal factors underlying these changes (e.g., Hauser, Linos, & Rogers, *in press*).

In addition to field experiments, another promising methodological approach is experience sampling, which captures people's thoughts, feelings, and self-reported behaviors in real time, typically involving multiple assessments throughout a day. Experience sampling methods could help to illuminate several intriguing aspects of meaning in the workplace, including how specific aspects of the work environment (e.g., collaboration with colleagues, perceived support of one's colleagues or supervisor) and personality characteristics (e.g., optimism) promote meaning. They can also enable an investigation into whether perceptions of meaning at work facilitate better performance and motivation.

One especially intriguing topic—exemplifying the utility of experience sampling technologies—would be to examine how the meaningfulness people experience while working compares to that experienced during other activities during their daily lives. Although happiness and meaning in life are strongly related (King et al., 2006), it is possible that people may view them differently in relation to their attitudes about work. May work promote more meaning than happiness? A recent large-scale experience sampling study (Bryson & MacKerron, 2017) demonstrated that people reported less happiness when working when compared to a host of other positive and negative activities they engaged in during their daily lives (e.g., reading, doing chores, waiting in line, childcare). The authors concluded that work is negatively associated with hedonic well-being, despite people generally being positive about their work when reflecting on it. Thus, people may exhibit differences in their overall beliefs about work

contributing to their happiness versus the actual emotions they experience when they work. Perhaps, people feel that their lives are meaningful but not especially happy while working, while meaning and happiness may be more strongly intertwined during other activities.

## Conclusion

Although people may occasionally view meaning in life as difficult to attain, the scientific study of meaning indicates that meaninglessness is likely temporary and potentially illusive. Meaning in life, widely recognized as a cornerstone of well-being and related to a host of important positive outcomes, is a commonplace experience. That experience is facilitated by everyday experiences that are often intimately tied to the workplace and the experience of work. Of course, some people view their work as deeply meaningful, believing it serves as their primary source of fulfillment in life. Others tend to see work solely as a means to a paycheck, expecting very little social engagement or personal growth from their work. Regardless of whether people expect their work to provide them with meaning, work inevitably involves a variety of situations that can hinder or foster meaning in life. Through work people can accomplish valued goals and form supportive social connections while simultaneously contributing to broader organizational and societal aims that foster purpose, significance, and coherence in one's life. Understanding how work can contribute to employees' meaning in life is an important goal for future research and for organizations endeavoring to improve employees' well-being.

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