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Existential Indifference: Another Quality of Meaning in Life

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Tatjana Schnell¹

Abstract

Existential indifference is characterized by a state of low meaningfulness that is not associated with a crisis of meaning. In the existentialist tradition, this condition has been generally acknowledged, but quantitative measurement has not been available. By using and combining both the meaningfulness and crisis of meaning scale of the SoMe, the existentially indifferent can be identified empirically. According to data from a representative sample (Study I, $N = 603$), existential indifference slightly decreases with age and is especially common among singles and unmarried partners. The existentially indifferent show low commitment to all sources of meaning; they demonstrate particular disinterest in self-knowledge, spirituality, explicit religiosity, and generativity. Whereas their mental health (depression, anxiety) is comparable to that of individuals who experience their lives as meaningful, their psychological well-being (positive affect, satisfaction with life) is considerably lower (Study II, $N = 135$).

Keywords

meaning in life, crisis of meaning, meaningfulness, existential indifference, SoMe, well-being

Introduction

In 1964, Maslow spoke of a widespread “valuelessness” in Western societies. “The result? A rather bleak, boring, unexciting, unemotional, cool philosophy

¹Institute of Psychology, University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria

Corresponding Author:

Tatjana Schnell, Psychology of Personality and Individual Differences, Institute of Psychology, University of Innsbruck, 52 Innrain, Innsbruck 6020, Austria

Email: tatjana.schnell@uibk.ac.at

of life” (Maslow, 1964, p. 42). Frankl described a comparable state of emptiness and meaninglessness; he called it “existential vacuum” (Frankl, 1955, 1996) and also attributed it to a lack of commitment to values. Perhaps because it is fairly inconspicuous, the condition described by Maslow and Frankl has not received much attention in empirical psychological research so far. Experiences of detachment and indifference are relatively unlikely to be expressed as suffering. As long as social functioning is not impaired, there might be no explicit need to invest in counseling or treatment.

From a humanistic point of view, though, this philosophy of life, its etiology, and consequences are certainly worth exploring. Existential philosophers and psychologists, from Heidegger (1979) to Frankl (1996), May (1981, 1991), Yalom (1980), and Schneider (1999, 2008), have discussed distinctions between an authentic, complex life and a shallow, “everydayness” mode of existence. The concept of authentic living receives increasing attention in research on eudaimonic well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008; Ryff & Singer, 2008). For further insights into its contrary—valuelessness, everydayness, or existential indifference (Schnell, 2008a, 2009a)—the empirical tradition of research on meaning in life suggests itself as a fruitful approach. It permits the operationalization of the construct and helps locate it in the existing nomological framework of psychological theorizing.

According to Maslow, the bleak philosophy of life he deplores fails to inspire, to awe, to comfort, and to fulfill (Maslow, 1964). Experiences of meaningfulness should thus be low—as holds for the existential vacuum described by Frankl. Nevertheless, this attitude does not necessarily result in a crisis of meaning or “noogenic neurosis” (Frankl, 1996). Surrogates for meaningful commitment abound: They range from material possessions to pleasure seeking, from busy-ness to sexuality. How can such a state of covert meaninglessness be assessed? The most widely used measures of meaning in life are not very helpful in this regard because they draw on a one-dimensional concept, defining the experience of meaningfulness and that of experiencing a crisis of meaning as two poles of a continuum (see Schnell, 2009b).

Measuring Existential Indifference

In research on meaning in life, widely used scales are conceptualized one-dimensionally—for example, as a continuum from a “frustration of the will to meaning” to “purpose in life” (as in the Purpose in Life test [PIL], Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), or from “boredom” to “meaningfulness” (as in the Sense of Coherence Scale [SOC], Antonovsky, 1993), or from “confusion” to

“fulfillment” (as in the Life Regard Index, Debats, 1998). Aggregated scale values thus indicate a position on a continuum of two poles contradicting each other (which is problematic *per se* because, in contrast to negations, there is no gradable transition between contradicting poles; see Bonfiglioli, 2008; Schnell, 2009b). Furthermore, interpretation of the scale value is bound to the conceptual frame: Whereas high values represent purpose, meaning, or fulfillment, low values stand for despair, boredom, or other aspects of suffering from a lack of meaning. Indication of a mere absence of meaning is only possible through choice of a middle value, which is always difficult to interpret because there are numerous conceivable midpoints of bipolar scales (such as “neither X nor Y,” “equiproportionately X or Y,” “disproportionately X and Y,” and many more; see Schnell, 2009b; Yorke, 2001). To explicitly assess an absence of meaning as well as an absence of a crisis of meaning—as necessary for the measurement of existential indifference—independent measures for both meaningfulness and crisis of meaning are required.

The Sources of Meaning and Meaning in Life Questionnaire (SoMe) and the Hierarchic Model of Meaning

The SoMe (German version: LeBe; Schnell, 2009b; Schnell & Becker, 2006, 2007) contains scales to measure both meaningfulness and crisis of meaning; it also measures 26 sources of meaning. It is theoretically based on a hierarchic model of meaning (Schnell, 2009a, 2009b; Schnell & Becker, 2007). As proposed in the model, meaning-making takes place continuously, on different levels of human perception and action. These are increasingly complex and abstract, with perceptions on the lowest level, followed by actions, goals, sources of meaning, and the experience of meaning in life. Processes of meaning-making entail the integration of objects, actions, or events into a larger context, thus, creating coherence (see Reker & Wong, 1988). Higher levels provide the integrative framework for lower levels.

The two upper levels—sources of meaning and the experience of meaning in life—are measured by the SoMe. Sources of meaning represent generalized and relatively stable orientations toward life. They are manifestations of Leontiev’s concept of worldview, defined as “a more or less coherent system of general understandings about how human beings, society, and the world at large exist and function” (Leontiev, D. A., 2007, p. 245), including ideals of the desirable human being, society, and world that are worthy of personal commitment. Whether a person commits to a certain source of meaning or not

is, to a considerable degree, predicted by basic personality traits (Schnell & Becker, 2006). As “values put to action,” sources of meaning motivate commitment, give direction to life, and increase its significance (Leontiev, A. N., 1982; Schnell, 2009a, 2009b; Wong, 1998). Sources of meaning thus enable a meaningful structuring of life without explicitly striving for meaningfulness. Meaning in life represents the most abstract and complex level of the model. It emerges from a global evaluation of life. Two dimensions of meaning in life can be distinguished: the (positive) experience of meaningfulness and the (negative) experience of a crisis of meaning. Both are (relatively) independent: Variation in one can occur without reciprocal variation in the other. Meaningfulness is defined as a fundamental sense of meaning, based on an appraisal of one’s life as coherent, significant, directed, and belonging. A judgment on one’s life as empty, pointless, and lacking meaning amounts to a crisis of meaning. Although sources of meaning significantly predict both meaningfulness and crisis of meaning, they cannot fully account for them.

The SoMe meaningfulness scale allows for measuring both meaningfulness and its absence; the crisis of meaning scale permits assessment of the absence and presence of suffering from a lack of meaning. Correlations of both scales with psychological variables of interest can be interpreted more clearly than those using one-dimensional measures of meaning. Furthermore, both scales show different correlational patterns with positive and negative aspects of well-being and mental health, respectively, as was shown by Schnell (2009b).

Over and above that, a combination of both scales enables researchers to categorize individuals with respect to the dominant quality of meaning. Four types of meaning can thus be distinguished:

1. High meaningfulness, low crisis of meaning (*meaningful*)
2. High crisis of meaning, low meaningfulness (*crisis of meaning*)
3. Low meaningfulness, low crisis of meaning (*existentially indifferent*)
4. High meaningfulness, high crisis of meaning (*conflicting*)

To explore the condition of existential indifference, it will be investigated in comparison with the other types of meaning regarding its distribution and relation to demographic and psychological variables.

Study I

The first study draws on a representative sample of 603 Germans. The data allow for testing the claim that an existential vacuum (Frankl, 1996), a “bleak,

boring, unexciting, unemotional, cool philosophy of life” (Maslow, 1964, p. 42), is widespread by assessing the frequency of existential indifference. Furthermore, Maslow’s and Frankl’s assumption of this outlook on life being a result of low commitment to values is being put to the test: Sources of meaning, as measured by the SoMe, are conceptualized as “values put to action,” motivating commitment to and direction of action. Existentially indifferent individuals should thus be characterized by lower realization of sources of meaning than individuals experiencing their lives as meaningful. Additionally, the distribution of the types of meaning over different demographic states is explored.

Method

Measures. Meaningfulness, crisis of meaning, and sources of meaning were assessed by means of the SoMe (Schnell, 2009b; Schnell & Becker, 2007). The SoMe is a 151-item inventory. It allows a highly differentiated measurement of 26 sources of meaning, provides a clean assessment of meaningfulness, and separate measures for meaningfulness and crisis of meaning.

Sources of meaning were identified in a large qualitative research program (see Schnell, 2004, 2009a). In structured, in-depth interviews, a laddering technique (see Leontiev, D. A., 2007; Neimeyer, 1993) was used to identify ultimate meanings underlying the contents of existentially relevant cognition (“personal myth”; see McAdams, 1997), action (“personal rituals”), and emotion (“experiences of transcending”). After several cyclical processes of content analysis, carried out by a team of researchers, 26 ultimate meanings (sources of meaning) remained. They cover all eight types of personal life meanings identified by Ebersole (1998) as well as six of the seven sources of meaning that comprise the Personal Meaning Profile (Wong, 1998). The Personal Meaning Profile scale “fair treatment,” measuring the experience of life as just and fair, was not among the ultimate meanings identified in the qualitative studies. In contrast to the SoMe sources of meaning, the experience of fair treatment cannot be actively pursued and thus refers to another level of conceptualization.

Items for the 26 sources of meaning, the meaningfulness, and crisis of meaning scales were examined and improved in several versions of the SoMe, resulting in the present final version. Its statements are rated on a scale from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Internal consistencies range from .83 to .93 for the dimensions ($M = .89$) and .65 to .95 for the scales ($M = .79$). Sources of meaning, meaningfulness, and crisis of meaning show a high short-term stability: 2-month test–retest stability coefficients

average .81 for the scales and .90 for the dimensions. Stability of sources of meaning and meaningfulness is still high after an interval of 6 months (.72 for the scales, .78 for the dimensions); for crisis of meaning, it is .48. The SoMe's construct, content, discriminant, factorial, and incremental validity have been demonstrated in numerous studies (Gapp & Schnell, 2008; Hoof & Schnell, 2009; Imruck, 2009; Schnell, 2004, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b; Schnell & Becker, 2006, 2007).

Sources of meaning scales quantify the degree of realization for each of the 26 orientations. Orthogonal as well as oblique factor analyses suggest that the 26 sources of meaning can be further summarized by four dimensions:

1. Selftranscendence: or committing oneself to objectives beyond one's own needs; to allow for further differentiation, this dimension is divided into two subdimensions—*vertical*, *horizontal self-transcendence* (vertical self-transcendence stands for an orientation toward an immaterial, cosmic power; horizontal self-transcendence means taking responsibility for [wordly] affairs beyond one's immediate concerns);
2. Selfactualization: or using, challenging, and fostering one's capacities;
3. Order: or holding on to values, practicality, decency, and the tried and tested; and
4. Well-being and relatedness: that is, cultivating and enjoying life's pleasures in privacy and company.

The meaningfulness scale measures the degree of subjectively experienced meaningfulness. It is composed of complementary facets of meaning in life; its items read as follows:

- I think that there is meaning in what I do.
- I have a task in life.
- I feel part of a bigger whole.
- I lead a fulfilled life.
- I think my life has a deeper meaning.

Crisis of meaning measures the degree of meaninglessness and suffering from a lack of meaning:

- When I think about the meaning of my life I find only emptiness.
- My life seems meaningless.

- I don't see any sense in life.
- I suffer from the fact that I don't see any point in life.
- My life seems empty.

Meaningfulness and crisis of meaning scales correlate at about $r = -.37$, thus, indicating a relative independence. Confirmatory factor analysis supports the distinction of both dimensions (Schnell, 2009b).

Participants. The SoMe was completed by a representative German sample ($N = 616$). After choosing areas of residence and determining the number of people to be contacted there according to criteria of official population statistics (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2005), individual participants were randomly selected. In a first contact by telephone, they were told about the study's aims and asked to contribute. The questionnaire and a self-addressed envelope were sent to those who agreed to cooperate. The return rate was 67%. After eliminating incomplete records and excluding those with multivariate outliers (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001), 603 data sets remained. Distribution of sex, age, and place of residence were analogous to that in the total population. The proportion of female respondents was 53%. Age ranged from 16 to 85 years (mean [M] = 45; standard deviation [SD] = 17). In all, 15% were single, 18% lived with a partner, and 55% were married. One fifth of the respondents had general education only; 25% had obtained O levels and 17% A levels. Also, 38% had graduated from technical college or university; 56% had a job, 4% were unemployed, 10% were still in education, 20% were on pension, and 9% were working as housewives/househusbands.

Procedures. Assignment to the types of meaning was undertaken as follows: Both scales were dichotomized by the minimal value for agreement ($\leq 2.9 / \geq 3$, range 0-5). After combining codes for low or high meaningfulness and low or high crisis of meaning, participants were categorized by the four types listed above.

The frequencies for the four types were calculated. Parametric and non-parametric analyses tested for demographic differences between the types of meaning. Using MANCOVA and adjusting for age, types of meaning were compared with regard to the level of realization of sources of meaning.

Results

As Figure 1 shows, a majority of 61% experiences life as meaningful and does not suffer from a crisis of meaning. Only 4% suffer from a crisis of meaning and report low meaningfulness. As few as four persons are allocated to the conflict type (high meaningfulness, high crisis of meaning). Taking into

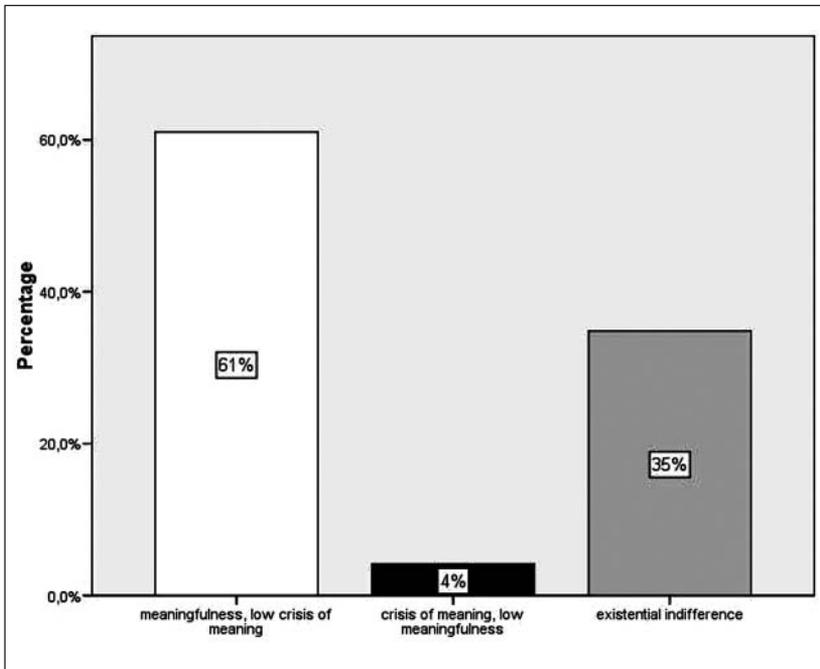


Figure 1. Frequencies of the three types of meaning: meaningfulness, crisis of meaning, and existential indifference; $N = 603$

account the conceptualization of the constructs meaningfulness and crisis of meaning, the type's occurrence is also theoretically implausible: Individuals who report meaningfulness and emptiness would contradict themselves when also reporting a fulfilled life and the experience of a deeper meaning. Type 4 is thus not used in further analyses. More than one third of the respondents (35%) can be classified as existentially indifferent: They neither experience their lives as meaningful nor suffer from an absence of meaning.

Can the three types of meaning be distinguished from each other? Before testing the hypothesis that existential indifference is associated with lower realization of sources of meaning, relationships with demographic variables are determined. Consequently, the variables in question can be controlled in the following analyses.

As results show, the three types of meaning can be discriminated regarding age, marital status, and employment status. Men and women are represented

Table 1. Frequency of Meaningfulness, Existential Indifference, and Crisis of Meaning Types in Terms of Different Marital and Employment Statuses

	Meaningful	Existentially Indifferent	Crisis of Meaning
Single	39 (44%)	40 (46%)	9 (10%)
Living with partner	51 (48%)	50 (48%)	4 (4%)
Married	228 (70%)	92 (28%)	8 (2%)
Divorced or separated	29 (63%)	14 (30%)	3 (7%)
Widowed	17 (59%)	11 (38%)	1 (3%)
Working	198 (59%)	127 (38%)	11 (3%)
Housewives/Househusband	42 (81%)	10 (19%)	0
Unemployed	15 (58%)	5 (19%)	6 (23%)
In education	24 (41%)	31 (53%)	4 (7%)
On pension	82 (68%)	34 (28%)	4 (3%)
Total	364 (61%)	207 (35%)	25 (4%)

similarly in all three groups ($\chi^2 = 2.91$; $df = 2$; $p = .23$). No differences in education are detected (Kruskal-Wallis, $\chi^2 = 2.75$; $df = 2$; $p = .25$). A slight age effect is found [$F(2, 590) = 6.86$; $p = .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .02$]: On average, the existentially indifferent are 5 years younger than those with high meaningfulness ($M = 42$, $SD = 17$ vs. $M = 47$, $SD = 16$; Tukey Honestly Significant Difference [HSD], $p = .002$). Individuals suffering from a crisis of meaning seem to be even younger ($M = 40$; $SD = 13$), but post hoc tests are not significant (Tukey-HSD $p = .85$ and $p = .13$, respectively).

Marital status is strongly mirrored in group membership ($\chi^2 = 33.81$; $df = 8$; $p < .0001$): Singles as well as those living with a partner without being married tend to belong to the existentially indifferent about as often as to the meaningful type (see Table 1). Those who are or were married (married, divorced or separated, widowed) are categorized as belonging to the meaningful type much more often than to the existentially indifferent type. Crises of meaning are most common among singles and those who are married but living apart.

Frequencies of the types of meaning also differ with employment status ($\chi^2 = 47.70$; $df = 8$; $p < .0001$; see Table 1). Crises of meaning are most frequent among the unemployed (23%; see also Figure 2). Existential indifference is most common among those who are still in education (53%), but more than a third of working individuals also are classified as existentially indifferent (38%).

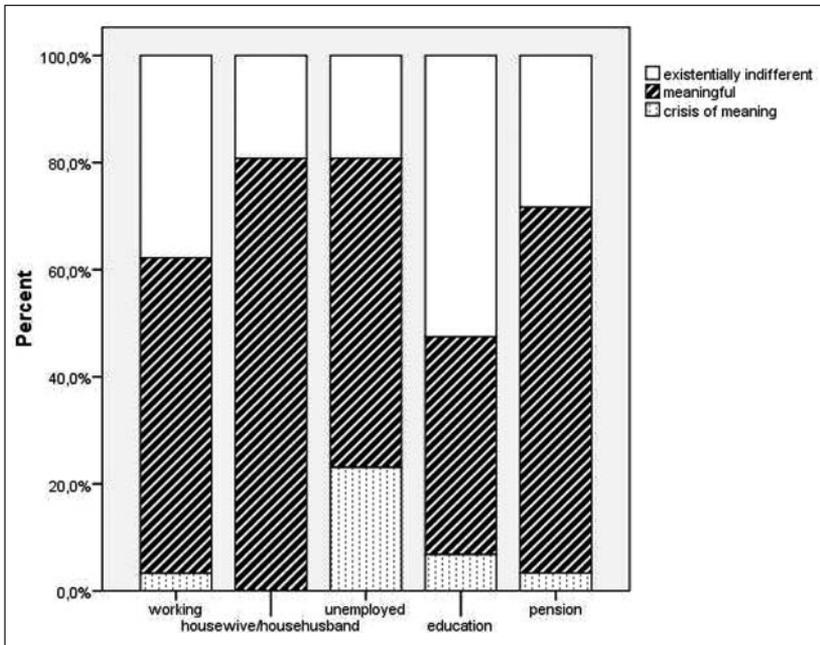


Figure 2. The three types of meaning in different statuses of employment; $N = 603$

To test the second hypothesis, all three types of meaning are compared regarding their levels of realization of sources of meaning. A three-level multivariate analysis of covariance is performed on the 26 sources of meaning as dependent variables (DVs). Adjustment is made for age. Using Wilk's criterion, the combined DVs are significantly related to the covariate [$F(26, 564) = 18.50; p < .0001$; partial $\eta^2 = .46$] and the type of meaning [$F(52, 1128) = 6.13; p < .0001$; partial $\eta^2 = .22$]. The effect of the independent variables is large (Cohen, 1988). Group differences are stated for all 26 DVs but tradition (ps for all 25 sources of meaning $\leq .006$, partial η^2 s ranging from .02 to .24). Figure 3 displays z values of all sources of meaning for the three types of meaning. Effects are largest for generativity (partial $\eta^2 = .24$), attentiveness (partial $\eta^2 = .16$), harmony (partial $\eta^2 = .13$), and development (partial $\eta^2 = .13$).

The existentially indifferent report lower values than the meaningful type in all sources of meaning (Tukey-HSD). They also differ from those in a crisis of meaning by reporting significantly lower values in self-knowledge ($d = .78$), spirituality ($d = .64$), explicit religiosity ($d = .58$), and generativity ($d = .46$).

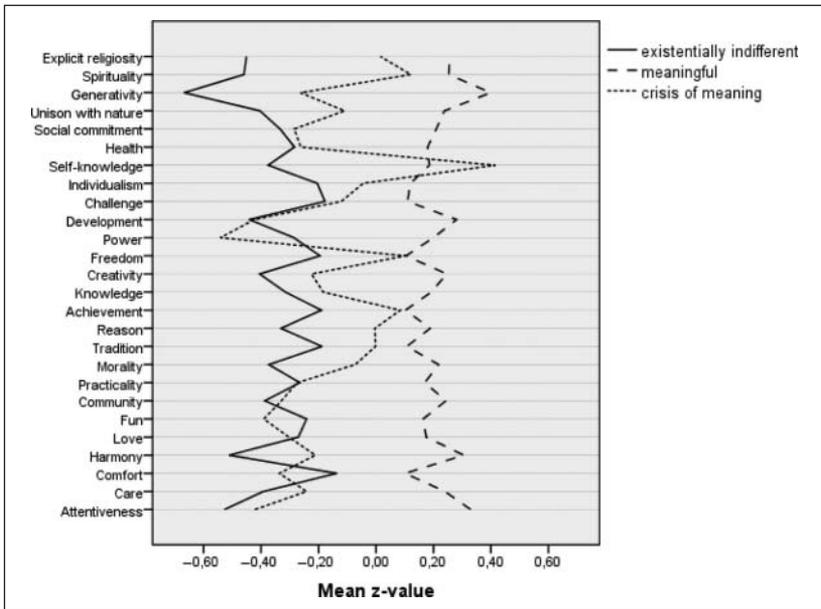


Figure 3. Mean z values of the 26 sources of meaning for the three types of meaning: existentially indifferent, meaningful, and crisis of meaning; N = 603

Study II

How can the existentially indifferent be characterized regarding mental health and well-being? Are they as healthy and well-off as those with high meaningfulness? Or do they experience negative affect to the same extent as those reporting a crisis of meaning?

Method

Measures. Meaningfulness and crisis of meaning were measured by the SoMe. The revised NEO-Personality Inventory (Costa and McCrae; German version, Ostendorf & Angleitner, 2003) was used to assess two negative aspects of mental health: depression and anxiety. The NEO-PI-R is based on the Five-Factor Model of personality (McCrae & Costa, 1996). It measures the Big Five as well as their facets. In the present sample, Cronbach's alpha for anxiety is .84 and for depression, .82.

The Trait Well-Being Inventory (TWBI; Dalbert, 1992) measures two aspects of subjective well-being: level of mood and general satisfaction with life. It uses 13 items rated on a 6-point scale of agreement. In the present sample, the mood scale shows an internal consistency of .89 and the satisfaction with life scale an alpha of .87. As reported by Dalbert (1992), stability over a 3-month interval amounts to .81 for mood level and .87 for satisfaction with life.

Participants. Respondents were 135 psychology students, 85% of them female. All of them participated voluntarily. As an incentive for participation, a psychology textbook was raffled. Age ranged from 18 to 45 years ($M = 21$; $SD = 4$). About one third (36%) lived with a partner or were married, and 64% were single.

Procedures. Analogously to the procedure in Study 1, participants were ascribed to the three types “meaningful,” “crisis of meaning,” and “existentially indifferent.” A MANCOVA was performed on four DVs: depression, anxiety, mood, and satisfaction with life. Adjustment was made for age.

Results

How is classification by the types of meaning distributed in this student sample? As much as 7% are categorized as suffering from a crisis of meaning; 37% are classified as existentially indifferent, whereas the remaining 56% experience their lives as meaningful.

The MANCOVA shows the combined DVs to be significantly but weakly related to age as covariate [$F(4, 128) = 2.77$; $p = .03$; partial $\eta^2 = .08$]. Type classification accounts for a much stronger effect [$F(8, 256) = 5.42$; $p < .0001$; partial $\eta^2 = .15$]. Group differences occur on all four DVs. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics. According to Tukey HSD post hoc tests, mood as well as satisfaction with life of existentially indifferent participants are significantly higher than those of people suffering from a crisis of meaning ($p = .004/.003$) but lower than those of individuals reporting high meaningfulness ($p = .04/.000$). Their values in both anxiety and depression are significantly lower than those of people in a crisis of meaning ($p = .03/.002$) but comparable to those experiencing their lives as meaningful ($p = .76/.42$).

Discussion

A personally meaningful life ensues from commitment to sources of meaning consistent with personality and worldview. Meaningfulness is thus not effortlessly achieved. Consistency demands self-knowledge; commitment

Table 2. Means (*M*) and Standard Deviations (*SDs*) for the Three Types of Meaning

		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Positive mood	Meaningful	3.60	0.78	76
	Existentially indifferent	3.18	1.14	50
	Crisis of meaning	2.06	1.02	9
	Total	3.34	1.02	135
Satisfaction with life	Meaningful	4.04	0.56	76
	Existentially indifferent	3.49	0.95	50
	Crisis of meaning	2.57	1.02	9
	Total	3.74	0.85	135
Anxiety	Meaningful	16.06	6.88	76
	Existentially indifferent	16.86	5.36	50
	Crisis of meaning	22.78	5.63	9
	Total	16.80	6.45	135
Depression	Meaningful	11.55	5.49	76
	Existentially indifferent	12.88	6.37	50
	Crisis of meaning	20.22	4.68	9
	Total	12.62	6.12	135

requires motivation. Many other factors might obstruct the path toward experiences of meaning.

Whereas empirical research on meaning in life has explored numerous positive effects of meaningfulness as well as investigated causes for and treatments of crises of meaning, another quality of meaning in life—that of existential indifference—has been hard to capture. It characterizes those individuals who neither experience their lives as meaningful nor suffer from this lack of meaning. In the existentialist tradition, this condition has been acknowledged long since. Heidegger (1979) described it as “everydayness”. He associated it with a superficial and illusionary life, a consequence of not being oneself, but “a slave to the world.” Psychologists such as May (1981, 1991), Yalom (1980), and Schneider (1999, 2008) took up this distinction and discussed origins as well as consequences of shallow and superficial living in contrast to more complex, rich, and authentic modes of life. But even as these theoretical in-depth analyses were available, quantitative operationalizations of everydayness have not to date been available.

The SoMe comprises measures for meaningfulness and crisis of meaning. Therefore, the absence as well as the presence of both qualities of meaning can be investigated. Furthermore, this kind of measurement allows

for allocating individuals to types of meaning, regarding their respective values in meaningfulness and crisis of meaning. Logically, four exclusive categories (types of meaning) can be distinguished: (a) high meaningfulness, low crisis of meaning; (b) high crisis of meaning, low meaningfulness; (c) low meaningfulness, low crisis of meaning (“existentially indifferent”); and (d) high meaningfulness, high crisis of meaning. In a representative German sample ($N = 603$), frequencies of the four types were determined. A majority of 61% report experiencing their lives as predominantly meaningful. Only 4% can be ascribed a crisis of meaning; the frequency is thus lower than the point prevalence of depression (which amounts to 5%, as reported by Jacobi et al., 2004). Because a crisis of meaning is a common attribute of depression—either as cause or as consequence (Schmitz, 2005)—the external validity of the 4% frequency might be questioned. Individuals suffering from a depression could probably have felt less motivated to participate; the reported frequencies would thus be distorted because of “not randomly missing values.” But even when considering a correction, the data do not reveal a widely spread crisis of meaning among the Germans.

The—also theoretically unlikely—Category 4 proved to be very rare and was thus excluded from further analyses. A rather high percentage of individuals, though, was allocated to Type 3, the existentially indifferent: More than one third (35%) of the representative sample neither experience meaningfulness nor suffer from a crisis of meaning. Maslow’s theorized dictum of a bleak philosophy of life being prevalent and Frankl’s claim of an existential vacuum being widespread are thus empirically confirmed by the German data. The measurable extent of existential indifference within the sampled population calls for attention.

Demographic Characteristics

Drawing on a representative sample, correlates of the types of meaning with demographic variables were explored. The existentially indifferent were seen to be somewhat younger than those experiencing meaningfulness. The fact that meaningfulness increases with age (Reker & Fry, 2003; Schnell, 2004, 2009a, 2009b; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) surely contributes to this result. Furthermore, it can be presumed that existential indifference will get questioned with the occurrence of life events because they often prompt a rethinking of priorities and meanings: “Many individuals report finding positive meaning in their lives following a major stressor” (Bower, Kemeny, Taylor, & Fahey, 2003, p. 146). Because the probability of having

experienced one or more of these major stressors rises with age, existential indifference should be less common among older people.

Interestingly, existential indifference is closely linked to marital status. About half of both singles and people living with a partner were classified as existentially indifferent in contrast to only 28% of the married participants. Existential indifference thus seems to be a frame of mind with far-reaching consequences, including decisions regarding conformity to societal or religious customs. Alternatively, it can be postulated that marriage especially enables the experience of meaningfulness. This might be based on the confirmation of belonging through the official wedding, the availability of direction through the implicit aim of building a home and raising children, and the experience of significance through responsibility for children. A strong connection between meaningfulness and marriage is also apparent in the findings that even those who were married, but are not any more—that is, divorced, separated, or widowed—are classified as “meaningful” more frequently than as “existentially indifferent.”

The fact of being married hence distinguishes clearly between these two types of meaning. The meaningful type takes an official commitment to partnership very seriously. The existentially indifferent are less (overtly) committed: They are either single or they live as unmarried couples. As regards the occurrence of a crisis of meaning, though, it is less the fact of not being married but more the absence of a partner that seems to contribute to it. The percentage of individuals classified as belonging to the “crisis of meaning” type is highest among singles. To live in an intimate relationship thus decreases the probability of suffering from a crisis of meaning; nevertheless, the chances of experiencing meaningfulness are higher in matrimony.

More than one third of the working individuals are categorized as existentially indifferent. “Work” is a source of meaning often cited in explorations of meaning (see Ebersole, 1998; Schnell, 2004, 2009a; Ziebertz, 2003). It seems to have a great potential for meaning-making. Yet the percentage of working people classified as the meaningful type equals that of unemployed individuals (59% vs. 58%); the fact of having a job is thus no predictor for meaningfulness. The shift in the labor market toward temporary and short-term jobs, resulting in precarious living conditions, could perhaps be considered an explanation. Commitment to a job or company during a temporary contract is difficult, if not counterproductive. Under these circumstances, the experience of meaning at work is very unlikely (see May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). These are first considerations; further studies are needed to explain the high percentage of existentially indifferent working people.

Sources of Meaning

He went on to ask if I had felt grief on that “sad occasion” [his mother’s death]. The question struck me as an odd one; I’d have been much embarrassed if I’d had to ask anyone a thing like that. Nevertheless I answered that I had pretty much lost the habit of analyzing myself and that it was hard for me to tell him what he wanted to know. (Camus, *The Stranger*, p. 41)

Maslow (1964) attributes the bleak philosophy of life he laments to valuelessness: “People have nothing to admire, to sacrifice themselves for, to surrender to, to die for” (p. 42). Frankl (1996) ascribes it to low commitment to experiential, creative, or attitudinal values. The claims are well supported by the data: The existentially indifferent show very low commitment to sources of meaning altogether. Realization of all the sources of meaning is lower among the existentially indifferent than among those experiencing meaningfulness. The existentially indifferent are more comparable to people in a crisis of meaning. But to some sources of meaning, they are even less committed than individuals suffering from a crisis of meaning. These are self-knowledge, spirituality, explicit religiosity, and generativity.

Low self-knowledge among the existentially indifferent. Confrontation with their strengths and weaknesses is of little importance to the existentially indifferent. They do not spend much time reflecting about themselves, their needs, and motives. Going back to the hierarchic model of meaning as explained in the introduction, generation of meaning is based on the integration of lower levels into higher, more complex levels. Actions acquire meaning by concurring with specific goals; goals are experienced as meaningful when being aligned with personal sources of meaning. Among the existentially indifferent, a gap between the level of goals and that of sources of meaning can be assumed: Because of a lack of self-knowledge and little interest in their needs and motives, goals are being pursued without orientation toward more general sources of meaning. None of these is credited with centrality in the lives of the existentially indifferent. Sources of meaning, thus, cannot enrich actions, cognitions, and experiences; life remains without a deeper meaning and fulfillment.

From an existentialist perspective, these low values in self-knowledge might indicate a refusal to deal with the existential givens, such as freedom, responsibility, pain, guilt, and death (Frankl, 1984; Heidegger, 1979; Yalom, 1980). The existentially indifferent deny the confrontation with the paradoxes

of living: being free but limited; being capable and expected to expand but also to constrict (May, 1981; Schneider, 2008). Angst is thus avoided but with it also the chance to become one's true self (Heidegger, 1979).

Higher self-knowledge among the "crisis of meaning" type. People who suffer from a crisis of meaning are clearly more committed to self-knowledge than the existentially indifferent, as was shown in Study I. Because crises of meaning are highly salient, they are frequently followed by a search for meaning as is known from the literature (see Baumeister, 1991; Klinger, 1998; Skaggs & Barron, 2006). Crises of meaning could thus be seen as potentially activating a beneficial development: Combined with the awareness of a lack of meaning, the active search for self-understanding might more likely lead to the detection or construction of meaning than the passive and disinterested condition of existential indifference. But on the other hand, the strong interest in self-knowledge may also be interpreted as a state of hyperreflection sensu Frankl (1996). In that case, it would, rather, be an obstacle to the detection or construction of meaning. By means of longitudinal studies over a period of 1 to 2 years, both hypotheses could be tested against each other.

Low religiosity, spirituality, and generativity among the existentially indifferent. The very little importance the existentially indifferent associate with explicit religiosity and spirituality ($M = 1.17/1.98$; range = 0-5) indicates a secular, probably materialistic frame of mind; the low significance they give to generativity ($M = 2.48$) additionally points to an exclusive concern with oneself and the here and now. This lack of self-transcendence can be seen as symptomatic of the absence of meaning in life (Frankl, 1996; Yalom, 1980). According to Frankl, being human means being directed to someone or something other than oneself. A sole concentration on self-actualization prevents real experiences of meaning and might result in hyperreflection. Self-detachment as well as self-transcendence are necessary preconditions for meaningfulness. "And only to the extent to which a human being lives out this his [sic!] self-transcendence, is he really becoming human and actualizing his self" (Frankl, 1996, p. 254). Yalom (1980) refers to Buber (1981) and explicates the necessity to explore oneself first but then move on to immersion in the world, to commit to objectives beyond one's own needs.

Well-Being and Mental Health

Looking back on it, I wasn't unhappy. When I was a student, I had lots of ambitions like that. But when I had to give up my studies I learned very quickly that none of it mattered. (Camus, *The Stranger*, p. 41)

Without commitment to sources of meaning, life remains superficial. But superficiality is not necessarily a state of suffering. The hustle and bustle of work and family life can cover an existing shallowness, creating an artificial experience of "being fulfilled" through "being busy." On the other hand, noncommitment might also be chosen knowingly, as a way of detachment from the world. Several religious traditions explicitly strive for the renunciation of the self and the world, such as Buddhism and a long line of Judeo-Christian, Sufi, and Hindu mystics.

Although existentially indifferent individuals live a life of low commitment and engagement, their mental health is not lower than that of the meaningful type; they neither report depression nor anxiety. Still, the degrees of positive mood and satisfaction with life reached by the existentially indifferent remain significantly lower than those of the meaningful type. They are neither especially happy nor content.

Summarizing the findings, the existentially indifferent appear to live a less introspective and apparently also less intense life. They report low commitment to all sources of meaning, with self-knowledge and self-transcendence being especially underrepresented. Though the existentially indifferent show no indication of psychological stress, they can hardly be viewed as living a life of health and well-being, as described by Ryff and Singer's (1998) manifesto of positive human health: "Purpose and meaning . . . result from invested, committed living, which we construe as the essence of health and well-being" (p. 8).

Outlook

To make valid propositions about relationships between meaning in life and different variables of mental health and well-being, research on meaning should separately assess the positive and the negative dimension of meaning in life, such as meaningfulness and crisis of meaning. Only then can the complexity of qualities of meaning be taken into account, including the configuration of different characteristics within a person.

We identified the existentially indifferent in this way. They represent a surprisingly high percentage of the population. Replications of this number would be useful. International comparisons are of interest: Is the commonness of existential indifference linked to a country's constitution or its GNP? Is it less (or more?) frequent in collectivistic cultures? Analyses of the frequency of the three categories in different subsamples could explore the validity of the construct. Existential indifference should be especially rare in groups and individuals committed to a cause, such as religious communities,

voluntary workers, human or animal rights activists, or even academic researchers.

Regarding the characterization of the existentially indifferent, further research is required. In particular, the stability of this frame of mind is of interest. Is it a trait-like attitude toward life? Or can it be understood as a developmental stage? If so, can the probability of entering and leaving this phase be predicted by biographical, psychological, or sociological parameters?

Last but not the least, the large number of individuals categorized as existentially indifferent in the German representative sample should make us think. Germany is a rather wealthy country. Health standards are comparatively high. The level of satisfaction with life is ranked in the upper range of 95 surveyed nations (average value of 7.2, scale 0-10; Veenhoven, 2006). Although most citizens probably have the freedom and the means to realize any kind of source of meaning, more than one third of the population shows generally low commitment. Because existential indifference is also common among working people, the lack of purpose cannot be attributed to unfulfilled basic needs or inaccessibility of opportunities. What is the reason for this lack of involvement? Further studies investigating existential indifference, as suggested above, could help clarify this question and thus generate ideas to support committed and meaningful living.

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Bio



Tatjana Schnell is an assistant professor in the Institute of Psychology at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. She is in charge of the Department of Psychology of Personality and Individual Differences. Her research activities include the conceptualization and measurement of meaning in life and the way in which meaning in life relates to personality, well-being, religiosity, commitment to work, acculturation, and interpersonal and social dynamics.