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Purpose and meaning in life: a comparative analysis of the concepts of Damon and Frankl

Projeto de vida e sentido na vida: uma análise comparativa dos conceitos de Damon e Frankl

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Abstract

Objective

Meaning in life and purpose are two concepts that have gained attention from researchers around the world due to their significant role in human existence. This study presents a comparative analysis of the constructs of meaning in life and purpose proposed respectively by Viktor Frankl and William Damon, two of the main authors in this field.

Method

A literature review was conducted to explore these constructs.

Results

For each construct, the origin, the definition and its components, the theoretical foundations, the sources and benefits and the instruments for measurement were described. Finally, convergences and divergences between the constructs are discussed, and a basis for further research in psychology is provided. Key convergences between Frankl and Damon include their shared salutogenic perspective, emphasizing that meaning in life and purpose are vital for health and human development. Both authors highlight how these phenomena provide individuals with a sense of direction and motivation, encouraging them to dedicate themselves to something or someone beyond themselves. Among their divergences, Damon conceptualizes purpose as a psychological force central to developmental psychology, offering a more operational definition focused on long-term goals. In contrast, Frankl's understanding of meaning in life is more complex, tied to finding meaning at any moment in life and rooted in a bio-psycho-noetic view of human being, influenced by the phenomenological-existentialist philosophical tradition.

Conclusion

The interdisciplinary perspective adopted in this study provides a broader and more complex understanding of these constructs, offering a foundation for future research across diverse fields of knowledge.

Keywords: Meaning in life; Purpose; Viktor Frankl; William Damon.

Resumo

Objetivo

Sentido na vida e projeto de vida são dois conceitos que têm ganhado atenção de pesquisadores de todo o mundo por compartilharem um papel relevante na existência humana. Esse estudo apresenta uma análise comparativa entre os constructos de sentido na vida e projeto de vida propostos respectivamente por Viktor Frankl e William Damon, dois dos principais autores desse campo.

Método

Uma revisão da literatura foi conduzida para explorar os constructos.

Resultados

Para cada constructo foram descritos e discutidos a origem, a definição e seus componentes, os fundamentos teóricos, as fontes e os benefícios e os instrumentos para mensuração. As principais convergências entre Frankl e Damon incluem um compartilhamento de uma perspectiva salutogênica, enfatizando que sentido na vida e projeto de vida são chaves para a saúde e o desenvolvimento. Ambos os autores destacam que esses fenômenos oferecem às pessoas um senso de direção e motivação na vida que as levam a se dedicar a algo ou alguém diferente de si mesmas. Dentre as divergências, evidencia-se que Damon conceitua projeto de vida como uma força psicológica, central na psicologia do desenvolvimento, oferecendo uma definição mais operacional focada em objetivos de longo prazo. Em contraste, a compreensão de sentido na vida de Frankl é mais complexa, vinculada a um objetivo em qualquer momento na vida e enraizada a uma visão de ser humano bio-psico-noética fundamentada na tradição filosófica fenomenológica-existencialista.

Conclusão

A perspectiva interdisciplinar adotada ofereceu uma perspectiva mais ampla e complexa sobre os conceitos, oferecendo bases para novas pesquisas em diversas áreas do conhecimento.

Palavras-chave: *Sentido na Vida; Projeto de vida; Viktor Frankl; William Damon.*

What gives life meaning? Why is life worth living? What matters most in life? These are examples of questions related to the meaning in life and purpose concepts that have gained attention in literature and are considered fundamental factors in human health and development (Bronk, 2014; Damon & Malin, 2020; Fischer et al., 2020; Frankl, 1986; Steger, 2017). Although these concepts have typically been considered synonyms (Bronk, 2014; Damon et al., 2003; Damon & Malin, 2020), a more in-depth study of the concepts reveals similarities as well as differences between them. Two authors who can contribute to this improved understanding are Viktor Frankl and William Damon.

Viktor Frankl (1905-1997) was a Viennese psychiatrist and philosopher who laid the foundations of Logotherapy and Existential Analysis (or simply Logotherapy), which has been the subject of international studies (Thir & Batthyány, 2016; Wong, 2014). He pioneered studies on meaning in life and argued that it is the main driving force in human beings. Unfortunately, his theory is often only understood superficially (Batthyany & Russo-Netzer, 2014; Wong, 2014) because it is frequently discussed in relation to only one of his books, *Man's Search for Meaning*, which describes his experience as a prisoner in a concentration camp (Frankl, 1984), although he published more than 40 books. While this book is important and contains some of Frankl's ideas, it does not cover the theory in all its depth.

William Damon (1944–) is a North American researcher and founder of the Center on Adolescence at Stanford University, where he led the development of a particular concept of purpose. Damon and his team continue to make significant contributions to this concept, which has gained acceptance in the literature and has been the subject of a growing number of empirical studies around the world (Damon & Malin, 2020; Moran, 2017).

Given the importance of both these authors, this study sought to present and discuss similarities and differences between Viktor Frankl's concept of meaning in life and William Damon's

concept of purpose. First, we introduce essential aspects of each author's perspective: the context of the constructs, their conceptualization, the use of the terms, the sources and benefits and the instruments. Using these elements, we then discuss the similarities and differences found.

The Historical Background to the Development of the Constructs: in which Context did they Emerge?

Concern about meaning in life in the scientific milieu was first raised by Viktor Frankl in a Europe shaken by the First World War and in a state of flux as the continent was on the brink of another major war. Although he had been part of the Viennese circles of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis and Adolf Adler's individual psychology, Frankl began to perceive limitations to these approaches, particularly in the still very mechanistic way in which they conceived the human being. He then started to develop a new approach, in which meaning in life was of central importance as a primary factor motivating humans. This approach challenged the common notion proposed by the school of thought developed by Freud, which centred the main human dilemma as primarily psycho-sexual in nature. The Austrian psychiatrist instead claimed that human mainly experience current challenges when immersed by feelings of meaninglessness and inner emptiness (Frankl, 1988). His approach is based on an idea of human beings that consists of being conscious of their responsibility for searching for and finding meaning in their life.

From the 1920s, Frankl gradually developed and structured his theory, and by around 1942 he had concluded a manuscript that organized all his ideas. However, before it was published, he was arrested by the Nazis and sent to four concentration camps over a period of almost three years (Frankl, 1984). Although he took the manuscript with him, it was thrown out during an inspection at one of the camps. During this period, Frankl observed that one condition was crucial for a prisoner to survive in a concentration camp: the presence of meaning in life, of future orientation. Those who still had this summoned up the little inner and outer strength they had to continue the struggle to live. Frankl (1984, p. 97) summarizes this idea by quoting Nietzsche: "He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how". Prisoners who lost this perspective ended up "throwing in the towel" by, for example, committing suicide on the electric fences around the camps. Frankl's experience is considered an *experimentum crucis*, i.e., an experiment that provides definitive proof of a hypothesis. After he was released, Frankl threw himself into his work and published, among other works, two outstanding books, both in 1946: (1) *Man's Search for Meaning*, an autobiographical description of his experience in concentration camps viewed from the perspective of psychology, particularly Logotherapy (Frankl, 1984), which remains one of the most widely sold books to this day; and (2) *The Doctor and the Soul*, based on the lost manuscript, the first work to describe Logotherapy.

In the following years, Frankl dedicated himself to raising awareness of his theory in various parts of the world. He taught at over 200 universities in more than 40 countries. Moreover, he received acknowledgment through different ways like professorships (e.g., Harvard University), twenty and nine honorary doctorate degrees (mainly in the US universities), and various awards (e.g., Oscar Pfister Award of the American Psychiatric Association). Although it became better known, Logotherapy faced considerable resistance because it dealt with meaning in life, a subject that had until then been quite foreign to the academic world or modern science at least. Nowadays, this approach has been more common and widely adopted in diverse universities around the globe (Santos et al., 2020; Thir & Batthyány, 2016) and outside of universities through dozens of institutes in several countries (see the Viktor Frankl Institute from Vienna for a list of institutes and other

several information: <https://www.viktorfrankl.org/>). His book *Man's Search for Meaning* has sold millions of copies and has already been published in over 50 languages. It is considered by many to be among the top influential books of the 20th century.

As we discuss here, the construct of purpose first appeared at Stanford University, in the USA, a country established as an international economic power in the world on the threshold of the 21st century. The construct was developed by William Damon with significant contributions from other researchers, such as Anne Colby, Seana Moran, Heather Malin, and his advisees, including Kendal Cotton Bronk, Jenni Menon Mariano, Matthew Bundick, Matthew Andrews, and others, since 2001 (see the Center on Adolescence for a list of scholars contributing to the work on purpose at Stanford: <https://coa.stanford.edu/>). Damon, in particular, had already worked on human development at other universities, but it was after his arrival at Stanford University in 1997 that research into the importance of purpose in youth development was organized and took a concrete form. The importance of the construct can be seen from the fact that Damon (2008) stated that the idea of studying purpose was a sort of “culmination of the work that I had been doing on moral commitment, character education, and human development for over thirty years”. He also noted that “None of my earlier studies was about purpose per se; yet I now see that much of what I have been trying to understand for many years does in fact hinge on purpose” (Damon, 2008, p. 17). Indeed, it's evident from the author's works that the purpose construct is present to some degree in all the subjects mentioned by the author as his main earlier works were notable for their analysis of the connections between life aims, values and moral identity (Colby & Damon, 1992; Damon, 1995). Like Frankl's work, Damon's work is also the result of a perception that “a prevalent sense of emptiness looms as one of our greatest contemporary psychological dangers” (Damon, 2008, p. 36). Damon's contribution during this period is significant because he focused on youth and their development – a topic formerly neglected in psychology. His conceptualization emerged at a timely juncture, coinciding with shifting viewpoints on who youth are and their development at the dawn of the current century. Notably, this period witnessed a growing rise in life expectancy and the concept of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). It makes sense that the demand for youth to acclimate to a lengthened adolescence phase might also imply an extended period of young people searching for a sustainable purpose (and identity) in life.

Following a major, pioneering study with American adolescents, Damon introduced the concept of purpose with coauthors Jenni Menon Mariano and Kendal Cotton Bronk in the article “*The Development of Purpose during Adolescence*” in 2003. In this article, after a discussion of some related studies, the authors realized that there is a need to make a distinction between the terms meaning in life and purpose (Damon et al., 2003); for them, meaning in life is a broader construct that includes purpose, which is more associated with significant long-term goals that motivate people to take actions and define goals. As his studies of adolescents progressed, Damon (2008) published the book *The Path to Purpose: Helping Our Children Find Their Calling in Life*, which synthesizes several years of study into how youths can have meaningful lives and how teachers and parents can help with this task. In both works, purpose is put forward as the main factor motivating humans. Studies of purpose using the framework developed by Damon have been gaining ground, and other universities in the USA and elsewhere have also been carrying out studies of this construct (Damon & Malin, 2020).

Definition: What Are the Components of the Constructs?

While Viktor Frankl did not provide well-defined factors that constituted the construct of meaning in life, possibly because of the philosophical nature of his work, he did discuss elements

that are fundamental for an understanding of the concept. Let us therefore highlight the main components (1) uniqueness – meaning is unique and unrepeatable for every person and every situation. In other words, a “meaning differs first from man to man and second from day to day, indeed, from hour to hour” (Frankl, 1988); (2) concreteness – meaning in life is very often seen as something abstract, but this is not the case as long as it is understood as a task to complete in a specific situation in which the people find themselves – something that happens daily during life. This task “must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct.” (Frankl, 1984, p. 98). In other words, meaning consists of an action, of something significant to be done; (3) tension – “A sound amount of tension, such as that tension, which is aroused by a meaning to fulfill, is inherent in being human and is indispensable for mental well-being” (Frankl, 1988, p. 38). In other words, meaning as a task constitutes healthy tension for the person between who they are and who they can and should be by completing this significant task; (4) self-transcendence – the essence of human existence is self-transcendence, or being dedicated to something or someone different from oneself, such as a cause, a person or even God (Frankl, 1988). This component denotes an opening of human beings to the world, a relationship between the people and intentional objects in terms of meanings to be fulfilled, i.e., the people transcend themselves in search of meaning. For this reason, Frankl (1988) argues that meaning has a trans-subjective character which involves a relationship between the subjectivity of the person and the objectivity of the meaning itself. Even though a snapshot of reality may be subjective, it will always be a subjective capturing of an objective reality, which in no way detracts from the objectivity of the intended object, of the apprehended meaning. Hence, “meanings are discovered but not invented” (Frankl, 1988, p. 6).

There are two other key points which are fundamental to an understanding of this construct. Firstly, the assumption that “if there is meaning, it is unconditional meaning, and neither suffering nor dying can detract from it” (Frankl, 1988, p. 107). In other words, there is no situation in life that is not endowed with meaning. And no less important is the ethical character that permeates Frankl’s thinking and is based on another assumption: that life is always worth preserving, and that there are therefore no reasons, in the context of healthcare professionals, for meaning in life to imply not caring for a person or, in a broader context, to imply somebody in some way harming another person (Lukas, 2020). For Lukas (2020), in addition to being inviolable, the “axiom of the value of life” is completed by the previous assumption that life always has meaning. In this context, it is essential to highlight that meaning is always discovered through conscience, a sort of “organ of meaning” (Frankl, 1986). From this perspective, Frankl (1988, p. 50) argues that “only an erroneous conscience will ever command a person to commit homicide, or – once more to refer to Hitler – genocide”.

Therefore, Viktor Frankl’s concept of meaning is complex and requires careful study because he did not leave a unique, definitive definition. Nevertheless, based on the elements discussed above, we can propose that meaning in life can be understood as a significant, unique and personal task that involves something or someone different from oneself, hidden in each concrete situation in life so that it is the responsibility of the individual to discover this task through his conscience and accomplish it.

The purpose construct, on the other hand, has been defined by Damon et al. (2003) in a more readily understandable and operational sense as “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (p. 121). This construct has better-defined components, which Bronk (2014) synthesizes into four elements: (1) goal-directedness, where goals connect with a long-term goal and an openness to the new, although this directedness includes stability over a certain period (Bundick, 2009). This is in contrast to ephemerality (Araújo et al., 2020), which allows the subject’s psychological strength to

generate coherence between goals in an attempt to achieve an “end that is extremely vulnerable to external factors, such as the various circumstances of life, time and collective projects, and internal factors, such as the variations and reformulations of the subject’s own intentions” (Araújo et al., 2020, p. 28). Purpose implies an irregular path rather than a straight one (Malin, 2018); (2) personal meaningfulness, i.e., a purpose cannot be based on any goal whatever but on one that motivates the individuals, is a central concern in their life. In Brazil, purpose has been translated as *projeto de vida* (Araújo et al., 2020; Damon & Malin, 2020), a term that reveals a meaningful goal to be pursued throughout life; (3) commitment, which involves continuous engagement with the development of goals. It is not enough to find a meaningful purpose; if the purpose is truly motivational and organizational, it must produce engagement that requires actions for the person to progress toward the desired goals; (4) beyond-the-self focus, a striking characteristic that differentiates a personally meaningful goal from other important personal goals. This difference, which Damon usually defines as beyond-the-self motivation in studies, lies precisely in the desire to contribute positively to the world, to have a beneficial impact beyond-the-self (Malin, 2018).

Damon (2008) observes that because they are a psychological force that motivates individuals, purposes can, unlike Logotherapy, be for good or bad or, in his words, be noble or antisocial. In this case, returning to the example of Hitler, the plan to eliminate Jews for which he was responsible can be interpreted as a purpose – clearly of an antisocial nature – as it involves meaningful intentions that motivate the individuals toward an end, making them establish and achieve concrete goals (Bronk, 2014). On the other hand, noble purposes have moral intentions, seeking to promote humans their well-being as well as favouring long-lasting self-motivation and resilience (Damon, 2003). A noble purpose, in Damon’s words, does not need to have an element of heroism, but “may be found in the day-to-day fabric of ordinary existence” (Damon, 2003, p. 7), i.e., it can manifest itself in work, family, friendship, environmental matters, faith and/or other socially established subjects. Damon also notes that “finding noble purpose means devoting ourselves to something worth doing and doing it in an honorable manner” (Damon, 2003, p. 12). Morality can play a fundamental role in relation to the development of purposes, particularly in the search for ethical goals referred to by Damon (2008) that impact positively on the individuals’ life and the life of the society in which they find themselves.

Use of the Terms Meaning in Life and Purpose: How are They Applied by the Authors?

In their analysis of Frankl’s work Damon et al. (2003) argue that the Austrian author uses the terms meaning and purpose interchangeably, without any distinction between them. In the book *The Will to Meaning* (Frankl, 1988), which was originally published in English and was the result of a course Frankl gave in the USA, we can see expressions such as “fulfill meaning and purpose”, “meaning and purpose in life” and “lack of content and purpose in life.” However, all these only occur very occasionally. The term purpose appears around 40 times, while meaning occurs approximately 400 times. A similar proportion can be observed in other books by Frankl, many of which were translated from German. If we analyze the theory in more detail, we will see that two of the three pillars of Logotherapy contain the word meaning: freedom of will, will to meaning and meaning in life. Furthermore, most of the titles of his books (at least in English, Portuguese and Spanish) include the word meaning, and none of them include purpose. In German, Frankl used the word *sinn* (meaning) almost exclusively. In light of this analysis, we can see that meaning is undoubtedly the key term in his work and that purpose really does not form part of its theoretical basis. Nonetheless, it is worth

bearing in mind that Frankl never objects to the use of the term purpose; on the contrary, when the first psychometric test based on his theory, the Purpose in Life (PIL) test (and not the Meaning in Life test) was created by American researchers, he included the test in several of his books and was not concerned about this difference in nomenclature.

Another noteworthy point is that although Frankl's theory prioritizes the meaning of a situation, there is no particular concern to delimit the time this situation refers to, if it is associated with part of the present day or if it extends over days and even years. As already mentioned, Frankl (1988, p. 42) merely notes that meaning changes "from day to day, indeed, from hour to hour". In his books he gives examples both of more immediate situations and of situations with long-term goals. As an example of the former, Frankl mentions cases of people who had to take a decision at particular moments when they were suffering, such as when one of their legs had to be amputated or when they had a severe illness (Frankl, 1986). An example of long-term goals is the case of a woman who decided to take over management of an orphanage after losing nine children in a concentration camp (Frankl, 1984). We can thus infer that meaning in a life situation can be tied to a one-off situation or may take the form of a life plan with long-term goals.

Damon et al. (2003), in turn, use purpose and meaning in life differently. For the authors, meaning is a broader term than purpose, indicating that there is a difference between them. However, if we analyse works related to purpose, we notice that some researchers cite studies on meaning in life using the term purpose instead of meaning even when the original authors use the term meaning in life. An example is Michael Steger, who has produced an extensive body of work on the meaning in life construct; however, when some studies discuss his work, they often do so using the word purpose (Bronk, 2014; Bundick et al., 2021; Burrow et al., 2018). In conclusion, for authors in the field, both are related constructs, purpose being a newer term, which inspires and contributes to meaning in life.

Theoretical Principles: What are the Main Authors and Schools of Thought that Provide the Basis for the Formulation of These Two Constructs?

From a scientific perspective, Frankl made a synthesis as it were of aspects of psychoanalysis and individual psychology when he proposed a unity of the human being combining the fundamental elements of the Freudian conscious being and the Adlerian responsible being. In addition, he viewed meaning in life as the motivational centre of the human being. Although he acknowledges pleasure and power – seen by Freud and Adler, respectively, as motivations for human behaviour – for Frankl, the latter is a means of achieving meaning and the former is an effect of achieving meaning. Finally, the father of logotherapy always gave prominence to the healthy aspects of the human being, emphasizing the search for meaning and the person's freedom when faced with conditions. At the same time the other authors mentioned, according to Frankl, concentrated more on the limitations and pathological aspects of the human being (Frankl, 1986).

Although a scientific basis is indispensable, Frankl notes that it is insufficient to understand human beings in their complexity and that a philosophical orientation such as that provided by Phenomenology and existential psychiatry is required (Herrera, 2016). Hence, having reflected on the human being's ontological differences in Nicolai Hartmann and the philosophical anthropology of Max Scheler, Frankl developed the idea, despite the ontological differences, of the physical-psychic-noetic unity of the human being with a radical openness to transcendence through conscience. To be a person is to be directed toward someone or something – self-transcendence. The idea of

conscience here is not merely a psychological fact, but also a transcendental or metapsychological phenomenon (Herrera, 2016). The integration between psychology and anthropology, the presence of a metaphysical dimension in the human being and the experience of existence anchored in a scale of values presented in Frankl's theory were strongly influenced by Max Scheler's phenomenology as well as the psychiatrist Rudolf Allers' thinking. Frankl also found inspiration in the existential psychiatrist Karl Jaspers not only to formulate the concept of the tragic triad of the human being – limit situations of pain, guilt and death – but also to defend the human's ability to adopt a stance when faced with such limitations (Herrera, 2016).

With regard to the theories underlying the purpose construct, it should be pointed out that Damon is a scholar of the psychology of development, more specifically the psychology of moral development (Colby & Damon, 1992; Damon, 1995). It is clear in his first works that these are based on Piagetian theory, which he discusses, concluding that the reasoning structures are insufficient to deal with everyday situations involving morality (Damon, 1995). Using as a reference the study by Piaget and Inhelder (1976), which seeks to understand adolescence more thoroughly, Damon analyses this phase as the period when morality is integrated with identity as it is during this period that operational intelligence is being consolidated and abstraction and displacement from the self to the world are present. Emphasizing cognitive development, Piaget and Inhelder clearly argue that a life plan is one of the "factors that make up personality and a fundamental part of the integration of the adolescent into the adult world" (Araújo et al., 2020, p. 20). Accordingly, Damon (2008) states that the key to development for Piaget is "the direction and meaning of a young person's effort" and adopts this as a central element of his theory. The study "Some Do Care" carried out with Anne Colby and published in 1992 was a landmark and contributed to the idea of moral development integrated with identity. After analysing interviews with people who were moral leaders in their communities, the authors compared their lives and goals from the first signs of moral conscience in childhood to wisdom and moral commitment in adulthood.

Thus, using the framework of the psychology of moral development, Damon (2008) sought to determine how life goals can integrate with morality and showed how crucial this integration is for optimal development, especially during adolescence. Frankl's work is an important reference for these authors in their development of the idea that purpose is a priority for human development. The concept of self-transcendence is still considered important for an understanding of dedication to goals that go beyond the self (Araújo et al., 2020; Bronk, 2014).

In the field of psychoanalysis, Erikson (1968) also contributed to studies of purpose as he analysed how subjects should overcome crises to develop healthy identities. One of the most critical crises for Erikson is adolescence, a period when the individual adheres to certain values and social roles and commits to beliefs and principles. Erikson observed that youths who were not able to find something to which they could dedicate themselves had more difficulty developing motivational beliefs (Damon et al., 2003). Put differently, pursuing a purpose, which involves engagement with values, goals and orientations, makes a major contribution to human development and helps particularly to overcome the so-called crisis of adolescence and develop an identity with ideals and meaningful goals (Araújo et al., 2020; Bronk, 2014).

Continuing this analysis of how such purposes underpin development, one finds that the theory has one of its main interlocutors in positive psychology as this brings together studies that seek to promote quality of life and prevent pathologies that affect subjects when their lives are sterile and meaningless. Many of these studies are based on well-being and happiness and include within psychological welfare the Aristotelian idea of *eudaimonia* as the search for a good life in a

continuous process of growth and commitment toward personal and collective good (Araújo et al., 2020). Seligman (2011), one of the founders of this school, defends a theory of well-being according to which this consists of five elements: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. Thus, meaning is one of the crucial elements required for well-being. Reviewing different theories of human development, particularly those related to models of resilience and to positive psychology, Bronk (2014) concluded that for all of them meaning in life holds a central position among other factors needed for healthy development.

Although both constructs originated in psychology, they are reflected in other areas of knowledge. Franklian meaning in life has also gained acceptance in education, religious sciences and other areas of health, such as nursing (Santos et al., 2020). Outside psychology, on the other hand – particularly psychology of development (Bronk, 2014; Damon & Malin, 2020) – purpose has been extensively discussed in the context of education (Araújo et al., 2020; Damon, 2008; Malin, 2018, 2022).

Sources and Benefits: What are the Main Empirical Findings?

Using a phenomenological perspective, Frankl (1986) identified three major ways in which people have found meaning in their lives throughout history, each of which can manifest itself in different ways: (1) creativity, which synthesizes everything that the human beings can create that is meaningful for the world, particularly in their professional work, which can be the main source of meaning for people; (2) experiences, which correspond to everything that the person encounters in the world that enables them to experience meaningful moments, be it loving someone or in some way experiencing something meaningful such as art, nature, beauty and kindness (Herrera, 2016); (3) (inevitable) suffering, from which learning can be extracted or which can be transformed into something positive in life. Although these three categories are present in any human experience, one will predominate over the others depending on the situation (Miguez, 2019). An example is art, which can be a means of creating, something to appreciate or an aid to overcome suffering.

Empirical research on meaning in life is extensive and has been growing, particularly in the last two decades. Following are some aspects worth highlighting:

People who report higher levels of meaning in life also are happier, express more frequent and strong positive emotions, endorse and use their character strengths more, have more satisfying relationships and are viewed as more desirable potential friends, help others more, feel better subjective health, report fewer health symptoms, have better functioning immune systems, lower levels of inflammatory cytokines, engage in less risky sexual and substance behaviors, show slower advancement of cognitive decline and Alzheimer's disease, and live longer [...] Meaning plays an important role in coping with stress, trauma, and adversity, including greater use of effective coping strategies. (Waters et al., 2021, p. 4)

Purpose is developed in the relationship between individuals and their contexts. An emerging line of research on the development of purpose (Zhu & Burrow, 2022), rooted in behavioural principles, delineates three pathways to identifying a purpose, which are often intermixed: (1) proactive, via consciously searching; (2) reactive, via seeking answers to transformative events; (3) social learning, via observing and imitating role models. Another contribution to understanding the development of purpose is from Hill et al. (2023) drawing on literature on personality development. The authors propose that purpose through a complex way can evolve from initial and fleeting purposeful moments (state level) can encourage individuals to engage in purpose-driven activities (habit level), ultimately arriving at a more lasting stage (trait level) encompassing commitment to a

broader purpose. However, as pointed out by Malin et al. (2013), being developed in the face of such diverse contexts, with accelerated changes in the social supports, opportunities and restrictions of societies today, purpose takes on precursor and fully realized forms in fluid transitions over time.

According to studies, purpose can manifest itself through engagement in the following areas (Bronk, 2014; Damon, 2008): (1) family, serving the family one is descended from, preserving its traditions, or even caring for the family one has formed or one's descendants; (2) career, focusing on developing a professional path dedicated to something personally meaningful that allows one to make a useful contribution to the world; (3) religion, the search for God can serve as a structure for organizing people's lives and providing a view that they should struggle for. Faith can inspire purposes when it inspires a person to help others, to develop a moral character, to give meaning to personal goals or to participate in a religious community that shares a common purpose (Mariano & Damon, 2008); (4) the arts, following art because of what it can do for people; (5) community services, doing voluntary community work; (6) politics and civil life, striving to be politically active in a way that benefits the target population. Despite their different content, family and work are the two main sources that inspire purpose in adolescents in different countries (Damon & Malin, 2020). Community, artistic and political projects are the sources that are least mentioned (Bronk, 2014; Damon, 2008).

The benefits listed for meaning in life are associated with those listed for purpose as the constructs are very closely related. Nonetheless, it is essential to show the results of specific studies on purpose. A brief review of the literature showed that purpose is associated with greater psychological maturity, academic self-regulation, a sense of hope about the future, future orientation and a feeling that school activities are meaningful (Linver & Urban, 2018). Other empirical studies found that well-established purposes are associated with character strengths (Damon & Malin, 2020), overcoming adversities (Malin et al., 2019), resilience, optimism, positive expectations about the future (Bronk et al., 2019), positive adaptation (Bundick et al., 2021), satisfaction with life and lower rates of depression (Bronk et al., 2018).

The purpose construct was developed and discussed mainly about healthy human development, which is characterized not merely by the absence of problems but by adaptive capacities and characteristics (Bronk, 2014). In this context, purpose "serves as an important source of guidance and direction, influencing the way adolescents, emerging adults, midlife adults, and later adults allocate their time, energy, and other psychological resources" (Bronk, 2014, p. 83). Despite the importance of purpose for the different age groups mentioned, the focus of studies has been mainly adolescents and young adults.

Purpose is still strongly associated with the formation of identity and vice versa, i.e., there is mutual reinforcement. While identity concerns who we are, purpose refers to what we hope to achieve and why; nevertheless, both develop at approximately the same time, share values, beliefs and personally meaningful goals and are considered critical factors for youth development (Araújo et al., 2020; Bronk, 2014). Youths who develop purposes also achieve higher levels of identity with greater commitment to their values and beliefs. On the other hand, better-defined identity provides youths with greater support for conceiving and developing purposes (Bronk, 2014). However, although all individuals have an identity, not all of them manage to develop purposes (Araújo et al., 2020).

How to Measure Each Construct: How Can We Capture Each Construct with Methodological Instruments?

Since the publication of the Purpose in Life (PIL) Test in 1969, various instruments have been proposed to capture specific, and different features of meaning in life, such as its sources, its search,

and how meaning is experienced in the face of suffering (Bronk, 2014). Of these measures, the tool that has been most widely used is the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006), which has sound psychometric properties and has been validated in various languages. More recently, researchers have invested in instruments that attempt to capture meaning in life based on three factors: (1) coherence, a feeling that life or the experiences one has lived make sense; (2) purpose, a feeling of central aims and direction in life; and (3) significance, a feeling that life has an inherent value and is worth living (Costin & Vignoles, 2020; George & Park, 2017). Here, purpose appears as a subfactor of meaning in life, a viewpoint also echoed in other theoretical studies, such as those of Baumeister (1991). These latter instruments were not necessarily directly inspired by Franklian thinking.

Research on purpose – particularly at the Stanford Center on Adolescence – has also invested in developing its instruments for capturing the components of this construct. The main tool is a semi-structured interview which has been extensively used in research into purpose (Damon, 2008). Despite the difficulty in capturing components of purpose, such as beyond-the-self motivation (Bronk, 2014), some quantitative instruments for measuring specific components of purpose have been proposed. We can mention three measures that uniquely address Damon's proposed dimensions of purpose and were designed with young people in mind: (1) *Claremont Purpose Scale* (Bronk et al., 2018), a 12-item survey that uses three dimensions of purpose: meaningful intentions; engagement with and commitment to goals; and beyond-the-self orientation; (2) *Sense of Purpose Scale* (Sharma et al., 2018), which contains 17 items distributed into three factors: awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, altruistic purpose; (3) *Measure of Adolescent Purpose* (Summers & Falco, 2020), a 10-item instrument with three subscales: intention, engagement, and prosocial Reasoning.

There is also a quantitative-qualitative instrument, the *Stanford Purpose Assessment*, inspired by the interview protocol mentioned above (Malin, 2022). It consists of (1) three open-ended questions that require the interviewee to describe an important goal, the reason it is important and what is being done to achieve it and (2) nine closed questions that evaluate the level of agreement between items connected with factors related to purpose. Although there are other instruments (Malin, 2022), we have chosen to mention these more important ones. It is worth highlighting that the number of studies that use mixed methods to deal with the complexity of the purpose construct has been growing (Bronk et al., 2019; Bronk et al., 2020; Malin et al., 2019). These studies generally involve the interview protocol mentioned above and psychometrically validated scales.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this work, we have described similarities and differences between the constructs of purpose proposed by Damon and meaning proposed by Frankl. These are summarized in Table 1. Both terms were born not only of a perception of a society lacking meaning in life, but also of an understanding that they are key factors for human motivation, health and development. Common to both is a salutogenic perspective of the human beings, which focuses on positive aspects, making them thrive in life and guiding them toward choices about how to live a meaningful life.

Empirical studies provide a solid body of evidence suggesting that the two constructs are, on the one hand, positively associated with better health and healthier behaviour and, on the other, negatively associated with risk behaviour and poorer health. However, the scientific findings related to purpose are more notable for their arguments linked to the formation of a stronger identity and positive human development, particularly youth development.

Table 1*Comparison of meaning in life and purpose*

Meaning in life (Frankl)	Purpose (Damon)
Trans-subjective	Subjective
Self-transcendent	Beyond-the-self
Short- or long-term goals	Long-term goals
Task or goal to be fulfilled by means of actions	Project to be carried out by means of actions and goals
Can become a project	Is a project
Can change in every situation	Relatively stable over time
Always values life	Noble or antisocial
Inspired by existential psychology	Based on moral psychology and gained significance in positive psychology
Found in the relationship between the person and the world, especially through creativity, experiences and suffering	Develop in the connection between the self and the world, in fluid forms, by engaging in some areas, especially family, work, faith and social impact

Another point common to the authors discussed in this study is the understanding that suffering is an opportunity for discovering meaning and purpose. Frankl considers suffering as one of the paths for discovering meaning in life. Logotherapy “is realistic in that it faces the tragic triad of human existence: pain, death, and guilt. Logotherapy may justly be called optimistic, because it shows the patient how to transform despair into triumph” (Frankl, 1988, p. 8). Although Bronk (2014), inspired by Frankl himself, acknowledges the important role and potential of negative experiences in the development of purposes, this emerging field requires further study (Bronk & Mitchell, 2020; Malin et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2022).

Hence, the idea of meaning or purpose, viewed here in terms of similarities, reveals substantial common ground between Frankl and Damon. These constructs have also allowed an increasing number of important intersections between the schools of thought to which they are close: existential psychology, the psychology of moral development and, to a certain extent, positive psychology (Bronk, 2014; Wong, 2019).

Despite these similarities, there are crucial differences between the authors’ thinking that have repercussions in the understanding of the constructs and, consequently, the implications derived from them. Perhaps the most fundamental of these is how Frankl and Damon understand meaning in life in their concepts of the human being. From the Damonian perspective, there is a tendency to view purpose as a psychological force that organizes and motivates present actions and future projections (Damon, 2003). On the other hand, in the existentialist philosophical and psychological tradition, the question of meaning takes on a broader scope as it is subordinated to an image of the human being, which is very closely related to Franklian thought (Batthyany & Russo-Netzer, 2014). For the Austrian author, meaning in life should be seen in a phenomenological-existentialist view of the human being, in which the fundamental constituent aspects such as freedom, responsibility, conscience, values and openness to the world cannot be left out. This includes a three-dimensional, bio-psycho-noetic perception of the human beings in which the noetic dimension is a specifically human one that distinguishes humans from other living creatures. This dimension encompasses the other dimensions and includes not only the aspects mentioned, which make up the human being, but also the search for meaning in life as a primary driving force of motivation (Frankl, 1986, 1988). From this perspective, meaning in life is very closely related to a view of the human beings and cannot be reduced to a strictly psychological construct, as tends to be the case in the Damonian school of thought. This changes the way the human beings is understood and has important practical implications.

One of these concerns is the importance attached by Frankl and Damon to self-transcendence and beyond-the-self motivation as crucial elements in their theories. In Logotherapy, this pillar is

well established philosophically as self-transcendence is viewed as a constituent part of the human being. Thus, the more people open up to the world and transcend the conditions of their environment toward a meaning to be reached, the more they fulfil themselves and the closer they get to what is essentially human. For Damon, this aspect is fundamental, but for other researchers it may not be explicitly mobilized in purposes (Arantes & Pinheiro, 2021; Bundick, 2009). Therefore, beyond-the-self motivation may be contested or may not even be needed in purpose, suggesting, we believe, that more detailed studies and further analysis of the empirical evidence is needed.

It is also important to discuss how the constructs evolved. When the purpose concept was proposed by Damon et al. (2003), the concept of meaning had been appropriated by positive psychology in a more abstract way and tended to focus “almost exclusively on the cognitive function of making sense of the world” (Wong, 2014, p. 173). Purpose, in turn, was seen as a subset of meaning by some authors belonging to the same school of thought although this idea had not yet been clearly expressed (Damon et al., 2003). However, this proposal gained strength to the extent that meaning is now understood to be made up of the factors coherence, purpose and significance. Despite this view, Damon’s concept of purpose remains up-to-date and unique. It is also a more operational construct, unlike the concept of meaning in life proposed by Frankl, which he did not define as clearly as Damon defined purpose.

Here it is crucial to point out that whereas for Damon purpose is a personally meaningful, long-term goal, for Frankl meaning refers to a meaningful, personal goal to be fulfilled in the here and now although this goal can extend throughout life. Thus, fulfilling a purpose will always provide meaning in life, but not all meaning in life will constitute a purpose. This means that for Frankl meaning can be found in any situation even if it is not associated with a long-term goal. The very sources of meaning identified by the Austrian author are broader and concern everyday life more than the sources of purpose. On the other hand, although it is possible to lead a meaningful life without a purpose, purpose seems to be a more promising and continuous source of meaning throughout life rather than just at a particular time. After all, purpose in the broader sense requires that situational goals or meanings be achieved at various times in life. This issue appears to be a significant area that could benefit from further study.

In conclusion, the theoretical effort made here to analyse the constructs of meaning in life and purpose points to a promising interdisciplinary perspective, which, while respecting the limits and possibilities of the three schools of psychology –experimental psychology, existential psychology and the psychology of development –could favor a broader, more complex perspective based on the growing number of studies dedicated to these two constructs in various areas of knowledge.

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