The Tree of Desires: A Purpose-oriented Framework for Integrating Theories of Human Wellbeing, Distress and Change

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A Purpose-oriented Framework for Integrating Theories of Human Wellbeing, Distress and Change

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The Tree of Desires

Background

Helping Theories: A Tower of Babel

Multiplicity of psychological helping theories, languages and practices: Often pitted against each other
Helping Theories: A Tower of Babel

Meaning- and purpose-centred approaches often at the margins

Purpose as an integrating construct for theories of psychological, and social, wellbeing and change

Aim of Talk

To show how a purpose-oriented approach forms the core of a teleological model of psychological thought and practice; and how it can be informed by – and inform – this wider field
Developed in...


Content of Talk

- Purposes/ 'wants' as a key psychological construct
- Hierarchical model of purposes
- Conceptualizing problems in living
- An integrating framework for the psychological therapies
- The unique contribution of meaning-centred therapies
- Extending to social-political factors
- The contribution to meaning-centred practice

A teleological psychology
Existential and meaning-oriented approaches rooted in teleology

As human beings, we are not machines that are caused to do things. We are human agencies that do things for reasons: to achieve the purposes, goals and meanings that we set out for ourselves (Source: Cooper, 2017)

Recent flourishing of teleological concepts, models and research in psychology

Goals (Locke)

Plans (Caspar)

Wants (Cooper)

Life tasks (Cantor)

Personal projects (Little)

Purposes (meaning-centred)

Personal strivings (Emmons)

Source of wants can be:

- Physical
- Psychological
- Social
- Spiritual
  (and generally complex integration of more than one)
Wants can range from...

Immediate short term desires

Long term objectives

Wants can be...

Approach

Intrinsic vs Extrinsic wants

• Desires may be for intrinsic self-fulfilment, or to impress/comply with others
• Cf. ‘ideal’ vs ‘ought’ goals, learning vs. performance goals

(Source: Elliot & Church, 2002)

(Source: Sheldon & Kasser, 1998)
Wants can be:

- Conscious
- or
- Unconscious

Conscious vs Unconscious goals

- Research indicates that goals can operate at unconscious level
- For instance, subliminal exposure to cooperative words led to more cooperation in task

Wants and Wellbeing
The human brain cannot sustain purposeless living. It is not designed for that. It’s systems are designed for purposive action. When that is blocked, its systems deteriorate, and the emotional feedback from idling these systems signals extreme discomfort and motivates the search for renewed purpose, renewed meaning. (Klinger, 2013, p.13)

### Wants and Wellbeing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presence</th>
<th>Absence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orientation to wants</td>
<td>Orientation to wants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning, purpose, sense of direction, orientation, order</td>
<td>Meaninglessness, disorientation, chaos, directionlessness, despair</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Caspar, 1995; Emmons & Diener, 1986; Koestner et al., 2002)

When affects, themselves, are wants, creates potential for vicious and virtuous cycles

‘I’m not as happy as I “should” be’

Disappointment
Frustration
A Tree of Desires

Wants as hierarchically structured

- Wants can be conceptualised in a hierarchical structure (e.g., 'Perceptual Control Theory'; Powers, 1973)
- 'Lower order' wants are means of attaining 'highest order' wants: e.g., pleasure (Freud), power (Adler), or meaning itself (Frankl)
- Research suggests multiple highest order wants may exist: e.g., relatedness, competence, autonomy
- Hierarchical model is open to range of highest order wants: nomothetically and idiographically
Basic principles

• **Equifinality:** each goal can be attained by several different means
• **Multifinality:** any one means can attain a range of goals

(Source: Austin & Vancouver, 1996)

Desires as hierarchically structured

- Autonomy
- Relatedness
- Competence
- Physical pleasure
- Travel
- Intimacy
- Be close to partner
- Be close to friends

Has been applied to clinical formulation:
e.g., Franz Caspar’s (1995) Plan Analysis
Conceptualising problems in living: Why don’t people actualise their wants?

Conflict/dysergy between wants ('horizontal incoherence')

'Dysergy'

- A relationship in which, when one desire is actualised, it impedes the actualisation of another desire: a conflictual, 'win-lose' intrapersonal relationship
- Consistent evidence that conflictual intrapersonal relationships associated with psychological distress

(Source: Kelly, Mansell & Wood, 2015)
Dysergetic relationship

- Relatedness
- Self-worth
- Be genuine
- Hide vulnerability

‘I don’t want others to see my vulnerability’

‘I desperately yearn for closeness’
Ineffective means
('vertical incoherence')

Goals need **Implementation intentions** to be successful: ‘if-then’ plans to fulfil the goal

(Source: Koestner et al., 2002)
Tree of desires as an integrating framework

Humanistic model

Psychodynamic model
Cognitive model

- Happiness
  - Making rational choices
  - Avoiding 'ego depletion'
  - All-or-nothing thinking

Behavioural model

- Happiness
  - Develop interpersonal relationships
  - Poor social skills

Meaning-oriented model

- Meaning
  - Creativity
  - Contributing to community
  - Faith
  - Music
Therapy, across orientations, is a process of helping clients find better ways of doing things: more synergetic, more effective.
Towards Synergetic: Awareness

- Relatedness
- Creativity
- Desire for social approval
- Dance and movement

Synergetic reconfiguration

- Relatedness
- Creativity
- Loved by accepting others
- Dance and movement

Therapies can facilitate these processes through:

- Insight: reflection, re-evaluation, re-deciding
- Experiencing ‘better’ ways of doing things
- Psychoeducation
The unique contribution of meaning-centred and existential therapies

1. Contributes a philosophical depth and richness to teleological models

Human being as agentic

‘Man, first of all, is the being who hurls himself towards a future and who is conscious of imagining himself as being in the future.’
- Jean-Paul Sartre (1996)
2. Foregrounding the highest order wants

Keeping in mind what a client is ultimately aiming for, not just how they might go there

- Meaning
- Creativity
- Contributing to community
- Faith
- Music
- Join music group

3. Recognises that highest order wants may be values/ethical – not necessarily biological or psychological needs
Meaning

Creativity

Contributing to community

Faith

Music

Join music group

... and therefore can be found in any situation.

Reconfiguration of purposes is always possible

4. Recognises that highest order wants may be individual rather than universal
Highest order wants may be individual

- Meaning
  - Creativity
  - Contributing to community
  - Faith
  - Music
  - Join music group

... and perhaps given as our destinies

‘For as the needle of the magnet has chosen from all the points of the compass north... so the soul from the beginning has chosen its direction.’ (Buber, 1964)

5. Recognises the value of actualising *meanings* as well as *purposes*
6. Recognises that a lack of purpose (and not just conflict, or ineffectiveness) can cause distress
7. Development of therapeutic methods for facilitating the identification of purposes

Meaning-centred methods

- **Existential attribution** (Wong, 1998): Asking ‘Why?’ questions that help clients track back to their most fundamental meanings and purposes. For instance, ‘Why is it important for you to relate to people on an equal plane?’

- **Fast-forwarding** (Wong, 1998): Asking clients to depict likely future scenarios given a particular choice. For instance, ‘How do you imagine your life would be if you left your husband and children?’

- **Magical thinking** (Wong, 1998): Asking clients questions that help them transcend their present situation and consider new possibilities. For instance, ‘If you could do whatever you wanted right now, what would it be?’

- **The movies exercise** (Schulenberg et al., 2008): Inviting clients to develop a film of their life, focusing from the past to their present life, and then from their present to their future.

Lack of wants can cause distress

Meaning

Creativity

Contributing to community

Faith

Have been a good friend to neighbours

Have been a reliable, consistent bedrock of the community
8. The inevitability of existential despair

There is no ultimate meaning

The importance of social factors in actualising wants
The extent to which people actualise their wants is not internally-determined alone, but fundamentally shaped by their external, socio-political circumstances.

Our external environment shapes:
- The extent to which our wants are attainable
- The effectiveness of our methods
- The extent to which our wants are dysergetic or synergetic

Financially supportive environment
Financially restrictive environment

Unconditionally accepting environment

Conditionally accepting environment
Social change

Helping people actualise their wants may require social and political change, as well as psychological

Contributions to meaning-centred practices

Contribution to meaning-centred practices

1. Developing an understanding of the psychology of purposes, and their relation to wellbeing
2. Recognising that lack of purpose is one of several related problems – inability to actualise it, or conflicts between purposes, can cause problems too
3. Capacity of multiple methods to help people identify, and actualise, purposes – including social change: an integrative/pluralistic therapy
Meaning-centred therapies are one of several, newly emerging psychological/psychotherapeutic models based around a teleological, future-oriented understanding of people. These models may be powerful tools in forging an integrated understanding of psychological problems and change, with the capacity to also integrate a socio-political understanding. Existential and meaning-centred traditions have a unique contribution to make to this model, and may also have much to learn.

Thank you
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Key references


