

Religion and meaning in life among patients with severe mental disorders

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Introduction

- The meaning of life is the most pressing of questions (A. Camus)
- Our existence is forever shadowed by the knowledge that we will grow, blossom, and, inevitably, diminish and die (I. Yalom)
- The absence of meaning is equivalent to a disease (C.G. Jung)



Meaning and mental disorders

- The situation of people with schizophrenia :
 - Onset usually in the early 20s
 - Very often compromises professional and social projects
 - Need to take treatment to avoid :
 - Hallucinations, delusion, disorganized speech
 - Persistence of « symptoms » :
 - Lack of motivation, « affective flattening », social withdrawal ...

=> How to make sense of one's life under such conditions?

Recovery

- Psychological recovery denotes the development of a fulfilling life and a positive sense of identity founded on hopefulness and self-determination
 - Finding hope
 - Re-establishing one's identity
 - Finding **Meaning in life**
 - Taking responsibility

*Andresen et al., 2003, Jacobson et Greenley, 2001, Huguélet 2007

- Despite the possible persistence of symptoms, the patient can turn to the future and make new investments :
 - Work
 - Helping others
 - Art
 - **Spirituality**



But...

But... Few research on the « psychological » part of recovery

Hope
Meaning
Identity
Responsibility



Religion

Religion...

- Gives meaning to life*
- Gives meaning to the burden of the psychotic disorder *...

... at least for those who are believers



*Huguelet et al., 2010
Psychopathology

Article

Toward an Integration of Spirituality and Religiousness Into the Psychosocial Dimension of Schizophrenia

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Objective: Spirituality and religiousness have been shown to be highly prevalent among patients with schizophrenia. However, clinicians are rarely aware of the importance of religion and understand little of the value or difficulties it presents to treatment. This study aimed to assess the role of religion as a mediating variable in the process of coping with psychotic illness.

Method: Semistructured interviews about religious coping were conducted with 34 patients with schizophrenia with psychotic illness.

Results: For some patients, religion is related hope, purpose, and meaning in their lives (71%), whereas for others, it induced spiritual despair (14%). Patients also reported that religion increases

(34%) or increased (10%) psychotic and general symptoms. Religion was also reported to increase social integration (20%) or social isolation (1%). It may reduce (33%) or increase (10%) the risk of suicide attempts, reduce (14%) or increase (1%) substance use, and foster adherence to (16%) or be in opposition to (15%) psychiatric treatment.

Conclusions: Our results highlight the clinical significance of religion in the care of patients with schizophrenia. Religion is neither a strictly personal matter nor a strictly cultural one. Spirituality should be integrated into the psychosocial dimension of care. Our results suggest that the complexity of the relationship between religion and illness requires a highly sensitive approach for each unique story.

(Am J Psychiatry 2006; 163:1952-1959)

Biological, social, and psychological factors are explored religion as a mediating variable in the process of

Existentialism*

- Mental disorders are linked to the major problems of existence
- In particular, **Anxiety** is related to :
 - Death
 - Responsibility
 - Existential isolation
 - Meaninglessness

«Never ask for whom the bell tolls; the bell tolls for thee »**

*Yalom 2008, **J. Donne, 1624



References on Meaning

- Philosophy
- Existentialism (as psychotherapy)
- Psychology and research



Meaning



Meaning (definition # 1*)

- *Personal life-Meaning* is concerned with one's goals in life
- *Cosmic Meaning* is concerned with the spiritual dimension of our lives

*Yalom 1980

Meaning (definition # 2)

- In addition, meaning can be considered in two perspectives :
 - A global perspective about the world and the self
 - A perspective related to particular circumstances such as trauma or grief
 - In this latter case it can be conceived as a “**meaning-making**” process aiming to cope with the situation (see later)

Sources of Meaning (1)

- Frankl (1988): Meaning stems from three domains:
 - 1) Creative, what people accomplish from creative work
 - 2) Experiential, what people derive from beauty, truth or love
 - 3) Attitude, i.e. what derives from pain and suffering

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How patients cope with their disorder!?

Sources of Meaning (2)

- Hedonic functioning
- Eudemonia (the happiness that emerges from living a life of virtue)
 - Religion
 - Social relationships
 - ...



(King & Hicks, 2012)

Meaning and psychopathology

- We hypothesize that « lack of- » Meaning may be related to mental disorders
- At first sight
 - 1) Psychological states of patients should impact on Meaning
 - 2) In turn Meaning would have an impact on symptoms such as those related to depression=> How may symptoms alter Meaning ?

Some symptoms « kill » Meaning

Symptôme	Conséquences
Depressive view of the world and the future	Colors in gray what is gold
Unpredictability of relapses	Hinders projects, commitment
Social « phobia »	Spoils social interactions
« Social skills » impairment	Obstacle to the implementation of projects
Delusions– thought disorders	...
Substance abuse	Alters the ability to defer the reward ...
Lack of motivation (related to medication, or to the neuropsychiatric process)	Compromises commitment

Our research on Meaning, Values



Background*

- Meaning depends on the fit between the Values, goals and needs of the individual and the values, goals and needs of the social structure in which he lives
- *Values* can be defined as “implicit or explicit principles orienting one’s action”

*Battista and Almond

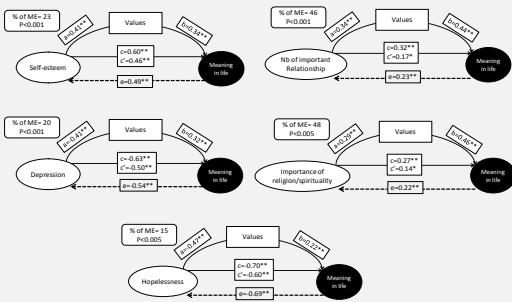
Hypotheses

- We postulate that Values foster a feeling of Meaning
 - For instance, if altruism is important to someone, organizing his/her life in accordance with this Value may help fulfil a feeling of Meaning
- This principle may be applied to patients with severe mental disorders

Our research on determinants of Meaning

- Participants were adults (n=176) who met the ICD-10 (WHO, 1993) criteria for:
 - Schizophrenia (75)
 - Borderline personality disorders (38)
 - Anorexia nervosa (28)
 - Bipolar disorder, type I or II (35).
- Questions:
 - What gives Meaning to patients with severe mental disorders ?
 - How do (lack of) Meaning impact on symptoms ?

Standardized path coefficients of the mediation model (mediator = Values) of valence of self-esteem, severity of depression, hopelessness, number of important relationships and importance of religion/spirituality in daily life on Meaning in life*



N.B.: age/gender's effect controlled in analyses

*Relation found for the 4 diagnostic groups

Spiritual Meaning in Life and Values in Patients With Severe Mental Disorders

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Abstract: Spirituality and meaning in life are key dimensions of recovery in psychiatric disorders. The aim of this study was to explore spiritual meaning in life in relation to values and mental health among 173 patients with schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, bipolar disorder, and anorexia nervosa. For 26% of the patients, spirituality was essential in providing meaning in life. Depending on the diagnosis, considering spirituality as essential in life was associated with better social functioning, self-esteem, psychological and social quality of life, fewer negative symptoms, higher endorsement of values such as universalism, tradition (humility, devotion), and benevolence (helpfulness) and a more meaningful perspective in life. These results highlight the importance of spirituality for recovery-oriented care.

Key Words: Meaning in life, severe mental disorders, spirituality, values
(J Nerv Ment Dis 2016;00:00-00)

The concept of recovery has been recognized as an organizing principle in psychiatric care (Sowers, 2005), and spirituality is a key concept in recovery (Cortigan et al., 2003; Gionti et al., 2014; Sims, 2007). A conceptual framework based on people's experiences of recovery in severe mental disorders comprises 3 superordinate categories: characteristics of the recovery journey, recovery processes, and recovery stages. The recovery process encompasses connectedness, hope and optimism about the future, identity, meaning in life, and empowerment. In this model, spirituality is included in the "meaning in

⇒ Prevalence of "essential role of spirituality to give Meaning" according to diagnosis:

41% in SZP
30% in BPD
9% in BD
7% in AN

⇒ Considering spirituality as essential was associated with:

⇒ Universalism
⇒ Tradition
⇒ Benevolence

Summary (first part)

- Symptoms seem to influence Meaning, via Values and their application
- Lack of Meaning appears as a "cognitive" element potentially inducing symptoms:
 - Depression
 - Hopelessness
 - Lack of self esteem
- A priori, existentialist's hypotheses look quite relevant!

• Meaning-Making



When people endure a negative life event...

- They have to deal with numerous psychological challenges, e.g. :
 - Managing loss of a relationship
 - Narcissistic reappraisal (e.g. loss of job, youth...)
 - Actual loss of social status (e.g. leading to precariousness)
 - PTSD symptoms (e.g. flash-backs)
 - Possibility of dying
 - Guilt
 - ...

Yet, one aspect is often (if not always) neglected...

- ⇒ Our representation of the world and our goals may be challenged by a major stressor*

***I never thought that something like this could happen"

- Examples:
 - Cancer for somebody who "does her best" during her whole life
- This challenge involves a "cognitive and emotional process"

⇒ The so-called **Meaning-Making process**

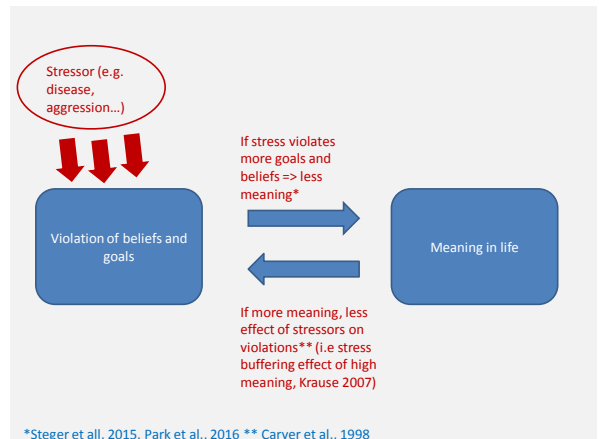
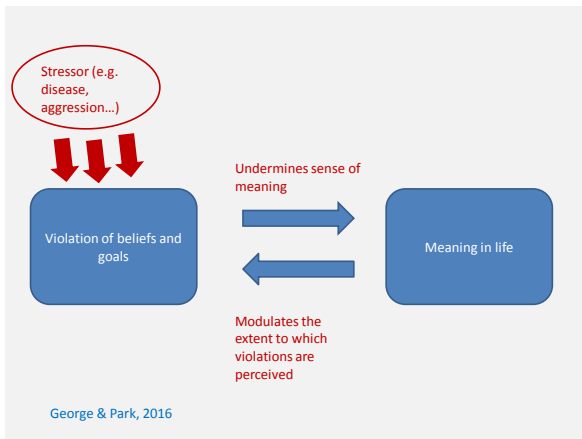
*Park, 2010

Meaning Making

- Meaning-Making is a lifelong process (Krause, 2012)
 - Most people feature assumptions that world is *a priori* a good place into which people receive what they deserve (Anderson et al., 2013)
 - Negative experiences challenge these assumptions
 - To resolve the conflict, people should modify their appraisal of the situation or their global beliefs

Meaning Making

- Meaning-Making coping is particularly relevant and adaptive for subjects living low control situations:
 - Cancer
 - Possibly? - the emergence of psychosis
 - Natural disasters
- Meaning-Making could involve a genuine process leading to the integration of the trauma
- For others though, Meaning-Making may not be adaptive, hence indistinguishable from *ruminations*



=> What about the **process** of Meaning –Making ?

Meaning-Making coping

- Meaning-Making is an **intrapsychic effort** to reduce discrepancies between what happens and global Meaning
- It involves :
 - Acceptance
 - Causal understanding
 - Transformation of identity
 - Transformed Meaning of the stressor
 - Perception of growth (sometimes)
 - Change of global goals

Meaning-Making coping

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Meaning-Making coping

- Irruption of a mental disorder (e.g. schizophrenia) in one's life represents most of the time a catastrophic life event
 - Severe stressor (e.g. cancer) may violate global Meaning system
- => *Research on trauma (e.g. Cohen Silver et al., 2013) shows that distress fosters search for meaning*

The role of spirituality

- Spirituality can inform global Meaning (beliefs, guidelines, goals...)
- Meaning Making often involves spirituality in ...
 - Ways to explain the illness
 - Ways to overcome the problem (e.g. spiritual growth)
- => transformation can arise from suffering (cf. Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity (Aldwin 2000))

Religious “Meaning-Making” way of coping*

- Attributing schizophrenia to a retribution for sin may lead to repentance and adoption of a healthy way of life (active coping) or to excessive guilt (passive)
- Attributing schizophrenia to evil forces may lead to collaboration with God in order to control the symptoms (active) or to spiritual despair at being in the hold of evil (passive)

=> Patients may refuse treatment in relation with these Meaning-Making models

*Huguelet et al., 2010 Psychopathology

Work on Meaning Making

- Consider patients' global Meaning (about world)
- Look at the way a particular trauma may have challenged this “worldview”
- Work on the aforementioned stages:
 - Acceptance
 - Causal understanding
 - Transformation of identity
 - Transformed Meaning of the stressor
 - Perception of growth (sometimes)

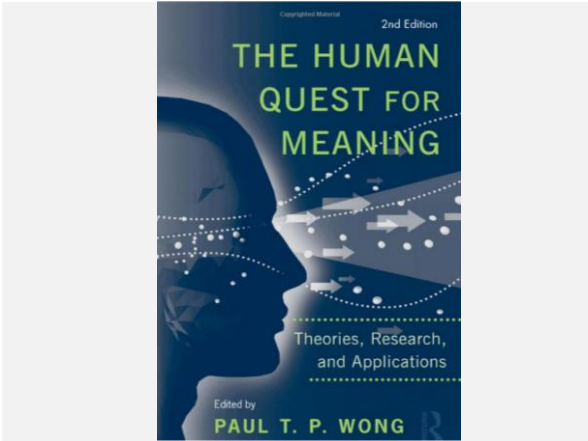
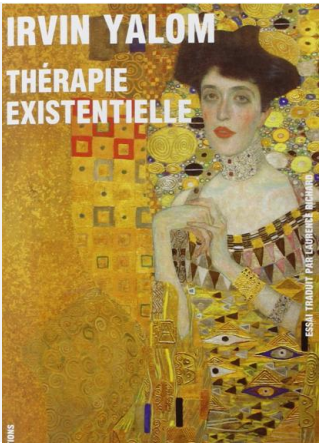
=> Work could be done by “Expressive Writing”, which has been shown to foster meaning (Park 2010)

Take home messages (concepts)

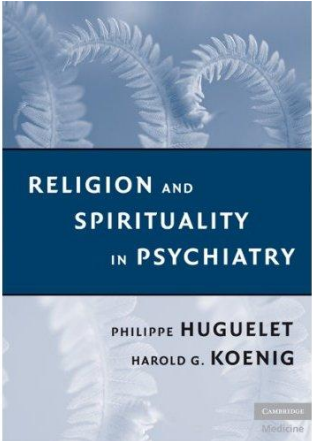
- Meaning is related to values
- Irruption of mental disorders may involve lack of meaning
- Lack of meaning may constitute a specific stressor



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Pour en
savoir
plus...



Thank you for your attention!

