

The Search of Meaning in Life in the Gifted

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to review the importance of the question of life's meaning, mainly for intellectually gifted, as well as suggesting possibilities for educational and therapeutic approaches with an integration between Dabrowski's proposals and Frankl's and Yalom's existential psychotherapies for enhancing meaning. In particular, we suggest that *a successful transition between childhood and adult giftedness depends upon the gifted individual's finding meaning in their life and a sense of purpose through which to try to achieve it*. The article is based on an integration of theory-based propositions, a review of existing research, and clinical observations. We conclude that it is important to integrate ideas about existential problems into education and psychotherapy, increasing gifted individuals' sense of meaning through development of human values, a eudaimonic life orientation, full expression of potential, generativity, harmony, self-compassion, and spirituality.

Keywords: giftedness; transformational giftedness; humanitarian giftedness; meaning in life; purpose in life; childhood vs. adult giftedness.

Introduction

Existential issues are important for many intellectually gifted people (Dabrowski, 1964; Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Pollet & Schnell, 2017; Seely, 2004; Sisk, 2008; Tirri, 2022; Vötter & Schnell, 2019; Webb, 2013; Wood & Laycraft, 2020), but that issue seems especially relevant for the gifted compared with the non-gifted. (Wood & Laycraft, 2020). From childhood or adolescence these individuals tend to ask questions about everything around them—questions others might not think to ask (Jackson et al., 2009; Piechowski, 2001; Seely, 2004; Sisk, 2008; Turanzas et al. 2020). 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); this questioning helps them better to understand life (Dabrowski, 1964; Piechowski, 2014; Webb, 2013).

The definition of intellectual giftedness (Pollet & Schnell, 2017; Silverman, 2012; Terman, 1925), historically, has centered around high IQ and related measures of general mental ability (also called “general cognitive ability” or “general intelligence”) and associated traits (Sackett et al., 2020). Often, indices of other attributes are added, such as motivation, school achievement, specific talents, and the like (Sternberg & Ambrose, 2021; Sternberg & Desmet, in press). But many individuals who are identified as “gifted” in childhood show few signs of giftedness in adulthood other than their high IQs and their past record of school achievement, a fact first recognized by Terman and his collaborators (Oden, 1968; Terman, 1925; Terman & Oden, 1947, 1959). Other individuals blossom and lead highly successful lives, by their own and by other people’s standards. What is the difference?

What, exactly, is *giftedness*? We define giftedness in terms of a pentagonal theory of identifying giftedness (Sternberg, 1993; Sternberg & Zhang, 1995). The pentagonal theory

recognizes that giftedness is in large part a sociocultural construct. Thus, it specifies how people use the term “giftedness”—what and whom they come to label as gifted, and what and whom, they do not. The pentagonal theory identifies individuals as *gifted* if and only if they meet all of five criteria.

1. Gifted individuals must *excel in some identifiable way*. They are much better than others in some specifiable way.
2. The way in which gifted individuals excel is *relatively rare statistically*. In other words, the identified excellence is one that relatively few people show.
3. Individuals labeled as “gifted” must be able, in some identifiable and meaningful way, *demonstrate their excellence*. Their excellence cannot be merely in someone’s imagination or a result of someone’s saying they are excellent.
4. Individuals identified as gifted somehow must be *productive* in the demonstration of their giftedness. They need, at least somewhat consistently, to find ways to demonstrate their gifts. One performance, even if superlative, does not suffice. It could have been luck.
5. Whatever it is that the people identified as gifted are excellent at must in some way be valued by persons in positions of authority in some group or groups. Those people must be—authorized to label people as “gifted” in some degree, or as not “gifted” at all.

There have been various speculative as well as empirical attempts to figure out what leads some people to greater success in life and other people to lesser success. Vaillant (2003), for example, in a study of Harvard graduates, identified as factors in a successful life an abundance of physical activity, the absence of abuse of both drinking alcohol and smoking, the possession

of mature and adaptive mechanisms to cope with the ups and downs that occur in every life, a healthy level of weight, and a stable marriage. But not every person who has these characteristics ends up being a gifted adult who finds meaning in life. What is the extra something that might lead individuals identified as gifted in childhood—Harvard graduates or not—to excel as adults in ways that go well beyond their elevated IQs? The answer to this question certainly is complicated (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1976; Gruber, 1989; Simonton, 1984, 1994; Wallace & Gruber, 1989), but we suggest that there is an underlying common feature of at least many those who make the transition to adult giftedness.

We propose that a common feature of many of those who make a successful transition to adult giftedness is a sense of meaning in life to accomplish particular life-central goals. Great scientists, when they write about their work, have a deep sense of purpose to reach particular professional goals that, to them, are personally meaningful (Sternberg et al., 2016). Their stories are not merely ones of doing research, or even particularly good research that is published in major journals or books. Their stories are not ones about numbers of publications, or of numbers of publications in particular journals, or of grant dollars. They are stories of the relentless and deep pursuit of significant scientific problems. Much the same could be said in other fields of endeavor (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1976; Wallace & Gruber, 1989). At least part of their meaning in life is found through their passion for their life work.

The intense search for meaning among some of the intellectually gifted—especially those who will make the transition from childhood to adult giftedness--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 (Dabrowski, 1964, Jackson et al., 2009; Seely, 2004). Then, they are stuck in their

thinking about meaning in life, with varying degrees of intensity, in a sense of meaninglessness. This situation can lead to great suffering from the feeling that life is meaningless and even futile (Dabrowski, 1964; Seely, 2004; Webb, 2013). Such feelings of futility are often a prelude to great accomplishments. The gifted sometimes need to see the “dark” before they see the “light.” Great composers, musical performers artists, and scientists rarely produce great works on the first try. They work at it until they get things to contribute in the way they want them to (Gruber, 1989).

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, which may put them at greater risk for the development of existential depression if they don’t find solutions (Dabrowski, 1964). Despite Dabrowski’s warning, there is relatively little research on existential issues in the gifted, although the issue has been widely studied in other populations and there is some relevant discussion of these issues for the gifted (Bainbridge, 2022; Davidson Institute, 2020; Webb, 2011).

To address the concept of meaning in life, we will take as a reference some existential proposals from Viktor Frankl’s (1959/2006) Logotherapy, Irvin Yalom’s (1980) existential psychotherapy, and Alfried Längle’s (Längle & Klaassen, 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, 1955/2019; Park & Baumeister, 2017; Vötter, 2019). 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, 1955/2019, 1959/2006). Brooks (2021) has suggested that having a meaningful life involves three elements: coherence (events fit together in a meaningful way), purpose (one has goals and aims), and significance (one feels that one's life matters). Meaning not only contributes to a happy life, but also can result in one's living longer (Routledge & FioRito, 2021).

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 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 and the core of the meaning of life, which we can

understand as a backbone of positive ethical and other values (Baumeister, 1991; 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 (Frankl, 1955/2019). But in today's world, there are many individuals with narcissistic attitudes who defy any kind of spiritual growth or improvement in their sense of meaning because they are fascinated with their self (Baumeister, 1991). 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 (Kjærviik & Bushman, 2021; Lasch, 1991; 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 (1959/2006, 1955/2019), 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 (Frankl, 1959/2006, 1955/2019, 1966). 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.

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), such as that seen in the work of people involved in defending human rights or in the development of science, when it goes hand in hand with ethics. Frankl's earlier work is complementary with Sternberg's later proposal by emphasizing the importance of putting positively transformational thinking into practice in one's life. 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 gifted people are (Sternberg, 2020b, 2021c). Transactional giftedness is giftedness that is tit-for-tat; one gives something (e.g., good test or school performance) in exchange for getting something (e.g., labeled as gifted). The exchange continues over many cycles. For example, after the labeling, more is expected of you, and if you keep giving it, you keep getting labeled (Sternberg, 2020b, 2021c). The problem is that the type of giving that leads to early giftedness is not the same as the type of giving that leads to adult giftedness. Adult giftedness gifts something back to the world (Subotnik et al., 2011)

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 (Frankl, 1959/2006, 1955/2019). Giftedness,

on this view of being humanitarian, 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 (1955/2019), 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 (Frankl, 1959/2006, 1955/2019, 1966; Längle & Klaassen, 2019). 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 toward other people (Frankl, 1959/2006, 1955/2019).

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 look for it. For Frankl (1955/2019), we can find meaning by maintaining objective values through which we can come who we really are and want to be. 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. 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 to 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 and Klaassen (2019) have proposed, a process of developing self-knowledge is necessary to unveil meaning. 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 & Klaassen, 2019). We could 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 in the gifted.

Difficulties with Meaning in the Gifted

Intellectually gifted people often tend to have difficulty finding meaning in their lives (Dabrowski, 1964; 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 Scale) 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, 2006). Although this relation has not been found in other studies (Voracek, 2007).

However, there is no clear relation between being intellectually gifted and having mental-health problems. More rigorous studies, such as Martin et al.'s (2010) meta-analyses, show that there is no consistent relation between being gifted and having mental-health problems; other research suggests that gifted people are at risk with respect to their mental health (e.g., Eeren et al., 2018; Karprinski, 2018); still other works with systematic reviews suggest that gifted people have better mental health than non-gifted (e.g., Francis et al., 2016; Jones, 2013). So, on average, gifted people appear not to have more mental health problems than non-gifted people.

Some gifted people are particularly susceptible to these problems because of their greater interest in existential issues, a fact recognized especially by Dabrowski (1964). 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 (Dabrowski, 1964, Webb, 2013). 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 (Jackson et al., 2009). However, they also search within themselves for their own identity and for self-knowledge, as they try to understand why they sometimes don't fit into a world in which they may feel different and strange (Webb, 2013).

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. 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 perhaps the most serious existential pathology of them all (Davidson Institute, 2020).

The following is the list of existential pathologies described by Frankl (1955/2019) in average people:

- **Existential emptiness:** This is found when one loses the perception that life is meaningful and when one 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 children and adolescents may easily perceive the most absurd elements of existence and react with corresponding idleness and indifference toward daily life (Seely, 2004; Webb, 2013).
- **Existential neurosis:** This occurs when there is a conflict within the individual between different possibilities that they consider would give meaning to their life. For example, this can occur when the gifted person has needs for personal development, on the one hand, and the desire to satisfy the demands of other people, on the other hand, as one gifted patient told the first author in a consultation. This balance can be difficult to find, especially in some kinds of gifted people who have humanitarian values, who have a great need for personal evolution and inner development, and who experience high empathy for the suffering of others.
- **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 for the gifted individual about meaning in life (Webb, 2013).
- **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

(Dabrowski, 1964). 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 (Jackson et al., 2009). Dabrowsky (1964) pointed out that the gifted are prone to existential depression, due to their failure to find personal meaning in their lives; he 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 can become inner-directed and values-driven, living with more autonomy, authenticity, and altruism (Mendaglio, 2008).

Different from Frankl’s classification is Dabrowski’s proposal of **existential crisis** in the gifted (Dabrowski, 1964; Vötter & Schnell, 2020), which is potentially of greater intensity than existential emptiness or frustration. The frequency of a crisis in life- meaning among the intellectually gifted was, in one study, almost four times higher than among non-gifted academic high-achievers or among a control group of non-gifted individuals (Vötter & Schnell, 2020).

In an existential crisis, previously held elements of meaning can collapse in a gradual or an abrupt change (Dabrowski, 1980; Piechowski, 2014). An existential crisis can arise when a gifted individual, although seeing that their studying or working at a job is valuable, also realizes that their talents may be exploited by unethical people or institutions, as one patient related about his problems working in a bank. Some gifted teenagers can come into conflict with their studies when they suddenly became aware that the discovery of their talents could cause those talents to be exploited by others who wanted to take advantage of their abilities for their profit, or to

benefit from their abilities by making them work on a single aspect of something that would prove to be harmful globally (as has happened to 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 (Webb, 2013).

In some cases, 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 them shallowly and temporarily. For example, this was the situation of a patient with a brilliant academic career who found that it was not fulfilling to him when he achieved the success he was seeking. 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 occur, 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. 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. 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 (Webb, 2013).

Some possible ways for gifted people to live with pseudo-meaning are as follows:

- **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. For example, they may not express what they know for fear of being rejected. This situation protects the gifted from expressing themselves authentically. As a consequence, they often cannot be, and cannot express themselves, as they really are, because they are busy trying to fit in with other people's expectations (Webb, 2013).

- **Being co-opted:** Co-option occurs when individuals are used for the purposes of others, without regard to their needs and desires. 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 being used. But the problem is not just with children: Adults are co-opted all the time through governmental or societal pressure. For example, this is the situation of very intelligent people when they are used to do the work of others without their true interests being taken into account.
- **Society's ignoring that they are gifted:** When the gifted are ignored, they usually don't develop their potentials, and as a result, don't develop their potential genuine sense of meaning. For example, if a gifted person's talent has not been detected in childhood, it is more difficult for them to develop their potential.
- **Having 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 on the view they don't need 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, mental disorders, double

exceptionality, or traumas, which can lead them to fail in their search for a possible meaning in life (Jackson et al., 2009).

- **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 (Rodríguez, 2021). Their pseudo-meaning is invested entirely in the enhancement of an ego that never feels even remotely satisfied. In this case, the gifted people may develop toxic giftedness (Sternberg, 2023). They seek self-enhancement at other's expense and are fine with doing so. Indeed, doing so is their notion of success.

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 existential problems of the intellectually gifted. 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 Frankl's Logotherapy, Yalom's Existential Psychotherapy, Längle's Existential Analysis, and Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration (1964), can provide an orientation for finding and cultivating meaning in life. For Frankl, Yalom, and Längle, the target of their writing was typical people; for Dabrowski, the target was specifically gifted people. All these scholars agree on the importance of helping individuals to have a better life by finding some kind of meaning to guide their lives.

Table 1 shows similarities and differences between Frankl's, Yalom's, and Dabrowski's proposals. Although there are specific proposals to apply Dabrowski's theories to existential problems in gifted people (e.g., Jackson et al., 2009), there are fewer contributions that specifically include existential psychotherapies as applied to gifted people (Armstrong et al., 2019, Sugiarti & Erlangaa, 2018).

With respect to the evolving meaning of life, Viktor Frankl (1955/2019) pointed 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, in everyday life, connecting with what is valuable and meaningful, and coupling the search with all that brings ethical and positive values. That is why Frankl differentiated 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 suggested people start from a phenomenological attitude by which they can be open to perceiving the phenomena that occur so as to decipher what is valuable in what is happening to them at a given moment. As Alfried 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 in a general

population (Chu & Mac, 2020; Maria Michael & Reyes, 2023) and in the gifted as well (Sharp et al., 2017; Turanzas et al., 2020).

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 human values. In Logotherapy practice, meaning is rooted in three kinds of values: creative values, experiential values, and attitudinal values. People can develop creative values by creating something, preferably something that contributes to others. In the gifted field, the importance of creativity and creative values has long been recognized (e.g., Renzulli, 1978, 2016; Renzulli & Reis, 1993; Treffinger & Reis, 2004). 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 are. We need to develop consciousness both of ourselves and of reality. And 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, 1966) 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.

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 (Yalom, 1980).

In the existential analysis of Yalom (1980), we find other points that don't 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 scholars 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 of gifted people, 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 in the gifted; 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., MacKenzie & Baumeister, 2014; 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. For the expression of one's personal potential, *generativity* has been proposed as one source of meaning for the gifted, 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:

- **Harmony**, which implies balance and agreement with oneself and with others (Schnell, 2011).
- **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).
- **Spirituality**, which 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.
- **Religion**, which, for some people, can be one way for cultivating meaning (Schnell, 2011). This excludes, however, religions or other ideologies when they become based on blind obedience or otherwise become cult-like.

Perhaps it is 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.

Conclusion

As we said at the beginning of this article, existential issues are important for many gifted people (Dabrowski, 1964; Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Pollet & Schnell, 2017; Seely, 2004; Tirri, 2022; Vötter & Schnell, 2019; Webb, 2013; Wood & Laycraft, 2020).

In addition, 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, will develop a selfish and narcissistic orientation, or will 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 even suicide (Glaw et al., 2017; Kleftras and Psarra, 2012; Rodríguez-Fernández, 2005; Vötter & Schnell, 2020; 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, because meaning in life needs to be studied through an interdisciplinary approach (Baumeister, 1991). Meaning in life can be developed through human values (Ryff & Singer, 2008), self-acceptance (Pollet & Schnell, 2017), a eudaimonic life orientation (Pollet & Schnell, 2017), full expression of potential (Ryff and Singer, 2008), generativity (Schnell, 2011), harmony (Schnell, 2011), self-compassion (Pollet & Schnell, 2017), and spirituality (Pollet & Schnell, 2017; Schnell, 2011; Tirri, 2022), as we can find in the research from different scholars.

Education can provide guidance about meaning; psychotherapy can treat the problems related to the lack of it (Frankl,1955/2019; Yalom, 1980). 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) or other kinds of therapy that have incorporated meaning in life into psychotherapy with gifted patients (Armstrong et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2009). Sugiarti and Erlangaa (2018) showed an increase in meaning of life in 10 gifted children with post-traumatic stress after Logotherapy treatment, but they used a narrow sample for a very specific problem (post-traumatic stress syndrome--PTSD).

As Jackson et al. (2009) pointed out, most psychotherapeutic paradigms are not sufficiently effective when it comes to helping a gifted client. And, as Dabrowski (1964) asserted, therapists need for the gifted more than cognitive or behavioral approaches. They 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. If we limit the definition of giftedness solely to 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 the ones concerned with finding meaning in life that transcends their own 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 achieving meaning in life for gifted people.

In addition, educators should take into account that, in the process of finding meaning, it is very important to develop self-knowledge (Längle, 2003), 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 can imply a deeper search for meaning (Jackson et al., 2009), so teachers and psychotherapists working with gifted children must consider their peculiarities (Armstrong et al., 2019).

Existential depression is the existential problem most studied in gifted people (Dabrowski, 1964, Webb, 2013). A variety of existential problems can exist prior to the onset of existential depression or other more serious mental disorders, such as anxiety disorders or addictions (Frankl, 1955/2019; Rodríguez Fernández, 2005; Yalom, 1980), because those who search for meaning but don't find it suffer greater psychological disturbances than those who don't search for meaning at all (Davis, 2000).

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 (Jackson, 2009). For these reasons, we need to differentiate existential problems from psychiatric problems. If educators and psychotherapists detect existential suffering in gifted people early, it is more likely that they can prevent the most serious situations 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 and the efficacy of existential psychotherapies for them. 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). This is to a goal for the gifted to have a happier life and better mental health. 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.

Many gifted children will not become gifted adults. If we wish gifted children to become gifted adults, providing accelerated or enriched academic experiences may help. But without helping the young people to formulate and achieve a sense of purpose that drives a quest for meaning, their transitioning from gifted children to gifted adults—from abilities to expertise (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2003)—may become fraught and even treacherous. Abilities, even broadly conceived (Sternberg et al., 2008), are not enough. Although clinical work, empirical studies, and prior theories all have their limitations, the combination of methods leads to a unified conclusion: Without meaning, it is challenging to find a deployment of abilities that satisfies the gifted individual.

Finally, knowing something about their purpose in life could help the gifted to know what their talents optimally could be used for, which in turn could help them to live a more fulfilling life.

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Table 1: Similarities and differences between Frankl's, Yalom's and Dabrowsky's theories

	Viktor Frankl (1959/2006)	Irvin Yalom (1980)	Dabrowsky (1964)
Similarities	<p>Meaning as a reason for living</p> <p>Human values: love, ethic, self-transcendence, creativity, experiential, attitude</p> <p>Existential crisis as a way for finding meaning</p> <p>Authenticity</p> <p>Consciousness</p> <p>Meaning as important factor for mental health</p>	<p>Meaning as a reason for living</p> <p>Human values: altruism, ethic, self-transcendence, creativity, experiential.</p> <p>Existential crisis as a way for finding meaning</p> <p>Authenticity</p> <p>Consciousness</p> <p>Meaning as important factor for mental health</p>	<p>Meaning as a reason for living</p> <p>Human values: altruism, love, creativity</p> <p>Existential crisis as a way for enhancing meaning.</p> <p>Authenticity</p> <p>Consciousness</p> <p>Meaning as important factor for mental health</p>
Differences	<p>Meaning as an objective discovery</p> <p>Meaning IN life is more important than meaning OF life</p> <p>Importance of spirituality as a source of real meaning</p> <p>Existential problems: Existential emptiness, existential neurosis, existential frustration, existential depression.</p> <p>Theory for all people</p>	<p>Meaning as a construction</p> <p>Religion and spirituality are like constructed maps or meaning, though there are no real references.</p> <p>Self-realization</p> <p>Theory for all people</p> <p>Existential problems: lack of meaning, concern about death, existential guilt (problem with freedom), existential loneliness.</p>	<p>Development of meaning in an evolution view in stages</p> <p>Development of consciousness</p> <p>Positive disintegration</p> <p>Implicit spirituality development</p> <p>Authenticity</p> <p>Awareness</p> <p>Theory for gifted people</p> <p>Existential problems: existential crisis and existential depression.</p>