

Meaning in Life in the Gifted

Abstract

Although existential issues are important for many gifted people (especially in the intellectually gifted), there is little research on these issues. When existential issues are discussed in the gifted, they tend to refer largely to existential depression. But there are other types of problems related to the lack of meaning in life that can affect gifted people, such as existential emptiness, existential frustration, or existential neuroses. Moreover, these other issues, in addition to existential depression, are fundamental to the gifted individual's emotional well-being and mental health. It is important to integrate ideas about existential problems into education and psychotherapy in the prevention and treatment of existential problems so that gifted people can find an optimal path to personal fulfillment. In this article we explore meaning in life in the gifted through the use of a combination of theoretical propositions, clinical observations, and review of existing research.

Keywords: giftedness; transformational giftedness; humanitarian giftedness; meaning; meaning in life.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to demonstrate the importance of the question of life's meaning for intellectually gifted, and other gifted individuals, as well as to propose possibilities for educational and therapeutic approaches in cases where gifted individuals face challenging existential issues or even crises.

Existential issues are important for some intellectually gifted people (Dabrowski, 1964; Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Tirri, 2022; Vötter & Schnell, 2019; Webb, 2013). Non-gifted people also may experience these issues, although sometimes, with less intensity. From childhood or adolescence, they tend to ask questions about everything around them—questions others might not think to ask. Their questioning often leads them to wonder about the meaning of life and of everything that exists (e.g., the origin of everything, the meaning of suffering and evil in the world, and the meaning of death, among other essential questions). Their questioning about such issues helps them better to understand life.

The intense search for meaning among many, although probably not all, of the gifted can lead those who are searching to important discoveries about the meaning of life; but it is not uncommon that, at least temporarily, they find themselves experiencing feelings of dissatisfaction with the answers they uncover. They then are stuck in their thinking about meaning in life, with varying degrees of intensity, in a sense of meaninglessness (Dabrowski, 1964; Webb, 2013). This situation can lead to great suffering from the feeling that life is meaningless and even futile. Those who search for meaning but do not find it suffer greater psychological disturbances than those who do not search for meaning at all (Davis, 2000).

Meaning in life appears to be an important factor for the subjective well-being of many intellectually gifted individuals (Kerr & Cohn, 2011; Tirri, 2022; Vötter & Schnell, 2019; Webb, 2013). Dabrowski (1964) noted the importance of existential issues for gifted people and the problems that

arise from the failure to develop the dimension of meaning in their lives. Their searching may put them at greater risk for the development of existential depression.

Despite Dabrowski's warning, there is little research on existential issues in the gifted, although the issue has been widely studied in other populations. Allusion has been made to meaning in life as a part of spiritual intelligence (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). From a different perspective, Gardner (1999) suggested the possibility of a construct of "existential intelligence" as a phenomenon that provides sensitivity and capacity to face deep questions about human existence, such as the meaning of life. Gardner has considered whether it would be more appropriate to consider spiritual intelligence as a separate form of intelligence or as part of existential intelligence. However, ultimately, neither existential intelligence nor spiritual intelligence was incorporated into the most recent version of his theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2011). Gardner (2011) believed that neither met his criteria for a separate intelligence.

One problem is there is no clear frame of reference for understanding what the meaning of life is in these studies, just as there is no clear and unified consensus among experts over what it means to be gifted. To address the question of the meaning of life, we will take as a reference some existential proposals from Viktor Frankl's (1959/2006) Logotherapy, Irvin Yalom's (1980) existential psychotherapy, and Alfred Längle's (2019) existential analysis, in combination with the clinical observations of the senior author, a practicing psychiatrist and psychotherapist who deals with many gifted patients in her practice.

The Concept of Meaning

According to Viktor Frankl (1959/2006), the process of searching for meaning is an essential effort for finding happiness in life. This process forms a basic part of adaptation to any situation of suffering. Its importance is such that the frustration of the desire for meaning would play a consequential role in the origin of neurosis, in the lack of desire to live, or in other mental health issues

(Frankl, 1999). Frankl affirmed that the perception that life is endowed with meaning or that meaning should be sought in one's existence would be a reliable criterion of mental health (Frankl, 1999). In parallel with these ideas, Maslow (1968) also gave great importance to meaning by considering the desire for meaning as humanity's main concern.

In modern social psychology, understanding the role of meaning and purpose in life has become a major topic of research, as some social psychologists have come to realize that often people's actions and interactions with each other can be understood only through their formulations of what gives them meaning in life (Burrow et al., 2021). Their ways of speaking and responding represent, in part, their attempts to attain meaning in their lives.

Frankl (1959/2006, 1955/2019) has argued that meaning is related to the answer to the question of "**What is life for?**" On Frankl's view, the meaning of life is related to the development of human values that make this world become a better place—what Sternberg (2021a) has recently referred to as adaptive intelligence. The world becomes better when values and actions are inspired by love (Frankl, 1959/2006, 1955/2019). Love, from Frankl's perspective, should be the essential value that inspires all other human values (Frankl, 1959/2006, 1955/2019). Moreover, meaning, according to Frankl (1955/2019), provides internal support to existence because it provides direction and an internal structure from which to live. Meaning is also a source of inspiration for life and one way of integrating thinking, feelings, and deep intuitions about what life is for through relationships with oneself and with other people. But in today's world, there are many narcissistic individuals who defy any kind of spiritual growth or improvement. This is a particular concern because, on average, people are becoming more narcissistic and less concerned with the welfare of others, which is leading to increased aggression directed toward others (Kjærøvik & Bushman, 2021; Rodríguez, 2021; Shaw, 2021).

The idea of meaning for Frankl must be differentiated from cognitive meaning (although Frankl takes it into account) and from just any random purposes and goals, which may be self-centered and

even narcissistic. Meaning, as discussed by Frankl, and in contrast merely to various purposes and goals, concerns the development of that which humanizes us, in such a way that personal fulfillment is integrated with, and becomes part of, the good that is done for the rest of the world. Therefore, Frankl's idea of meaning is related to self-transcendence (looking beyond oneself) and responsibility; it implies that an authentic vital meaning is reached only when the person can look beyond themselves and seek a common good for the rest of human beings and for the world. The idea is very close to that of wisdom, which Sternberg (1998, 2019) refers to as the seeking of a common good by balancing one's own, others', and larger interests over the long- as well as the short-term through the infusion of positive ethical values. Frankl (1959/2006) suggested that the core of the meaning of life must be love, which we can understand as a backbone of positive ethical and other values.

We can see Frankl's approach as clearly related to Sternberg's concepts of transformational creativity and transformational giftedness, which seek positive and meaningful transformation to the world (Sternberg, 2020a, 2020b, 2021b, 2022). Frankl's earlier work complements Sternberg's later proposal by emphasizing the importance of putting positively transformational thinking into practice in one's life.

Why is it important or even necessary to be transformational? Finding meaning helps to put genuine transformational thinking into practice. Gifted individuals need to learn the reasons to be transformational and not merely self-centered and selfish (as transactional people are). It is a way to stimulate such thinking. Indeed, thinking in a transformationally gifted way is a source of positive and productive meaning in life.

Frankl's concept of meaning is also related to Sternberg and Rodriguez-Fernandez's (2023) proposal of "humanitarian giftedness," which is described as "the deployment of one's gifts and talents in a way that, at some level, benefits humanity" (p. 1). One cannot be totally gifted, following the thinking of Frankl, unless one somehow has found meaning that transcends oneself and that contributes

positively to the world. Giftedness, on this view, is not about a collection of abilities or other traits. It is about the positive contribution one gives back to the world (Sternberg, in press-a).

According to Frankl (1999), the desire for meaning is a specific need, which is not reducible to other needs and is present, to a greater or lesser degree, in all human beings. It also can lead the human being toward self-actualization, that is, to bring into the present one's range of potentialities (Kaufman, 2021; Maslow, 1993). Within this perspective, each person would have to search for their own path to meaning through their self-knowledge, through self-transcendence, and through becoming more aware of their ethical values. Although there may be common aspects of meanings for many different people (which would belong to the realm of values), nevertheless, each person finds their own meanings by themselves, but with responsibility to others. Purpose and goals may or may not be egocentric. But full meaning, according to Frankl, is never egocentric; rather, as noted above, it seeks an integration between personal fulfillment and the pursuit of the common good, as in modern conceptions of wisdom (e.g., Sternberg, 2019).

Frankl (1955/2019) has argued that meaning is something that we can find, if we seek it, because it is objectively a part of existence; we only have to find it. For Frankl (1955/2019), we can find meaning by maintaining objective values through which we can realize our lives to become who we really are. Such a life includes the expression of our most authentic reality and contributes common good to others.

In contrast, for Irvin Yalom (1980), meaning is something we must build to survive, because there is no real meaning inherent in life. Yalom's view is more in line with that of existential philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, and indeed, he has described himself as an existential psychiatrist (www.yalom.com). In this view there is no meaning to be found—only meaning to be created through the path of one's existence.

Perhaps the most balanced position is one that makes possible the integration between Frankl's and Yalom's perspectives, considering that it is possible to discover valuable elements of life with which we connect from our authenticity and humanity; and yet it is possible to construct meaning, in a creative way, through the way that is most meaningful for each of us. Somehow, in life, we can *find* meaning but we also can *build* meaning. Furthermore, as Längle (2019) has proposed, a process of developing self-knowledge is necessary to unveil meaning, given that it is not possible to know what the meaning of life is without a person discovering who they really are in the face of the experiences that life brings (Längle, 2019). We can integrate Längle's perspective about self-knowledge in a better understanding of meaning with Frankl's and Yalom's proposals and with clinical observations about existential problems.

Difficulties with Meaning in the Gifted

Various research studies have found that gifted people tend to have more difficulty finding meaning in their lives (Pollet & Schnell, 2017; Ubani, 2007; Voracek 2004, 2017). For example, Pollet and Schnell (2017) found that gifted people find significantly less meaning in their lives than do other adults. It even has been found that gifted people with a mean IQ of 151 (according to the Stanford Binet test) had a lifetime suicide mortality 4 times higher than that of the general population (Voracek, 2004). A weak but significant positive correlation also has been found between higher IQ and suicide rates in Austria (Voracek, 2007).

Although these and other existential problems were described decades ago, in the field of giftedness, little attention has been paid to a loss of meaning of life or to existential depression. Nor are there sufficient numbers of citations to relevant authors like Dabrowsky (1964), Frankl (1955/2019), and Webb (2013) in the existential field that would be of value to understand the problems related to the lack of meaning in life in some of the gifted. Oddly, some gifted people are particularly susceptible to these problems because of their greater existential sensitivity, a fact recognized especially by Dabrowski (1964).

Oddly, if gifted people do not face these challenges, it may be because their schooling and socialization have made them robotic—individuals who do what they are told to do, do it well, and are trained not to think too hard about the meaning of what they are doing. Such a problem exists especially in narcissist cultures (Rodríguez, 2021) and in authoritarian societies (Sternberg, in press-b).

The concerns of some gifted individuals to understand reality and themselves can progressively lead them to ask increasingly deeper and more comprehensive questions to reach a greater understanding of the world and their place within it. At the same time, they are particularly well able to see the inconsistencies, outright contradictions, and absurdities around them, which can lead them to disillusionment and to a feeling that it is all meaningless (Webb, 2013). Their deeper vision of reality, their more acute sensitivity to the phenomena that occur, and their greater capacity to reflect on abstract questions, lead them to think in this existentially challenging way. However, they also search within themselves for their own identity and for self-knowledge, as they try to understand why they sometimes do not fit into a world in which they may feel different, strange, and “geeky.” These feelings are caused by their having concerns that are uncommon for their age and situation in life. Moreover, as they become more aware of other people's incongruities, along with their sometimes grandiose ideals of how things should be, they may be impelled to try more deeply to understand a reality that is sometimes incomprehensible by any rational process. In other words, their more reflective view of reality, their perception of its oddities, and their search for ideals are part of what can lead them on a possibly less than successful existential quest. This search is what can eventually cause existential problems, as gifted individuals in search of meaning do not always know how to find the answers they are looking for. Indeed, sometimes there may be no meaningful answers to the problems they seek to address. This may happen because, in their environment, they do not find valid interlocutors who understand their concerns and who can help them in their search. As a result, they may end up keeping

their less than successful quest to themselves so as not to feel even more strange and rejected by others.

In addition, it is relatively common for their peculiarities to expose gifted individuals in search of meaning to the unfavorable judgments of their peers (Webb, 2013), which can be especially difficult if this judgment starts to appear in adolescence, because others are not as reflective, as intense, as self-critical, or as deeply concerned about truth and values as the gifted person may be. In their frustration, they may just decide to “play the game,” and turn their attention to teacher-pleasing, grade-getting, and doing whatever they are supposed to do to get ahead, thus constructing a false meaning for their lives.

From the perspective of Frankl's (1955/2019) Logotherapy, it is possible to experience different difficulties related to the meaning of life, which have varied degrees of intensity, with existential depression the most serious existential pathology of them all. We can read below the main difficulties with meaning described by Frankl in average people (1955/2019) and how they manifest themselves in the gifted:

- 1. Existential emptiness:** This is found when one loses the perception that life is meaningful and begins to live with a sense of absurdity or of boredom—the sense that nothing fills a deep longing that the life one is living is worthwhile. Gifted adolescents may easily perceive the most absurd and chaotic elements of existence and react with corresponding idleness and indifference toward daily life. This situation can lead to an existential vacuum in which their life is experienced with boredom and lack of interest. This situation can lead them to lose their motivation to study (because the absurdity they perceive permeates everything) and, as a consequence, to school failure. In gifted adults, existential emptiness can be felt as a deception about life and with a sense of dissatisfaction with life.
- 2. Existential neurosis:** This occurs when there is a conflict within the individual between different possibilities that they consider would give meaning to their life. This can occur when the gifted

has needs for personal development, on the one hand, and the desire to satisfy the demands of other people, on the other hand. This balance can be difficult to find, especially in some kind of gifted people, who have a great need for personal evolution and inner development, together with a high empathy for the suffering of others. There is a balance between yielding to concerns for the self and for others. If gifted individuals lean strongly to one side, they may feel, and indeed, become, selfish and individualistic. If they lean strongly to the other side, they may be impelled to yield excessively to others and give up valuable elements of themselves or their lives. Gifted individuals also must face the challenge that others often do not respond positively to the gifted individuals' intensity, sensitivity, or peculiar characteristics. These characteristics can make others feel uncomfortable, and they often are not well understood or tolerated by others. This conflict between apparently opposing elements within gifted individuals can lead them to get stuck.

3. **Existential frustration:** This is produced when a previously existing meaning of life is frustrated and cannot be rekindled. In the gifted there can be elements of meaning that previously fulfilled one in life, but that can end up being seen as absurd because of the apparently unanswerable existential questions that arise about meaning in life.
4. **Existential depression:** This occurs when no way out has been found for existential problems, and the individual loses hope that a way out is to be, or even can be, found. After some time spent in this state, the individual feels discouraged, sad, and collapsed inside, in the face of the meaninglessness from which they do not know how to escape. They have reached a point where it is no longer possible to find meaning in life. The symptoms can be very similar to those of a major depression and can lead these patients to end up on medication and with cognitive or another kind of psychotherapy. But often, neither the medication nor the cognitive therapy reaches the level of depth they need to overcome their existential depression. The question of

the meaning of life is important to some gifted people (Dabrowski, 1964; Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Tirri, 2022; Vötter & Schnell, 2019; Webb, 2013). Failure to address it properly can lead to existential depression (Dabrowsky, 1964; Webb, 2013). Dabrowsky (1964) pointed out that the gifted are prone to existential depression, due to their failure to find personal meaning in their lives. Dabrowsky (1964) related existential depression in the gifted to “positive disintegration,” understood as a crisis in which the person could subsequently rebuild their personality to a higher and healthier form of functioning if they recover from existential depression. Through positive disintegration, gifted individuals become inner-directed and values-driven, living with more autonomy, authenticity, and altruism (Mendaglio, 2008, p. 36).

In some cases, problems with meaning manifest themselves in the gifted as an **existential crisis** which is of greater intensity than existential emptiness or frustration. In this case, a gradual or abrupt collapse of the previously held elements of meaning may occur. Sometimes, even an internal conflict between different aspects of meaning may be felt, or there may be a realization that there is no possibility to find meaning in life at this moment in their existence. This type of crisis may lead one to experience symptoms of anguish, anxiety, sadness, insomnia, and even the desire to die or commit suicide to escape from a world in which evil, contradictions, and incoherencies are perceived and there is no conceivable hope of betterment. Many gifted people today seek psychological or psychiatric help for this type of problem—if they can afford it. These kinds of crisis can arise gradually or abruptly. For example, an existential crisis can arise when, although seeing that one’s studying or working at a job is valuable, the gifted person realizes that their talents may be exploited by unethical people or institutions. Some gifted teenagers can come into conflict with her studies when they suddenly became aware that the discovery of their talents could cause them to be used by others who wanted to take advantage of their abilities for their profit, or to benefit from their abilities by making them study a single aspect of something that would prove to be harmful globally (as happened to Einstein with the

atomic bomb or with some gifted individuals who work in large, impersonal, and sometimes nearly amoral companies). Another form of existential crisis can be caused by a clash between lofty ideals and the reality in which one perceives the evil of the world, the lies, and the utter incoherence. Existential crisis can be precipitated by problems that are perceived as unsolvable and even impossible to embrace.

In some cases, as we see with gifted patients, there arises a false meaning of life, or a **pseudo-meaning** that can occur when the person believes that their life has meaning because they are focused on some goal or purpose that does not bring fulfillment or happiness, even if it satisfies shallowly and temporarily. When the purposes of life are not linked to the development of human values and to the possibility of bringing good to others, it is common for the person who lives such a life increasingly to experience existential emptiness and boredom with existence, if they are existentially or ethically sensitive. This can happen, for example, when the main purpose of life is seen through goals such as societal success, money, power, or any other egocentric goal that ends up distancing an individual from others and from the possibility of doing good. Such goals are satisfying but fail to bring true long-term and deep fulfillment. In addition, the person who lives with these goals feels that they need more and more. These kinds of goals never fulfill them because they have a pseudo-meaning or in some way a meaning that is not true to themselves. This can happen on a job, when one feels that one's work does not represent who one is and may even represent someone whom one does not want to be; it also can occur in a close relationship, when one realizes that, through the relationship, one is becoming someone whom one does not wish to be. In this kind of situation, the gifted can arrive at this false meaning of life in a number of ways. In all of them, a false purpose can lead them to feel that their life is empty or antithetical to their ideals, and that nothing really satisfies them. Some possible ways for gifted people to live with pseudo-meaning are as follows:

1. **Masking their giftedness:** Experiencing situations of rejection as a result of standing out from the crowd can lead some gifted people to hide a part of themselves so as better to fit

with non-gifted people. This situation protects the gifted from expressing themselves authentically. As a consequence, they cannot be, and express themselves, as they really are, because they are fitting in with other people expectations (Webb, 2013).

2. **Being co-opted:** Co-option occurs when individuals are used for the purposes of others, without regard for their needs and desires. In such cases, their right to find their own way has been perverted and they have been seduced into contributing to other people's projects, often projects that are unrelated to, or even counter to the interests of the gifted individuals. Such episodes risk alienating their lives as they move away from whom they want to be or what they want to do. Capturing and co-opting them is easier when they are children or adolescents who have not yet developed enough critical sense to discern whether they are being supported or rather used. But adults are co-opted all the time through governmental or societal pressure, as in Russia, where Stalinism has returned full force, and the slightest perceived criticism of the government can result in arrest and harsh prison sentences. In *1984*-like dictatorships such as Russia and China, the gifted are especially watched over because they represent a threat to the brutally enforced dictates of the government, no matter how arbitrary or harmful those dictates are. And in true *1984* doublespeak, the dictatorships are presented as an alternative form of "democracy."
3. **Ignoring they are gifted:** When the gifted are ignored, they do not develop their potentials, and as a result, do not develop their genuine sense of meaning.
4. **Having some problems because of their differences:** Gifted individuals stick out, sometimes in ways that others find uncomfortable. Rather than being given enhanced resources, they may have resources pulled away from them and can become "lost in the crowd, unable to find others with whom they otherwise might feel a genuine sense of connectedness" (Webb, 2013, p. 97). They also may find themselves with a lack of family and social support, double

exceptionality, or traumas, which can lead them to fail in their search for a possible meaning in life.

5. **Being narcissists:** Narcissists believe they are superior because of their abilities and achievements; they come to see the purpose of their life as being to show their superiority and take advantage of others, whom they take into account only in order to use them for their own ends. They believe both they and others then are getting what they deserve. Their pseudo-meaning is invested entirely in the enhancement of an ego that never feels even remotely satisfied. In this case, the gifted people develop toxic giftedness (Sternberg, 2023). They seek self-enhancement at other's expense and are fine with doing so.

As we can see, there could occur different and varied types of problems with the meaning in life in the gifted. So, it seems necessary to develop educational and psychotherapeutic approaches to assess and treat the problems. Perhaps the best way is to be inspired by previous existential approaches and by the clinical experience of psychotherapists who regularly treat gifted children and adults when they have problems, so, it seems necessary to know more about how these difficulties may develop and then manifest in these individuals.

How the Gifted Can Find Meaning in Life

Existential psychotherapies, such as Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy, Irvin Yalom's Existential Psychotherapy, and Alfred Längle's Existential Analysis, can provide an orientation for finding and cultivating meaning in life. It is possible that an integration of their proposals and methods with other psychotherapies could provide educators as well as therapists with methods adapted to the problems of gifted people of all ages. Ideally, we need more current and specific proposals that integrate rather than differentiate alternative psychotherapeutic models and that consider the clinical experiences of those who treat gifted individuals with existential issues.

With respect to the evolving meaning of life, Viktor Frankl (1955/2019) points out that more important than having a global vision of the meaning of life is to develop a process of finding meaning in what we are doing at the present moment, connecting with what is valuable and meaningful, and coupling the search with all that brings ethical and positive values; that is why Frankl differentiates the general meaning of life from the meaning in the present situation, the latter of which he refers to as “meaning IN life”.

To find meaning in life, Frankl suggests we start from a phenomenological attitude by which we can be open to perceiving the phenomena that occur so as to decipher what is valuable in what is happening to us at a given moment. As Alfred Längle has explained: “This phenomenological attitude is an openness of mind free from personal interest and directed towards the essence of the situation that allows one be reached or even captured by the situation” (Längle, 2003, p. 15).

The phenomenological attitude proposed by these psychotherapists can be enriched by the practice of different kinds of meditation, using methods such as Mindfulness, which is defined by Kabat-Zinn as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgementally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). There are already scholars who have indicated that the practice of Mindfulness can facilitate the finding of meaning in life (Chu & Mac, 2020). However, in Mindfulness, it is not always evident that attention is cultivated with an intention that should be aligned with ethical values. If, though, we integrate mindfulness or other types of meditation with Logotherapy, it is important to have positive ethical values as a reference point for meditating.

Since the 20th century, various psychotherapeutic proposals have been made to help people who have problems finding meaning in their lives. The proposals that can still be considered relevant to current clinical practice are the proposals of Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy and its subsequent developments, Irvin Yalom's Existential Psychotherapy, and Alfred Längle's Existential Analysis, all mentioned earlier. All of these scholars agree on the importance of helping patients find some meaning

to guide their lives, in order to have a better life, stimulating in them the search for meaning through therapeutic dialogue.

In Frankl's proposal (1959/2006, 1955/2019), search for meaning is the most relevant task for existence. In this process, people have to **cultivate values**: in Logotherapy practice, meaning is rooted in three kinds of values: creative values, experiential values, and attitudinal values. We can develop creative values by creating something, preferably something that contributes to others. Creative values are also important in Yalom's proposal (1980). Experiential values are expressed by feelings, sensations, and experiences that enrich us. At some point, we develop attitudinal values when we are drawn toward unavoidable suffering and we choose a new perspective that can give us freedom in some way. It also should give us the capacity to change something, at least inside of ourselves. For developing these values, we need connection and love for other people and to have an ethical attitude. In this process, it is necessary to be **developing consciousness**, because each individual has their own way to meaning that reflects who they really are. We need to develop consciousness both of ourselves and of reality. It is also important to be aware of the reality of death in order more to value the time we have left. With regard to this point, Yalom (1980, 2009) has a similar view because he considers the consciousness of death to be very important for building meaning with realism about life.

In Frankl's (1955/2019) Logotherapy, also very important is **self-transcendence**, because it is necessary that we see beyond ourselves so that we can find complete or nearly complete meaning in life. If we are not able to transcend ourselves, we may pursue largely egocentric goals; thus, the meaning would be incomplete because it leaves one closed off to oneself. Similarly, Yalom (1980) has suggested that meaning can be found through self-transcendence and altruism or by devoting oneself to a cause that involves positive values.

Frankl (1955/2019) took into account as well **searching for meaning in everyday life**, paying attention to the present moment that allows us to perceive what is valuable in each situation. Through

this view, Frankl affirms that meaning is objective and that we have to discover it. At this point, meditation can help, as we said before.

Another important aspect of Frankl's Logotherapy is **cultivating spirituality**. Frankl (1955/2019) argued that spirituality is the deepest dimension of people. It brings inner freedom and makes it possible for us to love others. Each person must cultivate this dimension according to his or her beliefs and sensitivity. Some can live their spirituality through a religion, while others may live it independently of religion. Although Yalom believes that there is no objective meaning to be discovered, he considers that religious beliefs can serve as maps of meaning that provide a reference point for constructing a meaning that helps us to live; he says this way it is adapting to a pre-established meaning, which helps to build meaning (Yalom, 1980).

In the existential analysis of Yalom (1980), we find other points that do not appear in Frankl's Logotherapy and that can be useful for cultivating the meaning of life, like self-realization. Self-realization occurs when one comes to understand oneself and one's goals. Yalom also speaks of the importance of immersion in the "stream of life."

We can see coincidences and differences between Frankl's and Yalom's proposals. Perhaps, as we said before, the best option is a perspective on meaning that integrates both perspectives and Längle's (2003) self-knowledge proposal. It is essential for the gifted to be aware of who they are, considering not only their gifts but also their personality characteristics, emotional difficulties, and general strengths and weaknesses. In this way, they can find the best possible path toward the meaning of their lives and for knowing who they are.

Current Proposals for Developing Meaning in the Lives of Gifted People

We also can consider the proposals of more current authors who have investigated empirically the question of the meaning of life specifically in gifted people. For example, Pollet and Schnell (2017) found that, in some cases, it can help to have the perception that one's life has meaning, which depends

on an **active and involved lifestyle and on a positive and self-accepting view of oneself**. In addition, Pollet and Schnell (2017) pointed out that a **eudaimonic life orientation** has been related to finding meaning in life; this orientation focuses on a life lived well, not on a life lived merely hedonically. This idea goes back to Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia and is rooted in self-knowledge, volition, and intentionality, making life oriented by goals that are coherent with communal values and personal resources of meaning. Eudaimonic orientation is associated with a clear perception of meaning in life (Pollet & Schnell, 2017). This orientation would imply a life conditioned by, and on, truth and responsibility (Ryff & Singer, 2008). This view is consistent with that of contemporary positive psychology (e.g., Seligman, 2012).

According to Ryff and Singer (2008), for gifted people, meaning could be achieved in part through the **full expression of one's personal potential**, which would entail self-acceptance, purpose in life, autonomy, mastery of one's environment, and positive social relationships (Ryff & Singer, 2008). For the expression of one's personal potential, **generativity** has been proposed as one source of meaning, which has to do with commitment to the greater good and to future generations (Schnell, 2011). In one study of the intellectually gifted, generativity was the strongest predictor of finding meaning (Pollet & Schnell, 2017). Generativity can be related to **orientation toward development** (personal growth and goal striving), which has been identified as a contributor to meaning among the intellectually gifted (Pollet & Schnell, 2017). In addition, **satisfaction with work** contributed to the prediction of general life satisfaction among gifted adults (Wirthwein & Rost, 2011).

Other aspects that have been related to meaning in life in the gifted are:

1. **Harmony**, which implies balance and agreement with oneself and with others (Schnell, 2011).

2. **Self-compassion**, which may be a protective factor for the gifted individual's sense of meaning because giftedness is often accompanied by unrealistically high expectations, perfectionism, and self-criticism (Pollet & Schnell, 2017).
3. **Spirituality** is a subject that can be important in finding meaning in life, as has been pointed out especially for the gifted (Pollet & Schnell, 2017; Schnell, 2011; Tirri, 2022). In the studies of Tirri and Ubani (2005) and of Ubani (2007) with gifted pre-adolescents, spirituality was connected to finding the meaning in one's life. In addition, different scholars emphasize both transformation of consciousness and finding meaning as important factors in spiritual development (Baumeister, 1991; Frankl, 1966; Skrzypińska, 2021; Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Moreover, Skrzypińska (2021) has argued that spirituality activates existential intelligence as a means of developing a system of beliefs and different human values, or a sensitivity and capacity to face deep questions about human existence, both of which are useful in discovering the meaning of life.
4. **Religion**: in some cases, for some people, religion can be one way for cultivating meaning (Schnell, 2011). This excludes, however, religions or other ideologies when they become cult-like.

Is it possible to integrate all these perspectives into a broader vision that adapts to the specific needs of each gifted person and their particular circumstances, taking into account the contributions of different authors in education and in psychotherapy? This question is addressed in the next section.

Finding Meaning throughout Life

As meaning changes throughout life, it is also important to differentiate how to approach the issue in the different stages of life:

1. **Children**: Educators and therapists must take seriously children's questions about "Why?" and "What for?" and answer honestly when they do not know what to answer. It is important to

include instruction helping students find for themselves their personal meaning of life (literature, games, philosophical reflection, awareness of responsibility for the common good, ethical and positive values). Gifted children can develop existential depression and psychotherapists have to be aware of it. Such depression can create a dangerous situation for these individuals because of their risk of suicide. Or they can fall into a state of passive resignation (Webb, 2013). They need specific attention to their existential issues (Webb, 2013).

2. **Adolescents:** it is important to allow inquiry in adolescents and to establish honest dialogue and assistance in their search for information about meaning. If they have life problems about meaning, they may need existential psychotherapy.
3. **Adults:** it is important to take meaning seriously, to know their evolution with regard to the question of meaning, and to understand differences between gifted individuals identified in childhood, adolescence, and adult life. It might help them to have common spaces to share their experiences with meaning and how it relates to being gifted. They can have existential psychotherapy if they have existential problems.
4. **In all of the above,** it is necessary to let the gifted become aware of who they really are and to promote self-transcendence through ethical values as well as assessing and dealing with problems that may arise, throughout their lives, with meaning in their lives.

Conclusion

As we said at the beginning of this article, existential issues are important for many gifted people (Dabrowski, 1964; Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Vötter & Schnell, 2019; Webb, 2013; Tirri, 2022). However, it is surprising that many of the programs dedicated to gifted education focus on the development of gifted potential or talent but include almost nothing about the meaning of their development or about their meaning in life. Why are they developing potential or talent? What for? If we don't consider their meaning in life in education, there is a risk that gifted will be exploited by others or there is the

possibility of their developing selfish and narcissistic orientations or they can live their lives being lost because they don't find meaningful goals.

What happens when the gifted grow up without meaning? As meaning in life is an important factor for the subjective well-being of intellectually gifted individuals (Kerr & Cohn, 2011; Tirri, 2022; Vötter & Schnell, 2019; Webb, 2013), educators need to consider it seriously. In addition, living a meaningless life increases the risk of various mental disorders and suicide in many people (Glaw et al., 2017; Kleftras and Psarra, 2012; Rodríguez-Fernández, 2005; Yalom, 1980). For these reasons, educators and psychotherapists need to think seriously about meaning and to propose solutions to facilitating the search for meaning in gifted people, or at least for those who need it. These solutions must come from education and from psychotherapy. Education can provide guidance about meaning; psychotherapy can treat the problems related to the lack of it. To make an integral contribution to this problem, we need to consider different contributions related to meaning and to investigate further the problems that are related to meaning in the gifted. Although there has already been a proposal to apply Logotherapy to the gifted (Sugiarti & Erlangaa, 2018), there are still no clear proposals to address existential problems in these cases.

We need approaches that integrate different perspectives, taking into account the proposals of existential psychotherapies and integrating them with more current approaches to psychotherapy (such as those that include meditation) and with more relevant proposals about giftedness, beyond approaches focused solely on IQ as has been proposed by Sternberg et al. (2023). If we limit the definition of giftedness solely to something related to the results of psychometric tests, we run the risk of grouping together selfish and egocentric individuals focused on their personal achievements with those who are truly gifted in a broader sense that includes humanitarian and transformational aspects, and who are surely the ones concerned with finding meaning in life that transcends their selfish goals. It

is necessary to determine which types of gifted individuals are more likely to be concerned with existential issues in order to address their needs appropriately.

One possibility is to integrate various existential proposals with other current perspectives that share commonalities with them, such as Sternberg's concept of transformational giftedness (Sternberg, 2020a, 2020b, 2022) and Sternberg and Rodriguez-Fernandez's (2023) proposal of "humanitarian giftedness," which we can be integrated toward a better proposal for a meaningful life in gifted people. In this way, educators can assist the gifted in developing meaning and growing in humanity and then contributing with valuable elements to the common good.

In addition, educators should take into account that, in the process of finding meaning, it is very important to develop self-knowledge, understanding about different dimensions of oneself, and perceiving of what has happened in one's own life that is different for people who are gifted. Being gifted implies a deeper search for meaning and abilities, so teachers and psychotherapists working with gifted children must consider their peculiarities.

Existential depression is the existential problem most studied in gifted people (Dabrowski, 1964, Webb, 2013), but there is less information about other existential problems in the gifted, which probably occur more frequently in them than in the general population. These problems exist prior to the onset of existential depression or other more serious mental disorders, such as anxiety disorders or addictions. It therefore behooves us to identify them before existential depression develops. Moreover, because of the special characteristics of the gifted personality (intensity, sensitivity, overexcitabilities, intense reflection, etc.), the gifted may be led to erroneous diagnoses that pathologize the normal characteristics of their way of being and functioning. For these reasons, we need to differentiate existential problems from psychiatric problems. If we detect existential suffering in gifted people early, it is more likely that we can prevent the most serious situations more effectively than when more intense conditions develop, and we can help them to find not only their vocation, but also happiness and

meaning in life. In addition, placing gifted individuals in groups discussing issues of the search for meaning, self-acceptance, and understanding of one's own personal needs, will be helpful.

Finally, it should be noted that more studies are needed that consider the meaning-related aspects of gifted people's lives. As Tirri (2022) has said: "The goal of education is to help the gifted students to find a purpose in life that would be meaningful to themselves and contribute beyond-the-self at the same time" (p.77). Perhaps we can understand meaning as a path to wisdom for everyday life, thereby to orient the gifted individual's life for their self-realization, becoming transformational, and developing humanitarian giftedness so that this world can be a better place to live in, for them and for everybody else.

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