

An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of Traumatic Experiences: Clarifying Meaning-making Theory

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ABSTRACT

When coping with a stressful event, some individuals attempt to alter the way in which the situation is understood or appraised to manage their negative emotions and promote adjustment. This is a form of coping known as meaning-making. Meaning-making has been discussed extensively in the coping research literature, however, the variability of terminology, theory, and measurement has hindered researchers' ability to interpret, understand, and apply the concept. To address this issue, six individuals participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews to discuss their experience of using meaning to cope through a stressful event. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to examine how meaning was used throughout their coping process and how meaning contributed to the outcomes of their experience. Emergent themes were discovered and compared to two dominant meaning-making theories to identify consistencies, discrepancies, and novel findings. An integrated theory of meaning-making is proposed. Theoretical, methodological, and practical implications of the study are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Meaning-making theory, coping, traumatic events, interpretive phenomenological analysis

Traumatic events deeply impact those who experience them and raise questions such as 'why did this happen?' or 'what does this mean?' To cope with stressful situations, people feel the need to understand and make sense of what occurred. It has been suggested that all human beings have this innate desire to understand why people behave the way they do and why things happen (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967). To make sense of the world around us, people seek to understand and attach meaning to their life experiences (Pearlin, 1991; Taylor, 1983), however, meaning is not static. In some cases, the initial meaning of an event can be reappraised to help individuals cope with the stress caused by the event. This phenomenon of reappraising a situation and assigning meaning to it as a form of coping is known as meaning-making or meaning-focused coping and has been referenced repeatedly in the coping research literature. For consistency, this phenomenon will primarily be referred to as 'meaning-making' in this manuscript.

Several empirical studies have linked meaning-making to multiple positive outcomes when coping with stressful situations, such as adjustment (Davis et al., 1998; Park et al., 2008; Yang et al., 2021), positive affect (Fitzke et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2013), growth (Park et al., 2008), and well-being (Guo et al., 2013; Boehmer et al., 2007). However, other studies report that meaning-

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making increases distress (Bonanno et al., 2004), reduces mental health (Roberts et al., 2006) and is not associated with adjustment (Riley & Park, 2014). The use of different meaning-making constructs (Park & Ai, 2006; Park & George, 2013, Park et al., 2008; Davis et al., 2000) may explain some of these inconsistent findings. The purpose of this research study is to clarify meaning-making theory. This introduction will discuss the two predominant meaning-making theories (meaning-focused coping: Folkman, 2008; and meaning-making: Park, 2010) with a focus on similarities and differences, summarize the impact of these theories on how individuals cope with stressful experiences, and examine them from an integrated perspective. This review will establish the foundation for the subsequent qualitative investigation of meaning-making.

Meaning-Focused Coping

Park and Folkman (1997) initially introduced meaning as an addition to the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) to explain how positive and negative emotions can co-occur during periods of distress. Later, Folkman and Moskowitz (2007) and Folkman (2008) added ‘meaning-focused coping’ to the model. Folkman’s (2008) adapted model proposes that if the initial coping process (problem-focused coping or emotion-focused coping) is unsuccessful, an individual may use meaning-focused coping. Meaning-focused coping is said to induce positive emotions that encourage modification of the stressor’s appraisal and motivates individuals to sustain coping and well-being, even if the outcome cannot be changed (Folkman, 1997; 2008; Folkman & Park, 1997). For example, a grieving widow may find meaning in her husband’s death by having a new appreciation for life, which increases her positive emotions and helps her cope.

Controllability and duration of the stressor as well as coping efforts are suggested as precursors of meaning-making as they are applied in situations of prolonged significant stress and an uncontrollable outcome (Carver et al., 1989; Gan et al., 2013; Moskowitz et al., 1996; Park & Folkman, 1997; Riley & Park, 2014). Controllability largely influences how meaning is perceived and contributes to one’s initial appraisal of an event as a threat rather than a challenge (a lack of controllability results in threat appraisals) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). When a person feels a loss of control due to a discrepancy between what they believe and what they experience (i.e., I believe I am a good person and good things happen to good people, but I experienced something bad), they can regain control by altering their belief or the event’s meaning to reduce the discrepancy (Park & Folkman, 1997).

Folkman (1997; 2008) classifies meaning-focused coping as a cognitive-based coping mechanism that attempts to change or re-evaluate how a person appraises a stressful situation. It is distinct from problem-focused coping or emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) as it does not attempt to modify the stressor or regulate the distress, but involves reappraisal of the meaning of a stressful situation to reflect one’s beliefs, goals, and values (Folkman & Park, 1997; Pearlin, 1991). Folkman classifies five different methods of meaning-focused coping: benefit finding, benefit reminding, adaptive goal processes, reordering priorities, and infusing ordinary events with positive meaning that people use to restore physical and psychological resources and sustain problem-focused coping and create positive affect (Folkman, 2008; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2007).

Meaning-making

The other predominant theory (Park, 2010) contains five tenets that explain how people appraise stressful situations in the context of meaning to understand and process the event. The

first tenet is that everyone has a global meaning system. This global meaning system is a general orienting collection of beliefs, goals, and subjective feelings that form core schemas through which people interpret their experiences and make sense of themselves in the world. The second tenet states that when a situation threatens one's global meaning-making system, people try to search for meaning within it. This situational appraisal is the initial meaning one assigns to an event. Thirdly, a situation is experienced as more stressful when one's appraised meaning of the situation is discrepant with their global meaning (Park, 2010). The discrepancy creates a cognitive dissonance, which generates a motivation to reduce it (Park, 2010; Festinger, 1957). Fourthly, this discrepancy between the appraisal and global meaning initiates the process of meaning-making to restore an equilibrium. And lastly, if the meaning-making process is successful and the appraised and global meanings more closely align, greater adjustment is achieved (Park, 2010).

Park (2010) explains that meaning-making can be classified in two different ways, both as an "automatic and unconscious process" and as an effortful and deliberate coping process (Park, 2010, p. 259). Coping through meaning-making reduces the cognitive dissonance one feels between their appraised and global meaning. This coping process involves searching for a deeper understanding of the situation (sense-making) and/or as identifying the positive implications or benefits of a situation (benefit-finding) (Davis et al., 1998; Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Theoretical Comparison

Both conceptualizations of meaning-making are grounded in the discrepancy between global and situational meaning, with larger discrepancies producing more stress (Park & Folkman, 1997; Park, 2010; Folkman, 2008). Both theories discuss meaning-making as a way to reduce the discrepancy and they recognize the vital role that appraisal plays in all coping methods. A consensus exists that meaning is related to appraisal, as it determines the amount of personal significance a stressful situation has to one's global meaning and how one will attempt to cope (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Despite similarities in the core theoretical components of these two theories (i.e., global meaning, situational meaning, and appraisal), their application in research has varied.

For the most part, 'meaning-focused coping' has been conceptualized in a fairly consistent manner, with most researchers using Folkman's (1997; 2008) revised model of stress and coping reflecting its five types (benefit finding, benefit reminding, adaptive goal processes, reordering priorities, and infusing ordinary events with positive meaning). They also highlight the key role emotion plays in the stress and coping process (meaning-focused coping generates positive emotions). In contrast, the application of components of 'meaning-making' theory has been less consistent (Park, 2010).

Some researchers have conceptualized meaning-making as sense-making and/or benefit-finding (Davis et al., 1998; Holland et al., 2006; Keesee et al., 2008; Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012). Others have defined meaning-making as understanding the stressful situation and one's reaction to it (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1997), changing an appraised meaning to more align with global meaning (Park et al., 2001), demonstrating insight or a deeper understanding of a stressful situation (Graham et al., 2008), or even simply as searching for meaning (Bonanno et al., 2004).

Even though these two theories have some similarities, their differences in the definition and conceptualization of meaning-making have contributed to different research outcomes. In a review of the meaning-making research literature, Park and George (2013) concluded that the inconsistency in meaning-making definitions and operationalizations have severely compromised researchers' interpretations from the empirical research.

Present Study

The current study explored meaning-making through participant narratives of a stressful situation and their coping responses (including meaning-making). An interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) using semi-structured interview data explored each individual's experiences to uncover their meaning-making process. The information from these lived experiences was compared with current conceptualizations of meaning-making and its theoretical foundations. Therefore, the present study was guided by the following questions:

- 1) How do people make meaning in stressful situations?
- 2) What does the coping process look like when meaning-making is used?
- 3) How does meaning-making relate to outcomes of stressful situations?
- 4) What aspects of current meaning-making theories are evident in interviewees' coping?

Methods

Multiple researchers have suggested qualitative analysis to capture the rich and complex nature of meaning-making (Folkman, 1997; 2009; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Ortega-Maldonado & Salanova, 2018; Park & Ai, 2006). IPA aims to capture how individuals make sense of, or derive meaning from, their lived experiences through phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). By focusing on how people interpret and describe their experiences, IPA helps to identify the fundamental components of a phenomenon that makes it unique (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA is appropriate for clarifying meaning-making and answering the research questions because it is directly concerned with uncovering processes and meaning through individual perspectives within a specific context. In addition, the inductive approach of IPA allows the natural phenomenon to exist and be captured in its entirety, rather than restraining the phenomenon with a narrow focus based on prior theory (Smith et al., 2009). Moreover, IPA allows for the critical evaluation of theory by independently assessing what is confirmed and what is missing in current theory. An interview guide was designed to support the use of IPA in this study.

Interview Design

The interview questions were developed based on the four research questions listed above and guided by the stress, coping, and meaning-making research (refer to Appendix 1). The interview question sequence was developed to move in a chronological order to be more natural for the participant. This sequence also supported participants to first think back to their thoughts, feelings, and experiences at the time of the event, and then to move slowly towards the present and how they currently view, think, or feel about the event. Participants were then asked about the outcome of the event and where they are now in their coping journey. Lastly, meaning-making was introduced and participants were directly asked how meaning was involved in their coping process. Directly including meaning-making at the end of the interview was designed to avoid any potential leading or bias. The interview was piloted prior to use with a research associate who had used meaning to cope with a previous stressful experience.

Self-Reflexive Statement

As the researchers are active participants in the data analysis process of IPA, it is important to be intimately aware of how their experiences, knowledge, beliefs, interests, and assumptions

could have influenced the interpretation of the data. All three researchers believe in the positive benefits and adaptive outcomes of using meaning to cope. The first two authors reflected and discussed their goals for the research project and how their beliefs, assumptions, and experiences could influence the process and interpretations. The first author kept a reflexive journal to write down any thoughts, reactions, assumptions, or personal connections that arose during the data analysis process, in order to identify and separate them from the data analysis process. These notes were discussed regularly with the second author when participant responses and coding were reviewed. The second author read all of the participant transcripts and discussed the emerging and super-ordinate themes with the first author. Any disagreements were discussed fully by referencing back to the transcript for evidence. Each disagreement was resolved through consensus. To ensure rigor, the coding was also reviewed by the third author and an external reviewer.

Quality of Qualitative Research

The quality of IPA is evaluated by the degree of coherence across coders (balancing similarity without compromising or discounting interpretations) and the objectivity of researchers' interpretations as grounded in the raw data. To assess validity, Yardley's (2000) four principles were employed: (a) sensitivity to context, (b) commitment and rigour, (c) transparency and coherence, and (d) impact and importance. To further ensure rigour, comprehensiveness, and credibility for this research, Tong et al.'s (2007) 32-item checklist for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) was referenced and applied during the write-up. COREQ ensures transparent reporting of relevant information regarding the research team, study design, findings, analysis, and interpretation.

Participants

Six participants who indicated they used meaning to cope with a past stressful event were interviewed. Smith and colleagues (2009) suggest that three to six participants are an ideal sample size for a project of this scope. Moreover, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) suggest that IPA requires a small sample size to obtain an in-depth examination of each participant's unique case to capture the studied phenomena, rather than focusing on the breadth of data. Samples for IPA aim to be homogenous and purposely selected to align with theoretical foundations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), in this case, what is known about meaning-making. The participants' names were changed to pseudonyms to retain anonymity. The participants are Aaliyah, Adam, John, Manuel, Samar, and Stephanie (see Table 1 for a summary of participant pre-screen information). Any identifying information mentioned by the participants was removed from the transcripts.

Selection Criteria

To obtain a purposeful and homogenous sample, a pre-screening measure applied the following criteria: 1) the individual self-reported that the situation was moderately to highly stressful, 2) the individual felt a lack of control at some point during the event, 3) the event occurred more than two months prior, 4) the individual was no longer coping with the event, and 5) the individual searched for meaning to cope. As previously stated, meaning-making has traditionally been assessed in traumatic or highly stressful situations, such as disease diagnosis, coping with an illness, assault, PTSD, and loss of a loved one (Gan et al., 2013; Genoe, 2013; Gruszczyńska & Knoll, 2015; Guo et al., 2013; Park, 2010; Roubinov et al., 2015). For this research, the goal was to analyze experiences that were stressful enough to be a significant event in the individual's life

but not too stressful that discussing the event would re-traumatize or cause distress to the participant. Therefore, only those who rated their level of stress caused by the event between a score of 40 and 80 on a scale of 100 were included (moderate to high stress).

Table 1
Summary Table of Participants

Pseudonym	Age Group	Identified Gender	Sexual Orientation	Ethnic Background	Stressful Event
Aaliyah	19-28	Woman	Heterosexual	South Asian (East Indian, Sri Lankan, etc.)	Apart from husband, due to COVID-19 for eight months, while helping her pregnant sister navigate escaping an abusive marriage
Adam	39-48	Man	Heterosexual	White/European	Healthy young man diagnosed with colon cancer and developed anxiety and panic attacks afterwards
John	49-58	Man	Heterosexual	White/European	Navigating separation from wife due to ongoing marital problems
Manuel	19-28	Man	Heterosexual	White/European and Latin American	Experienced an earthquake and trapped in Ecuador for two months
Samar	49-58	Man	Heterosexual	South Asian (East Indian, Sri Lankan, etc.)	Let go from his 13-year career with a company in an impersonal and abrupt manner
Stephanie	19-28	Woman	Bisexual	White/European	End of a 5-year relationship during period of transition into 'adulthood' (graduated university)

Note. Participants' real names were changed for anonymization.

Meaning-making is theorized as a way to regain a sense of control, even when an event itself is uncontrollable (Gruszczyńska & Knoll, 2015). With more controllable events, problem-focused coping is most likely a viable coping method over meaning-making, as something can be done to reduce the stress of the situation. Therefore, participants must have felt a lack of control at some point during their experience to be included in the study.

In terms of timing, research suggests that time must pass in order for an individual to be able to meaningfully engage in the processes of meaning-making (i.e., benefit finding) (Helgeson et al., 2006), however, no exact duration is specified in prior theory. It was determined that two months should be a sufficient amount of time for initial emotional intensity to decrease.

Another goal for participant selection was to ensure that they had come to terms with the event. This is closely related to the criteria that the event must have occurred in the past. The purpose of this was to verify that participants felt comfortable discussing the stressful event so that the interview process would not unintentionally bring forth strong negative emotions that could be harmful to the participant. Lastly, only participants who indicated that they used some form of meaning-making or a search for meaning to cope with the event were included.

Pre-screening Procedure

Participants were recruited using two methods: *Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk)*, and convenience snowball sampling. A total of 206 participants completed the pre-screen questionnaire using *Qualtrics*. Based on the above criteria and further screening (for a homogeneous sample), eight participants qualified for an interview and were contacted with six being interviewed.

Semi-structured Interview Process

The one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted using *Microsoft Teams* and lasted approximately an hour, as per Pietkiewicz and Smith's (2014) recommendations. The interview questions were based on prior meaning-making theory, the research aims, and IPA principles. They were open-ended and non-directive to allow for detailed and narrative responses, as the goal of IPA is "to elicit rich, detailed, and first-person accounts of experiences and phenomena under investigation" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 10). Some closed-ended questions were included to address specific theoretical aspects that may have been missed if not directly asked (i.e., 'was there any point where you had to change what you were thinking or doing to help you cope with the event?'). Additionally, probing questions were asked when further detail was required or when the participant mentioned something particularly interesting.

The interview question sequence was structured in chronological order, following a narrative sequence that would be more natural for the participant. This sequence also supported participants in first thinking back to their thoughts, feelings, and experiences at the time of the event, with a progression to the present and how they currently view, think or feel about the event. After the interview, each participant received a \$20 Amazon.ca gift card for their participation. Prior to conducting participant interviews, the interview guide was piloted to ensure quality and flow.

Data Analysis

Once all interviews were complete, the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Smith and colleagues' (2009) six steps and guidelines. Firstly, the transcript was read multiple times to ensure an intimate familiarity with the participant's narrative and dialogue. Secondly, initial exploratory comments were recorded on a line-by-line basis. These initial comments were descriptive, linguistic, or conceptual, and initial observations, thoughts, reflections, emotions, and language were noted to encourage deep engagement with the data. This step was repeated two to three times per transcript. Thirdly, the initial comments were converted into emerging themes that represent the "psychological essence" of what is important in the initial comments (Smith et al., 2009, p. 92). The emerging themes represent a combination of the participant's original thoughts and words regarding their experience and the analyst's interpretations/understandings. These first three steps were completed by hand.

Once the third step was completed, the emerging themes were transferred to the qualitative analysis software *Nvivo 12 Plus*, which was used for the remaining stages of analysis. Fourthly, connections across emerging themes were explored, creating groupings of themes called 'super-ordinate themes'. Emerging themes were then removed from chronological order and grouped together in a way that reflected the participant's experience and made sense to the analyst with abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, numeration, and function used to support this process (Smith et al., 2009). Fifthly, the first four steps were repeated for each transcript.

For each participant transcript, the coding framework evolved as more statements were categorized into emerging themes. These themes were reviewed and discussed by the two lead researchers, with statements confirmed as being present in those themes or needing to be placed into other themes. Themes with large or small numbers of statements were reviewed for potential re-categorization. Once the emerging themes were considered to be robust, superordinate labels reflecting the theme were identified. These labels were also discussed and confirmed by the two lead researchers. In summary, the coding framework was continuously revised for each participant as their statements were identified, placed into emerging themes, categorized as super-ordinate themes and discussed by the lead researchers.

To keep IPA's commitment to idiography, each transcript was analyzed independently and treated as a unique case before comparing across cases. Any ideas or researcher derived thoughts that emerged based on other transcripts or prior experience were bracketed off using the reflexive journal (i.e., to separate and isolate them from the subsequent participant analysis). Lastly, super-ordinate themes were compared across all cases to explore further patterns, creating a final list of themes.

To aid in the quality of the analysis and consistent with Yardley's (2000) recommendations, the first case was independently analyzed by the first and second authors. The two researchers then discussed their findings and any differences in themes. There was a sufficient amount of overlap between the two analyses, supporting that the interpretations stayed close to the text and the participant's account. The remaining five cases were independently analysed by the first author with mini-audits by the second author. For the mini-audits, the secondary author reviewed the transcripts, notes, and themes developed by the primary researcher, before having a discussion to, again, ensure the analysis was grounded in the participant's account and to promote reasonable consensus.

Results

Multiple themes emerged throughout the analysis that directly related to the research questions. As is typical in IPA, a small sample of participant statements have been provided for illustrative purposes. As this study was designed to clarify meaning-making theory, the results focus on the most prominent similarities and differences between participant experiences and the two core meaning-making theories discussed in the literature review (Park and Folkman).

Findings Consistent with Prior Theory

Discrepancy between Global and Situational Meaning

In Park's (2010) meaning-making theory, she discusses that distress arises when an event's meaning (situational meaning) does not align with one's global meaning. She suggests that to reduce the stress, either the situational meaning or one's global meaning should be altered to decrease this incongruity. All six interviewees experienced the discrepancy between their situational and global meaning as evidenced by their shock at the beginning of the stressful event. Their beliefs were challenged and, in some cases, their sense of reality shifted. To illustrate this discrepancy further, the following section describes the experiences of Adam, Stephanie, and Manuel.

For Adam, he prided himself on being a healthy individual. When he was diagnosed with cancer, this shook his perception of what it means to be healthy. What he believed to be true about his health and the diagnosis he received did not align, causing stress. For Stephanie, she believed

she was in a healthy relationship with the person she would marry and spend the rest of her life with. Suddenly, he ended the relationship, destroying what they had and leaving her confused, “*I guess being so sure of something and then just having it ripped out from under my feet and just never knowing why*”. Lastly, Manuel was a young and healthy individual who had dreams and aspirations for his future, without fearing death. The earthquake he experienced threatened his life and challenged what he hoped for in his future, causing him to change how he viewed life (increased appreciation for life) and to re-evaluate things, “*it did have meaning because it helped me appreciate a little bit more- Life. ‘Cause you never know when it’s going to end, when it’s going to have another event like this one. And it really makes you re-value some things. Think about why you’re here in life*”. These examples support both Park’s (2010) and Folkman’s (2008) theories, although they are more reflective of Park’s conceptualization of meaning-making.

Sense-making and Benefit-finding

Each participant’s meaning-making process involved trying to make sense of the situation while looking for the positives of the stressful event. In the prior research literature, these coping methods are core components of meaning-making and are referred to as ‘sense-making’ and ‘benefit-finding’ (Folkman, 2008; Park, 2010; Davis et al., 1998; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). The participants described benefit-finding and sense-making thoughts as well as other coping methods, suggesting that these are key factors. For example, Stephanie tried to make sense of the event, saying “*at first I was like why, like you know, my life was so sure like why um did this happen?*”. Aaliyah and John identified positive outcomes from their stressful events, with Aaliyah saying, “*I think also it um strengthened, oddly, my connection with my husband as well ... it really like it gave me a new insight into our own relationship and how much I really appreciate him*” and John finding a new confidence “*I’ve got a lot of confidence out of, strangely, out of this stupid situation. I’ve got more confidence than I had before*”.

Change in Priorities

Participants also reported shifting their priorities as a result of their meaning-making. To illustrate this, Manuel viewed his near death experience as a ‘wake-up call’, which motivated him to prioritize the goals and actions that he had been procrastinating before, “*I mean that that’s kind of like a warning shot, like you have to start doing the things that you want because you never know when another earthquake or another thing can alter your life*”. Additionally, both John and Stephanie shifted their priorities to themselves after the end of their relationships. Stephanie said, “*You know it’s like, it’s fate. I was meant to do bigger things than this, and again like the whole like changing from, you know, wanting to do stuff with my business degree to wanting to be a pilot has come out of it*”. John said, “*in some ways I’ve never been happier. Uh I- and- it- because what I’ve done partly in in trying to find myself again*”.

Realigning priorities is a form of meaning-focused coping discussed in Folkman’s (2008) theory which involves reappraising what is important or what ‘matters’. Shifting priorities is implied in Park’s (2010) theory regarding reducing the discrepancy between global and situational meaning, however, it is not explicitly stated. Each situation facilitated participants to reflect on what matters in their lives and produced a shift in their priorities. In summary, aspects of both Park’s (2010) and Folkman’s (2008) theories were present in the current findings reflecting the discrepancy in global and situational meaning, sense-making and benefit-findings, and realigning priorities.

Differences between Theory and Findings

Beyond the similarities between this study's findings and prior meaning-making theory, there were several important inconsistencies. These reflected the non-linearity of coping activities, the integration of meaning-making with other coping methods, and the influence of social support. Each of these is described below.

Non-linearity in Coping

For the six participants, coping through meaning did not instantly result in adjustment. Even when meaning was found, coping was a continuous process that took time. For instance, Aaliyah discussed waves in her coping journey, saying "*there were periods where I felt very positive and then there were periods where I didn't*". This concept of non-linear and continuous coping is not directly addressed in Park's (2010) meaning-making model. According to Park (2010), once the discrepancy between the situation meaning and global meaning is reduced, then adjustment is improved. However, this does not account for the continuous effort participants use to remind themselves of the meaning (referred to as circular coping by Folkman, 2008). In Folkman's (2008) theory, meaning-focused coping has multiple functions. It generates positive emotions that influence the appraisal of the stressful event and restores coping resources, which, in turn, motivates and sustains additional coping (including emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping; Folkman, 2008). This idea that meaning-focused coping has no official endpoint and can continue and adapt over time was demonstrated in the participant's experiences.

Inter-relatedness of Meaning-making with Other Coping Mechanisms

Another finding from the participant's experiences reflected the integration of meaning-making with other forms of coping. For instance, Adam used the coping method of social sharing and realized that this became meaningful to him, "*In all honesty, helping others allows me to try and find a good in it um you know like what's the- Why'd I do this? And I for me I almost have to find a reason that OK I went through this so I can help someone else*". Without him first doing this initial type of coping, the meaning he generated and continued to use may not have been found. This is also similar for John. To cope with the separation from his wife, he explored *YouTube* videos and found mindfulness. His practice of mindfulness became deeply connected to his meaning-making, "*I kind of caught on to this the idea of mindfulness and being in the moment just applied it- had the time to apply it. A little bit of you know, discipline. Uh. Just trying to think of maybe what else- is it this sort of path that got me here*". Factoring how other coping methods may interact with meaning is important when determining how meaning is used to cope. This element is not addressed in Park's (2010) meaning-making model, however, it is partially addressed in Folkman's (2008) model.

As suggested above, meaning-focused coping is not only a coping mechanism itself but also functions to modify the appraisal of the event and sustain other forms of coping (Folkman, 2008). This explains the co-existence of meaning-making with other forms of coping that proved to be helpful and adaptive. This model supports the idea that meaning-making plays a role in other coping methods that people use, although not with the precise sequencing articulated by Folkman (2008).

According to Folkman's (2008) model, meaning-focused coping occurs after the failure of other forms of coping to sustain additional future forms of coping. However, in many of the participants' examples an external form of coping which was not meaningful initially became

meaningful afterwards. For instance, social sharing became meaningful for Adam. Similarly, when Samar lost his job, reconnecting to his faith (emotion-focused coping) transformed into meaning-focused coping as it caused the reappraisal of the meaning of the job loss. Both of these examples demonstrate how another form of coping became integrated with meaning-focused coping, rather than it being separate as theorized by Folkman (2008).

Influence of Social Support

Meaning-making was also integrated with social support in participants' coping experiences. Individuals sought support from family, friends, and support groups, and often generated meaning through their interactions. For instance, Samar went to a group session provided by an employment agency. By sharing his experience and listening to others' experiences, he realized that it was not his fault that he was let go and he began to view the event more positively, *"one of the things that even made me even more confident, was some of the suggestions that I was telling them of what I've gone through after the losing my job and what I was doing and how I was thinking um, was helping the others too in the group. And you know, some of the stories that they were sharing was also helping me, right?"*. For Stephanie, her friends helped to facilitate the reappraisal of meaning of her breakup. One friend vocalized multiple potential benefits as a result of her new single status, which Stephanie slowly started to internalize to help her reappraise the event, *"My one girlfriend keeps telling me, you know, I'm I can make all my decisions for myself now. I don't have to think about anyone else. Um which now- at the time again it was like super scary but you know, I've started realizing like I can do everything for me"*. Neither of these circumstances are explained using the current meaning-making theories in this study. Given that social support was deeply involved in each individual's meaning-making, social coping was included in the integrated meaning-making model.

In sum, participant narratives were more consistent with prior theory than inconsistent. Furthermore, where one theory lacked, typically the other made up for the gap. This suggests that both theories contain relevant aspects of meaning-making that should be more fully integrated.

Summary of Theoretical Comparison

There was an abundance of overlap in the research findings with Park's (2010) and Folkman's (2008) theories. In sum, it appears that Park's theory does an excellent job providing a high-level overview of the meaning-making process. The discrepancy between global and situational meaning was apparent, as was the coping efforts to reduce the discrepancy. Despite this, Park's theory lacks the specific lower-level nuances in the ways that individuals find, create, or reappraise meaning. This is where Folkman's (2008) and Folkman and Moskowitz's (2007) theories have an advantage in multiple ways. They get into the specifics of how meaning is changed or generated, they account for other types of coping and their relationship to meaning, and they acknowledge the continual process of coping. The presence of these multiple aspects of meaning-making suggests that both Park and Folkman's theories contain accurate representations of meaning-making and the coping process in relation to the participants' experiences. In addition, two other factors beyond their theories were important for several participants: religious meaning-making and the coping through loss and restoration.

Additional Coping Aspects

Religious Meaning-making

Participants were not directly asked in the pre-screen if they identified with a certain religion, but it became apparent that for some, religiosity was intimately involved in the meaning-making process. Samar found meaning and growth through his faith, “*God wanted me to get to know him a little bit more and get closer to him a little bit more and he’s in charge of everything and he basically said Samar, you know, you need this in order for you to be better*”. Aaliyah used her faith to make sense of her struggle, “*I’m a person of faith, so I think something else that really helps me specifically was like reading the Koran um and you know, just reflecting on that*”. Adam’s faith drove him to search for “the silver linings” of the event which became a catalyst for his meaning-making, “*Um so I think the faith played a role that that no matter what kind of situation we’re going through, yeah sometimes they suck, sometimes are good, sometimes it’s mediocre. But you can always look for the good in it*”. It makes sense that those who are religious identified the key role their faith played during their coping as one’s religion makes up a significant portion of their global meaning system.

Coping through Loss and Restoration

As individuals recounted their stressful events, how they coped, and where they were currently in their coping journey, two primary motivations for coping were noticed. The first motivation was to cope with the devastation and negative emotions caused by the event. For instance, when Adam was diagnosed with cancer, his perception of what ‘health’ entails was shattered. He struggled to understand how, being healthy and a health professional, he was not aware that cancer had been growing in his body for approximately two years. Stephanie had a future planned with her boyfriend, when suddenly he called everything off. Not only was it completely unexpected, but it destroyed everything she planned for her future. All of the participants lost something in their experiences that they had to cope with. In addition to coping with loss, participants also directed their coping efforts towards healing and adaptation. As the second motivation of coping, participants needed to discover what this loss meant for them and how they would move forward, such as Samar, who worked to rebuild his self-worth. Participants needed to cope with both the reality of their loss and what this meant for their life.

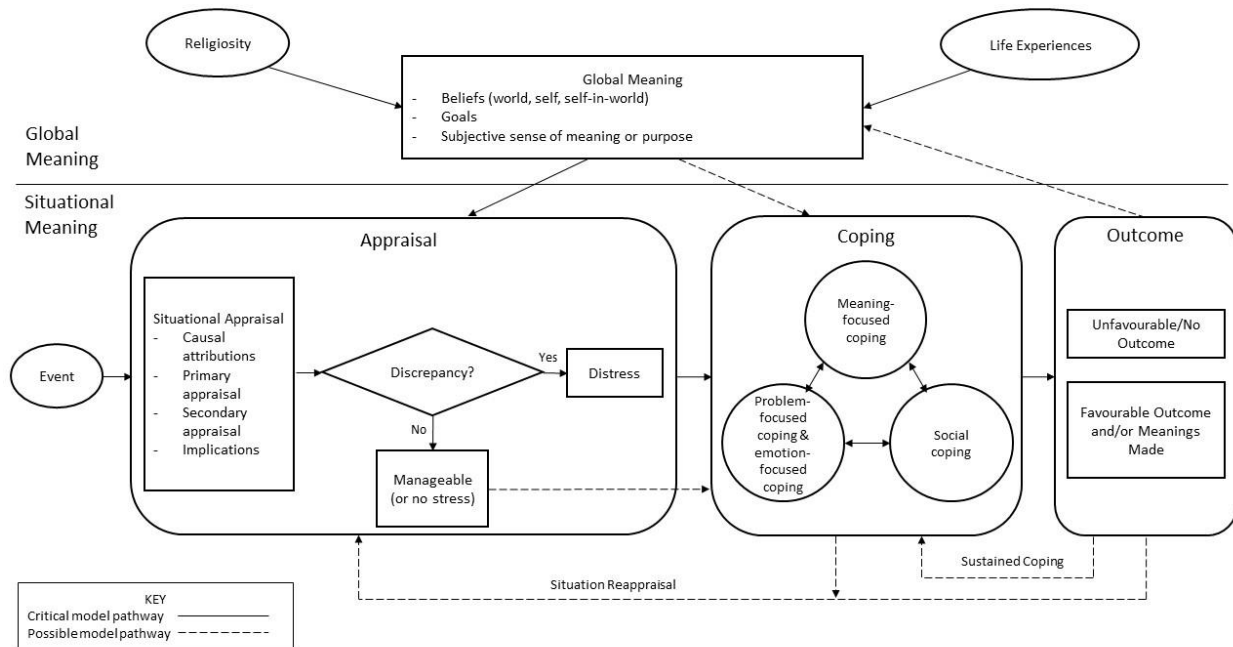
Stroebe and Schut (1999) developed a theory that explains this phenomenon in the context of bereavement called the Dual Process Model of Coping (DPM). These authors explain that when individuals cope with the loss of someone, they engage in two types of coping methods: loss-oriented coping and restoration-oriented coping. Loss-oriented coping addresses managing the loss and absence of the individual from their lives, while restoration-oriented coping addresses the secondary stressors caused by the loss and works on restoring one’s identity (i.e., wife to widow). Therefore, it is possible that their model can apply to meaning-making beyond bereavement. Beyond these two additional aspects, there were other important instances of the participants’ coping journey, but these did not coalesce into major themes.

Discussion

A considerable amount of theory and research has explored meaning-making in the context of coping, however, the variety of conceptualizations and measures has made interpreting this literature a challenge. The purpose of this study was to clarify meaning-making theory. Six

participants were interviewed with their experiences analyzed using IPA to inductively and deductively clarify two dominant theories of meaning-making: meaning-focused coping (Folkman, 2008; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2007) and meaning-making (Park, 2010). From these interviews, a new model is proposed to integrate these two theories based on the findings (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Proposed Integrated Meaning-making Theory Based on Study Findings



Proposed Model

Global and Situational Meaning

The model is a summary of the study findings rather than a new theory, however, it may provide a starting point for future researchers to further explore and evaluate the concept of meaning-making. The model incorporates global and situational meaning. Within situational meaning, first an event occurs and is appraised. The appraisal integrates both Park’s (2010) and Folkman’s (2008) theories as it includes primary and secondary appraisal (Folkman, 2008; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), in addition to causal attributions and perceived implications (Park, 2010). If the appraised meaning of the event is discrepant with one’s global meaning, the event is appraised as stressful. This discrepancy initiates the coping process.

Integrated Coping

Coping in the integrated model looks slightly different than previous models. Problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (Folkman, 2008) as well as meaning-focused coping and social coping are included. Social coping was added to the model as it was prominent in participant accounts and it is distinct from the other forms of coping. All coping methods are connected with bidirectional arrows to demonstrate how they interact with one another and are

sometimes deeply related (i.e., if social coping becomes meaningful and transforms into meaning-focused coping). This also reflects comments from several participants who benefitted from the cumulative effect of different coping approaches rather than one superior coping method for them. Furthermore, it helps demonstrate the non-linearity of coping. This coping model contradicts Folkman's (2008) model which indicates that problem- or emotion-focused coping must first be attempted and fail before meaning-focused coping is initiated. This sequence was not supported here. The participants found coping to be more interactive, hence, the modelled interactions of coping methods within the figure.

Coping Outcomes

The coping efforts produce one of two outcomes: one that is unfavourable and/or there is no outcome (no meaning made), or the coping results in a favourable outcome and/or meaning made. To model the cyclic/non-linear nature of stress and coping as demonstrated by the participants, possible pathways for the outcome include situational reappraisal, sustained coping, or modified global meaning.

Global Meaning

Global meaning reflects Park's conceptualization of global meaning, however, religiosity and life experiences were added to reflect participant perspectives. Global meaning influences both the appraisal and coping processes. Within appraisal, a difference between the model developed here and Park's (2010) model is the interpretation of the congruity (i.e., lack of discrepancy) between appraised and global meaning. When the congruity is high, the current model considers it to be "manageable" or "not stressful". This is to account for on-going or long-term coping that may be necessary even when meaning is made or to account for stress when there is no discrepancy. For example, a situation may be appraised as a 'challenge' because individuals feel that they have adequate coping resources to handle it, but it still may cause stress (i.e., an athlete is stressed before an important game and may still need to cope, but the appraised meaning of the game is not discrepant with their global meaning system). This explains why the label was changed to include 'manageable' and a potential path to coping was added.

The proposed model was developed using one qualitative research approach (i.e., IPA). Therefore, it is possible that the semi-structured interview questions guided participants to over-emphasize the role of meaning-making and coping in their experience. It is presented with the hope that future researchers will use it to explore the various components of meaning-making from a more fully integrated perspective.

Theoretical Implications

The findings from this study have significant theoretical and methodological implications. First and foremost, the goal of this study and the main implication was clarification of meaning-making theory. The findings support the inclusion of a discrepancy between global and situational meaning, sense-making and benefit-finding, and realigning priorities. They also suggest several concepts be altered or added to current meaning-making theory including a non-linear coping process, social support (Thoits, 1995), and religious coping (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005).

Practical Implications

As this study suggests, although the transactional model of stress and coping was generally applicable to participants' stress responses, their coping and meaning-making were implemented in dynamic and deeply personal ways. Interventions and programs can be designed to reflect this dynamism (e.g. non-linearity, integration of coping approaches, and inclusion highly personal coping aspects) to personalize the support process. By applying coping theories flexibly and incorporating individuals' personal coping approaches, it may be possible to increase the effectiveness of interventions. Consistent with this, recent meta-analyses have supported the impact of client preferences (Swift et al., 2018), patient coping styles (Beutler et al., 2018), as well as religiosity (Captari et al., 2018) in psychotherapy.

Methodological Implications

The in-depth investigation of meaning-making using a qualitative approach allowed for the exploration of nuanced participant experiences that would not have been captured in a quantitative study. For instance, the finding that social support can be a source for meaning-making (demonstrated by Stephanie's experience), or that other forms of coping can become inherently meaningful (as in Adam and John's experience), would not have been discovered in a quantitative study. Furthermore, the non-linearity of coping through meaning would also have been missed as current cross-sectional surveys do not account for the cyclic nature of coping observed in the findings in this study. This demonstrates the importance of conducting qualitative research to further clarify meaning-making and its related constructs.

Limitations

Although the methodology, study design, and materials were meticulously developed, there are methodological and theoretical limitations.

Methodological Limitations

Firstly, although one of the study's aims was to capture the authentic occurrence of meaning-making to cope without the constraints of prior theory, the study's measures and selection criteria were based on aspects reflecting prior meaning-making theories. Although this may seem counterintuitive as these theories could be over-emphasized in interpretations, there needed to be some underlying basis to guide participant selection and the design of study questions. Using theory to develop study samples and materials aligns with IPA literature and practice (Smith et al., 2009). To minimize the influence of any particular meaning-making theory, the chosen criteria had to reflect multiple theories.

In addition, although prior meaning-making research has focused on highly stressful events, participants in this study were included for moderate to high stress events (between a score of 40 and 80 out of 100). This criterion was set as a harm reduction measure for both participants and the researcher. Although the criterion included participants within the stress range of 40 and 80, the final sample had an average stress rating of 72 with a minimum rating of 65 and maximum of 80. As one's stress level can impact their coping, it is possible that the insights found in this study may not apply to less, or more, stressful situations. Future research should include a broader range of stressful experiences to confirm the findings here.

Following IPA guidelines, samples should be homogeneous and purposely selected. To ensure this, participant sampling adhered to strict selection criteria grounded in meaning-making theory while allowing for variability in the stressful event and time passed since the event occurred. Although the actual experienced event and timelines varied across individuals, as is evident in the results, there was considerable similarity and patterns found across cases. A recent longitudinal study with a shared stressful and negative event (COVID-19) found that meaning-making is beneficial for both immediate and future adjustment and predicted less psychological distress including depression, anxiety and stress (Yang et al., 2021), supporting meaning-making impacts with a more homogeneous sample.

Lastly, as mentioned in the methods section, the second round of sampling was convenience/snowball sampling and two participant identities were known to the researchers. Strict adherence to deriving all insights and interpretations directly from the data helped to mitigate the risk of researcher bias, however, this cannot be completely avoided. In summary, it is possible that aspects of the sampling process (i.e., the pre-screening questions, selection of moderate stress levels, homogeneity, and snowball sampling) could have implications for the generalizability of the findings.

Theoretical Limitations

An important consideration for the current study is that the results of IPA should not be used as evidence for generalizability. IPA is designed to guide research rather than confirm. Smith and colleagues (2009) instruct researchers to think of IPA analyses in terms of theoretical transferability as opposed to empirical generalizability. The strength of IPA lies in the in-depth detailed analysis of each case which would not be captured if generalizability was the primary goal. Furthermore, IPA can be used to evaluate existing theory and literature as groups of particular instances always lie within the general phenomenon, however, the general phenomenon must always comply to the particular (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, conducting an in-depth investigation of individual experience certainly adds to the literature as a means to either support or challenge current meaning-making theory.

Another limitation reflects the asking of questions about participant's experience and meaning during the interview that could have unintentionally facilitated the meaning-making process. To help avoid this, the interview schedule was strategically designed to move in a chronological order. It cannot be determined that the meaning participants discussed was present before the interview, however, at no time was meaning created or reconstructed for an individual. All meaning discussed in the interviews was completely generated by the participants even though the process of meaning-making still may have been facilitated or prompted by the nature of the interview.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of individuals using meaning-making to cope with the intent of clarifying meaning-making theory. Meaning was imbedded in the entire coping process, including the appraisal of the event, the coping methods used, and the outcomes of coping. Participants reported several positive outcomes from their meaning-making process, even though the events they endured were stressful and negative in nature. This is a first step to clarify the theory, but future work is needed to develop the theory further, strengthen its empirical support, and apply it in practice. When tragedy strikes and the question of 'why did this happen?' or 'what

does this mean?’ arises, reappraising meaning could be the answer to support adaptation and resilience.

Author Note

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Notes on Contributions

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Appendix

Sample Interview Questions

Unpacking the Stressful Event

How long ago did the event happen?

If you can, I would like you to walk me through the situation in detail. What was the situation?

Probes: how long were you under stress, what were you thinking when it happened, what were you feeling?

Compared to other situations you may have encountered, what made this event particularly stressful?

In the survey, you indicated that at a point you felt like you did not have control. At what point was this? Why did you feel that way?

What did this event mean for you?

Understanding the Coping Journey

I'm interested to hear how you got through it. If you can, I would like for you to tell me, in order, everything you did to deal with the stress produced by the event. What did this look like for you?

Probes: take me back to... [to gather more detail about a specific coping approach], how was this [coping approach] helpful for you, what did this [coping approach] mean to you?

Was there any point where you had to change what you were thinking or doing to help you cope with the event? When was that point, why did you switch, what did you do?

In your opinion, what helped you the most to come to terms with the situation?

Meaning-making

Thinking about how this event plays a role in your life, does the event mean something different to you now than it did before? How has it changed?

In the preliminary questionnaire, you indicated that at some point you tried to search for meaning in the situation. What did this look like for you?