

Encountering Connections May Make Life Feel More Meaningful

April 30, 2013

Experiencing connections, regularities, and coherence in their environment may lead people to feel a greater sense of meaning in life, according to a new study published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

The research, conducted by graduate student Samantha Heintzelman of the University of Missouri, along with advisor Laura King and fellow graduate student Jason Trent, suggests that meaning in life has an important adaptive function, connecting people to the world that surrounds them and, thereby, boosting their chances of survival.

“Meaning in life tells the individual when the world is making sense,” say Heintzelman and colleagues.

The research may help to explain previous findings that show that people who say that they have highly meaningful lives seem to be better off in many ways — reporting higher quality of life, better health, and fewer psychological disorders, among other outcomes.

Although experiencing coherence has often been thought of as an important component of meaning in life, it hasn’t been the focus of much research. Heintzelman and colleagues began exploring the relationship by making use of a natural pattern: the four seasons.

Participants taking an online survey looked at nature photographs that showed at least one tree and included indicators of the season, such as blossoms, greenery, fall color, and snow. After viewing the photos, they answered questions designed to measure their sense of meaning in life, such as “My life has a clear sense of purpose” and “I have found a really significant meaning in my life.” They also rated their current mood.

The data revealed that participants who saw the photographs in the natural order of the seasons reported greater meaning in life than those who viewed the photos in a random order.

But the relationship wasn’t limited to natural patterns. Even when participants saw the photographs in an arbitrary seasonal pattern — for example, autumn, summer, spring, winter — they reported greater meaning in life than those who saw them in a completely random order.

Additional studies suggest that the relationship between coherence in the environment and meaning in life holds even when the coherence isn’t obvious.

Participants who read groups of related words — such as “falling,” “actor,” and “dust,” which are all related to the word “star” — reported greater meaning in life than those who read unrelated words, even though they weren’t aware of any connections linking the words they read.

These findings provide evidence that coherence is recognizable even without explicit awareness.

Heintzelman and colleagues acknowledge that there are many other variables that contribute to existential meaning, such as religious faith, social connections, and sense of self. “We do not claim that the cognitive aspect of meaning in life captured in these studies fully encompasses this rich experience,” they write.

The research was supported by National Science Foundation Grant 1036447.