Situated and Historized Making Sense of Meaning: Implications for Radicalization

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The literature on meaning has recently been enriched by Baumeister's and von Hippel's evolutionary account delineating why nature selected human minds to use meaning. This is an important contribution to the fascinating study of meaning. Here we aim to complement the Baumeister and von Hippel article by arguing that humans engage in psychological processes of meaning because they want to make sense of their surroundings. Thus, people try to understand what is and has been happening in their immediate environment, their society, and the world at large. Meaning therefore takes place in social contexts and serves important goals. We further note that meaning needs to be understood as a dynamic process in which historical insights gives people meaning. We illustrate our line of reasoning by zooming in on processes of radicalization. Therefore, taken together, we propose a situated and historized making sense of meaning and note that this has important implications for radicalization.

GOALS IN SITUATED CONTEXT

The scientific study of meaning is an exciting area of research that bridges many different scientific disciplines and that has the potential to have far-reaching implications. However, perhaps precisely because of the bridge function, and hence having to integrate many different scientific views, the field tends to develop too abstract or overgeneralized theoretical frameworks. This tendency is frequently seen in many advanced current approaches to science. As such, the study of meaning can and should pay more attention to important contextual nuances which ultimately can lead to a more precise, more robust, and more relevant science of meaning (Van den Bos, in press).

In particular, we note that meaning is for doing. People engage in processes of meaning because they want to make sense of what has happened and is happening in their social surroundings. More specifically, people evaluate whether they make progress toward the attainment of their goals (Van den Bos, McGregor, and Martin 2015). They can best do this in a world in which they know they can have a personal contract that in the long run our efforts will pay off and will be rewarded (Lerner 1980). While this notion of a personal contract applies to an individual's own relationship with the world, it is also relevant for how they view how others are faring. In short, people engage in processes of meaning to assess whether they (and perhaps others) make progress toward important goals. When this progress is blocked or hampered they become upset and can quite easily become angry at those they think stand in the way of important goals, especially their personal goals (Van den Bos 2018).

These emotional responses trigger processes of meaning, understood as contextual sense-making: people want to evaluate what is going on in their social environments. The human organism frees capacity to do this, but meaning is often difficult because the context does not entail sufficient information. People frequently need to make sense of situations in which they are surprised, conflicted, or flabbergasted by what is happening and do not know how to respond to the situation at hand. In these situations the behavioral inhibition system is

activated such that the human organism inhibits behavioral action because now is the time to first find out what is going on and what is the appropriate behavior in the situation at hand. It is after people have made sense of the situation that the inhibition system is deactivated and the behavioral activation system is turned on so that people can perform the behavior which they think is appropriate in the current situation (Van den Bos 2013).

Thus, studying the precise social contexts in which people engage in meaning processes, what levels of information are present that people can use in these processes, and how this affects their appraisals of successful goal completion should be important components of every analysis of meaning.

HISTORY GIVES MEANING

Besides the interpersonal, societal, and global contexts in which meaning takes place, another important dimension is a dynamic one: meaning as narrated history. Many modern approaches to meaning and many current theories in psychology are ahistorical (Gergen 1973). One of the results is that many models of meaning seem to interpret meaning as a "monolithic" phenomenon, suggesting a simplified linear and mono-causal approach to it. In contrast, various theories of history inform us that how people engage in meaning differs widely, not only across different social contexts, but also over time. It also teaches us that meaning itself is dynamic process, narrating and providing input to human imagination. A "meaning" is a story in itself.

Meaning, as a story, has historical significance at the heart of its narrative and subject matter. Discrete events are not understandable without their link to a temporal and contextual frame of reference, and a sense of authorship behind them (Cercadillo 2001, 116). "Meaning making" is a category of culture and imagination, something Baumeister and von Hippel stress as well. Yet, we need to take this one step further and acknowledge that culture and imagination are historically

driven and situated. Histories of personal, group, or tribal success and failure; histories of crises, conflicts, or restorations, for example, are narrated and perpetuated to confirm a group's collective identity (De Graaf, Dimitriu, and Ringsmose 2015). From our own research in school settings, we have learned that engaging children in discussions on the history of terrorism helps them to come to terms with occurences of great violence and attacks in their young lives. They find solace in the story that terrorists have been around for some time, partly because history shows that terrorism not only waxes, but will also wane again.

THE CASE OF RADICALIZATION

Putting meaning and sense-making into social and historical contexts does not only help to provide important nuances: it can also contribute to making the science of meaning more relevant for direct intervention in processes of sense-making that are considered dangerous or detrimental to society—for instance, in the case of radicalization.

Kruglanski and colleagues (2014) note that goals play an important role in the psychology of radicalization. After all, making significant progress toward the attainment of one's goals motivates human behavior. The focal goal to which political radicals and terrorists commit is the fundamental desire to matter, to be someone, to be respected.

Interestingly, Kruglanski et al. (2014) point out that radical behaviors undermine goals that matter to most people. Most notably, living is among the most important goals that people have. The behavior of suicide bombers is inconsistent with this ultimate goal, as they kill themselves in the name of their terrorist organizations. Terrorist acts are driven by a disproportionate commitment to goal attainment, which is realized by engaging in extreme behavior and by devaluing or forcefully suppressing alternative, perhaps more sensible, goals (Van den Bos et al. 2015).

Furthermore, McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) note that radicalization of many kinds

may be associated with a syndrome of beliefs about the current situation and its history: "We are a special or chosen group (superiority) who have been unfairly treated and betrayed (injustice), no one else cares about us or will help us (distrust), and the situation is dire—our group and our cause are in danger of extinction (vulnerability)" (416). Thus, role models who have been treated in blatantly unjust ways throughout history can serve as important symbols that fuel anger and societal protest, and ultimately can contribute to processes of radicalization that lead to violent extremism and acts of terrorism. Such events shape "injustice frames" from which new generations of radicals draw their meaning, sense, and legitimacy to stage new rounds of violence (De Graaf 2015; De Graaf and Schmid 2016).

To conclude, goal-oriented behavior in social and historical contexts impact processes of meaning, especially when people are trying to make sense of injustices in their social worlds, and this can impact various sorts of radicalization processes among Muslims and both right-wing and left-wing extremists and terrorists (Van den Bos 2018 2020).

CODA

If we understand meaning as sensemaking in social and historical contexts we may be on our way to something truly profound and existential: we situate people in context and history. Meaning is a category of culture and imagination, as Baumeister and von Hippel rightfully emphasize, and the literature on meaning should take into account that culture and imagination are deeply socially and historically situated.

Furthermore, meaning and sense-making constitute important psychological, social, and historical processes. These processes involve people telling stories to others and to themselves. This helps them to make sense of what our primordial intentions were and are. It also informs them in important ways to ensure successful goal completion.

Moreover, these processes do not only entail conveying culture and imagining beyond the pale of existing possibilities, they also help to persuade ourselves to act in certain ways. After all, processes of meaning give legitimacy to our actions in the here and now to shape a certain future. These process are also used in our attempts to persuade others to see the world as we want it (De Graaf, Dimitriu, and Ringsmose 2015). These insights have important implications for the understanding of radicalization in our world and for possible interventions intended to fight violent extremism and terrorism, yielding a more insightful and relevant science of meaning.

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